



International Journal of Conflict Management

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Oluremi Bolanle Ayoko

Article information:

To cite this document:

Oluremi Bolanle Ayoko , (2016), "Workplace conflict and willingness to cooperate", International Journal of Conflict Management, Vol. 27 Iss 2 pp. 172 - 198

Permanent link to this document:

<http://dx.doi.org/10.1108/IJCMA-12-2014-0092>

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Workplace conflict and willingness to cooperate

The importance of apology and forgiveness

Oluremi Bolanle Ayoko

UQ Business School, The University of Queensland, Brisbane, Australia

172

Received 17 December 2014
Revised 29 July 2015
19 October 2015
Accepted 20 October 2015

Abstract

Purpose – This paper aims to clarify the relationship between conflict, apologies, forgiveness and willingness to cooperate after a conflict event.

Design/methodology/approach – The paper used scenarios and quantitative measures to examine the connection between conflict, perceived apology sincerity, forgiveness and willingness to cooperate in 358 business undergraduates.

Findings – Data revealed that relationship conflict was significantly but negatively associated with forgiveness and willingness to cooperate. Additionally, attitudes toward forgiveness were directly and positively related not only to forgiveness but also to willingness to cooperate. Finally, forgiveness mediated the link between both perceived apology sincerity attitudes to forgiveness and willingness to cooperate.

Research limitations/implications – Data were cross-sectional and may be subject to bias. Longitudinal studies are needed to further tease out the connection between the variables in the current study. Similarly, future research should explore the role of climate and individuals' disposition and readiness to apologize, forgive and their willingness to cooperate at work.

Practical implications – The paper includes practical implications for managers interested in eliciting cooperation after a workplace conflict. Specifically, apology and forgiveness should be included in managers' conflict management training programs.

Social implications – Our findings indicated that apology and forgiveness are social skills that are important for conflict management and cooperation after a workplace conflict.

Originality/value – Beyond reconciliation, the current study provides new insights into the important role of actual forgiveness in whether employees are willing to cooperate after conflict at work. Practical assistance is offered to managers who are interested in fostering cooperation and increased performance after conflict episodes.

Keywords Conflict, Apology, Forgiveness, Willingness to cooperate

Paper type Research paper

Conflict is a pervasive organizational problem that affects employees' work and interactions. Researchers describe conflict as the experience between parties or among parties that their goals or interests are incompatible or in opposition (De Dreu and Gelfand, 2008; Korsgaard *et al.*, 2008). In particular, conflict between co-workers often results in decreased productivity and job satisfaction (De Dreu and Weingart, 2003; Iverson and Zatzick, 2011). In this respect, research from social psychology suggests that the manner in which we resolve our day-to-day conflicts does not only have significant implications for interpersonal relationships

The author would like to acknowledge Ms Rebecca Paterson for her assistance.



(especially at work) but also have major implications on employees' well-being (De Dreu *et al.*, 2004). Effective conflict resolution strategies are therefore critical to successful interpersonal interactions that are important for increased cooperation and performance at work.

Literature on conflict and conflict management is replete with studies that have examined conflict management strategies and styles such as avoidance, accommodation, compromising, forcing and collaboration (Rahim, 1983) on work outcomes (De Dreu *et al.*, 2004). However, many conflict episodes are rarely fully resolved (Coleman, 2000). Rather, conflicts flare up from time to time (Ayoko and Härtel, 2003). Additionally, there is evidence that conflict triggers negative emotions such as shame and guilt (Chen and Ayoko, 2012), especially for the victim. Also, the interactive effect of relationship and task conflict is a key predictor of the intention to leave the current job (Medina *et al.*, 2005). The above suggests that conflict has the propensity to elicit employees' unwillingness to cooperate at work. In this paper, I draw on a more recent and growing stream of literature on alternative workplace conflict management strategies, namely, apology and forgiveness (Butler and Mullis, 2002; Struthers *et al.*, 2005), to argue that forgiveness is not only a viable means of restoring interpersonal workplace interactions after a transgression such as conflict (Freedman and Enright, 1996), but also plays an important role in promoting employees' willingness to cooperate after a workplace conflict episode.

