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Say the Right Thing: Apologies, Reputability and Punishment

ABSTRACT

Three studies examine alternative explanations of how apologies work. Findings from Study 1 suggest that future expectancies partially mediate the effect of apologies on need for punishment, but only for more reputable offenders. Apologies reduce the need to punish less reputable offenders also, but not by raising expectations of better behavior in the future. Study 2 replicates the Study 1 finding of moderated mediation using a different reputability manipulation. It also suggests that, regardless of reputability, the effect of apologies on the need to punish offenders is fully mediated by the perceived appropriateness of the response. Study 3 replicates the finding that response appropriateness fully mediates the effect of apologies on the need to punish the offender. It also suggests that perceived intent only partially mediates the effect of apologies on need for punishment and only for less reputable offenders. Overall, the findings suggest that saying the right thing benefits those who do the wrong thing, but not by influencing what others believe about their past intentions or future behaviors.