Cooperation is the process by which individuals, groups and organizations come together, interact and form different relationships for mutual gain or benefit (Smith *et al.*, 1995). In this regard, the willingness to cooperate is core to interpersonal relationships that can eventually foster employee performance (Beersma *et al.*, 2003). I propose that forgiveness (a transformation of motives and emotions from a hostile to a more pro-social orientation toward a transgressor following a hurtful event, McCullough 2000; Worthington, 2006) is a viable conflict management strategy that may assist in improving employees' willingness to cooperate after a conflict event. This is because forgiveness assists individuals to repair damaged workplace relationships and overcome "debilitating thoughts and emotions that result from interpersonal injury" (Aquino *et al.*, 2003, p. 210) and events such as conflict especially after an apology is tendered by the victim (Aquino *et al.*, 2003).

Apology is variously defined. Tedeschi and Norman (1985) describe apology as a confession of responsibility and normally accompanied by remorse for the harm inflicted. While studies have shown that apologies are critical in eliciting and improving victim's forgiveness, and reducing anger toward the transgressor (Exline *et al.*, 2007), most of these studies have largely focused on the victim's response to an interpersonal offence in the workplace (Palanski, 2012) and how the specific content or comprehensiveness of apologies may drive their effectiveness (Day and Ross, 2011; Schmitt *et al.*, 2004). Yet, there are important questions that remain unanswered when considering the association between conflict, apology and forgiveness. One of these questions relates to whether conflicting partners are willing to engage in future cooperation following conflict. For example, given a harmful conflict episode, apology and forgiveness at work, what are the chances that conflicting parties will willingly share information and cooperate for increased productivity at work?

The current research builds on but also departs from previous studies (Tomlinson *et al.*, 2004) on apology and willingness to reconcile in two significant

ways. First, beyond reconciliation, the present study focuses on cooperation rather than reconciliation. Cooperation is a willful contribution of employees' effort to the successful completion of interdependent tasks and the willingness to work with others, [Wagner, 1995](#)) while reconciliation is:

[...]when both parties exert effort to assist in rebuilding a damaged relationship [...]. It connotes a desire to settle issues that lead to the disruption of the relationship so that relationship can be restored to vitality ([Tomlinson et al., 2004](#), p. 167).

Thus, I argue that reconciliation is more focused at relationship restoration, while willingness to cooperate focuses on the completion of interdependent organizational tasks after conflict.

Second, the distinction between the previous studies on willingness to reconcile and the current one is even more obvious, considering the way the constructs were measured. For example, on the one hand, the willingness to reconcile after a transgression is measured by the respondents' perception of the likelihood to continue a business, reconcile after a transgression and/or the difficulty involved in taking a relationship back to where it was before the offending event ([Tomlinson et al., 2004](#)) in a trust violation context. On the other hand, the willingness to cooperate taps into the respondents' willingness to share information, enhance communication and cooperate after a negative conflict episode at work. Thus, while the current study draws on previous work in this area, it is substantially different in that willingness to reconcile seems to focus on "arms-length" exchanges in strictly professional relationships ([Tomlinson et al., 2004](#), p. 167), but willingness to cooperate focuses on "up-close" interpersonal everyday exchange relationships in the workplace.

Altogether, the current research makes three significant contributions to literature. First, research into the role of conflict management strategies [avoiding, accommodating, compromising and collaboration ([Rahim, 1983](#))] still leave many conflicts unresolved at work ([Coleman, 2000](#)). By investigating the connection between conflict, apology and forgiveness, the conflict literature is extended on how both apology and forgiveness may be used as a conflict management strategy in the workplace. Second, although literature abounds with studies examining the connection between trust repairs and apology ([Ferrin et al., 2007](#); [Tomlinson et al., 2004](#), [Tomlinson, 2012](#)), little research has investigated the willingness to cooperate (sharing information, enhancing communication and cooperating on organizational tasks) as an aftermath of conflict. By isolating the role of apology and forgiveness in employee's willingness to cooperate after conflict, our understanding of how to improve cooperation and performance after conflict should significantly improve. Outcomes of the current study should assist managers in gaining insight into fostering cooperation and increased performance after conflict episodes.

In particular, the present research aims to examine the connection between conflict, forgiveness and willingness to cooperate and investigate the link between apology sincerity, attitudes toward forgiveness, actual forgiveness and willingness to cooperate. Altogether, a conceptual model that depicts perceived apology and attitudes to forgiveness as direct antecedents of employees' willingness to cooperate given conflict was developed and tested. Also, forgiveness was conceptualized as a mediator of these relationships.

Theoretical framework and hypotheses development

The connection between conflict, apology, forgiveness and willingness to cooperate may be explained by attribution theory (Weiner, 1986). Initiated by Heider (1958) and extended by Kelley (1973) and Weiner (1986), attribution theory proposes that attributions are the end products of the fundamental cognitive processes by which people determine cause and effect so that they can resolve problems and become more effective in their interactions. In this respect, attribution theory explores how individuals attribute causes to events (e.g. conflict) and how they spontaneously explain failures (e.g. communication or trust failures). According to attribution theory, how individuals perceive a situation directly impacts their behavioral responses to that event (Martinko and Thomson, 1998; Weiner, 1986). For example, individual's beliefs about the cause of events may be a key driver in arriving at varying cognitive processing, evaluations and reactions to a conflict event such as forgiveness, apology and behavioral control (Weiner, 1985). Such evaluations, in turn, may evoke distinct emotions and behaviors (Weiner, 1985) upon which decisions about one's willingness to cooperate after conflict may be based. Overall, the present research is anchored on attribution theory to explain how conflict may trigger the information processing that may inform employees' perception of behaviors such as apology, attitudes to forgiveness, actual forgiveness and future cooperation after a conflict episode.

Conflict, perceived apology sincerity and forgiveness

I have already established that conflict is the perceived incompatibilities or differences by parties of the views, wishes and desires that each holds (De Dreu and Gelfand, 2008; Korsgaard *et al.*, 2008), regardless of any possible overt displays of hostility (Deutsch and Shichman, 1986) or harm. Weiner (1986) argues that individuals make attributions that impact their feelings and the evaluation of their experience such that the perception of a negative outcome may trigger negative emotions which may, in turn, prompt the individual to locate the cause of his/her outcome. Given the above, it is expected that individuals engaged in conflict event (in their work environment) will make attributions (internal or external) about the conflict and locate its cause and subsequent pain resulting from the conflict.

Regardless of the emotions arising from causal attributions, conflict itself produces psychological states (i.e. feelings, cognitions and motivations) that trigger behaviors intended to reduce or resolve tension (De Dreu *et al.*, 2001). Moreover, given that conflict has a potential to cause anxiety, reduced information processing, distractions and erosion of satisfaction (De Dreu and Weingart, 2003), it becomes critical for employees to find a way of restoring relationship after a conflict event (Ren and Gray, 2009). In this respect and to restore relationships, research from social psychology suggests that individuals use social accounts (denial, excuse, apology, and justification, Cody and McLaughlin, 1990) to shape the perceptions of others after a negative event (Cody and McLaughlin, 1990) such as conflict. Social accounts are restoration efforts that offenders make to reduce tension (De Cremer and Schouten, 2008). The present research focuses on apology as an account that can attenuate the negative emotions of a negative conflict event.

With apology, the offender accepts blame for the wrongdoing and makes explicit statements of remorse that may shape the victim's impressions of the offender's intent and motives (Goffman, 1972). Tomlinson *et al.* (2004) propose that apologies make

internal (i.e. located within the offender) or external attributions (i.e. located outside the offender) noting that apologies that make internal attribution may be more effective in stimulating the willingness to reconcile because the offender is accepting more personal responsibility for the event rather than shifting blame.

Research in this area also suggests that apologies are efficacious in mending broken relationships (Bottom *et al.*, 2002; Tomlinson and Mryer, 2009) for various reasons. First, given attribution theory, receiving an apology leads the victim to perceive transgression as less internal and less controllable while effective in reducing the negative emotions of an offence (e.g. conflict) and thus facilitates forgiveness (Takaku, 2001). This may also convey a stated desire to reconcile and continue the relationship (Goffman, 1972; Lewicki and Bunker, 1996).

Second, McCullough *et al.* (1997) propose that apologies have the potential to allow the victim to empathize with the offender to foster forgiveness following a negative event like conflict. In this respect, the victim's forgiveness may be prompted because of the perception that the offender's apology is an expression of guilt (Hareli and Eisikovits, 2006) and intent to avoid repeating the offence in future (Donnoli and Wertheim, 2012), thereby promoting forgiveness and future cooperation. In sum, there is an overwhelming evidence that apology elicits forgiveness. Nevertheless, scholars demonstrate that apologies that are not sincere may not succeed in triggering forgiveness (Basford *et al.*, 2013; Tavuchis, 1991).

There is no consensus on the definition of sincere apology (Allan *et al.*, 2006; Ohbuchi *et al.*, 1989), as researchers still debate whether offender's remorse or repentance is needed before victim's forgiveness occurs (Sells and Hardgrave, 1988). For example, Ohbuchi *et al.* (1989) describe sincere apology as a remedial behavior that attempts to explain a harmful behavior so that it becomes acceptable. In this case, followers' willingness to forgive their leaders may be compromised if followers suspect the leader's apology may be driven by a desire to save face, or to intentionally manipulate (Basford *et al.*, 2013). Other researchers (e.g. Shapiro, 1991) refer to it as the victim's perception of how sincere such a statement of responsibility and remorse is from the offender. Nonetheless, scholars agree that sincere apology should at least include an admission of responsibility and expression of remorse or sorrow (Tavuchis, 1991). A review of the literature also suggests that sincere apologies may be critical to victim's willingness to reconcile a broken relationship (Tomlinson *et al.*, 2004; Shapiro, 1991). Based on the ongoing discussion, I argue that given conflict, perceived sincere apology from the offender should trigger victim's empathy and the perception that the offender's apology is an expression of guilt and an intent to avoid repeating the offence which should, in turn, be linked with victim's increased forgiveness (Figure 1):

H1a. Perceived apology sincerity will be positively linked with forgiveness.

Conflict, perceived apology sincerity and willingness to cooperate

Apologies are acts designed to restore fractured relationships (Ho, 2012) or goal obstructions (e.g. conflict) that may sometimes provoke revenge (Bordia *et al.*, 2014). They facilitate transgressor's expressions of concern or care for the individual or the damaged relationship (Hareli and Eisikovits, 2006). Often, apologies also signal the transgressor's respect for the victim (De Cremer and Schouten, 2008) and motivate individuals to contribute to the welfare of the group (i.e. to collaborate and cooperate; De Cremer, 2002). Moreover, McNulty (2010) suggests that a sincere apology may signal to

the victim a reduced likelihood of reoffending, and consequently engender trust. We are aware that trust is critical to cooperation (Smith *et al.*, 1995) because trust is promoted by the emotional bond between individuals, such as expressing reciprocal care and concern for the well-being of each other (McAllister, 1995). Thus, in line with attribution theory, trust following an apology after a negative event arises from the emotional bond it restores and which, in turn, may be a key antecedent to employee's willingness to cooperate (Smith *et al.*, 1995). In this respect and given attribution theory, perceived sincere apology is associated with reduced negative affective reactions such as anger (Hubbard *et al.*, 2013), while respect and trust (following genuine apology) are factors that act as precursors to cooperation (Tanghe, *et al.*, 2010). Given the above, I propose that it is plausible that perceived apology sincerity is positively associated with willingness to cooperate. Thus:

H1b. Perceived apology sincerity is positively associated with willingness to cooperate.

Attitudes toward forgiveness and actual forgiveness

Attitudes guide human behavior (Ajzen and Fishbein, 1977). Ajzen and Fishbein acknowledge that attitudes can be poor predictors of behavior, but under certain conditions and with certain individuals, general attitudes can have a strong impact on behavior. In this respect, internal factors such as self-esteem, narcissism and need for structure are associated with reduced disposition to forgive and actual forgiveness (Eaton *et al.*, 2006). This is because personality differences are relatively enduring traits that shape individual cognition, behavior and emotionality and are critical in the attribution process. Thus, given attribution theory, individual disposition may also impact his/her tendencies to engage in forgiving behavior (Maltby *et al.*, 2008). For example, based on attribution theory, a victim in a conflict episode with internal *locus* of control (than external *locus* of control) may find it easier to forgive because he/she may be able (e.g. through empathy) to share some attributions of the negative outcomes of conflict with the offender. Additionally, the situation may be more complex, as an optimist might see a remorseful coworker's intention as wanting to restore a broken relationship, while a cynic might see an immature attempt to force a victim to accept an apology irrespective of the degree of its sincerity.

Also, the way in which individuals conceptualize forgiveness may be different (Kanz, 2000). Kanz (2000) found that people from different backgrounds (e.g. different religious affinities) and potentially different attributions have different attitudes to forgiveness.

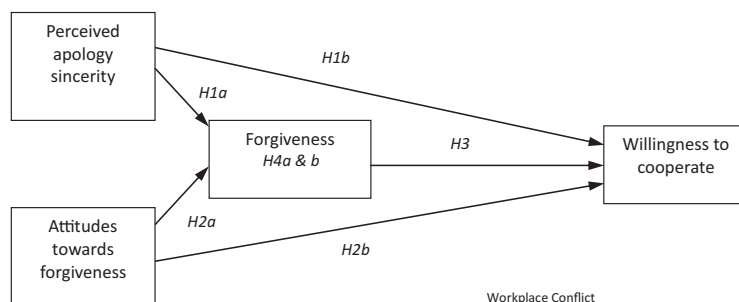


Figure 1.
The theoretical
model of the
relationship between
perceived apology
sincerity, forgiveness
and willingness to
cooperate

Similarly, individuals who are collectivists (than individualists) have been shown to be more forgiving because of their orientation toward harmony (Hook *et al.*, 2009). This suggests that attitudes toward forgiveness have a role in forgiving behaviors especially those related to conflict in the workplace. Altogether, I argue that an individual with a positive attitude toward forgiveness will be more likely to be linked with actual forgiveness. Thus:

H2a. Attitudes toward forgiveness are positively associated with actual forgiveness.

Conflict, attitudes toward forgiveness and willingness to cooperate

Cooperation is often described as being in polar opposition to conflict (King *et al.*, 2009). As established earlier, it is the willful contribution of an employee's effort to the successful completion of interdependent organizational tasks (Wagner, 1995) which is manifested as employee's willingness to work with other (Chatman and Barsade, 1995). In contrast, willingness to reconcile is realized when both parties (e.g. in conflict) exert effort to assist in rebuilding a damaged relationship (Lewicki and Bunker, 1996). Indeed, Sells and Hardgrave (1988) describe reconciliation as a process of two conflicting parties attempting to resolve their differences. The current research moves beyond willingness to reconcile to focus on willingness to cooperate and argues that the ultimate reason for reconciliation and restoring relationship after a conflict event at work is to get conflicting parties to work together again and successfully complete organizational tasks.

While Bottom *et al.* (2002) examined cooperation after conflict in the laboratory, their research was focused on the use of game theory models to determine when people make rational choices to choose cooperation after conflict. In the current research and using attribution theory as a platform, I examine in a field setting, the willingness of conflicting parties to cooperate after a conflict event and in the face of perceived apology, forgiveness and workers' attitudes to forgive. Thus, I propose that individuals with a positive attitude to forgiveness will also be linked with willingness to cooperate, and that cooperative behaviors are impacted by individual dispositions (Liebrand and McClintock, 1988).

Maltby and colleagues show that an individual's personal factors may predict victim's behaviors (e.g. revenge) even two years following a conflict, while Eaton *et al.* (2006) demonstrate that traits associated with ego-defensiveness can inhibit the ability to be forgiving (dispositional forgiveness) and to actually forgive (state forgiveness). Additionally, Feather (1985)'s research shows that subjects' explanations of events are a function of their attitudes and values. Feather further argued that the explanations that people give for events are not neutral beliefs that are end-products of unbiased, rational information processing but are linked to other beliefs, attitudes and values within the total social context.

Furthermore, research efforts show an association between agreeableness and forgiveness (McCullough and Hoyt, 1999). People who are inclined to forgive tend to be less exploitative, are more empathetic toward others (Tangney *et al.*, 1999) and demonstrate tendency to share resources with people who have been rude and inconsiderate to them (Ashton *et al.*, 1998). In terms of attribution, people who have forgiven their transgressors, appraise their transgressors as more likeable (Bradfield and Aquino, 1999) and the transgressor's explanations for the transgression as more

adequate and honest (Shapiro, 1991). Also, people who forgive tend to attribute less responsibility to their spouses (Fincham, 2000). Thus, it is reasonable that individuals who have a positive disposition to forgive would be more likely to engage in behaviors such as willingness to cooperate after conflict. In sum, positive attitude toward forgiveness should be connected with willingness to cooperate:

H2b. Attitudes toward forgiveness are positively associated with willingness to cooperate.

Actual forgiveness and willingness to cooperate

According to Bottom *et al.* (2002), interpersonal relationships can be fragile. However, once breached, cooperation can be re-established, and actions as well as explanations and apologies can augment the process. Following conflict events, causal attributions are expected from the conflicting parties: victim and offender. Such attributions may lead to negative emotions (e.g. anger) that may eventually lead to attributional behavior such as withdrawal (e.g. an individual may avoid the person) or seek forgiveness (Bottom *et al.*, 2002). Thus, coordination needs do not break down irrecoverably because of conflict between individuals (Bottom *et al.*, 2002). There is evidence that conflict is a trigger of dissatisfaction and poor morale (Iverson and Zatzick, 2011), and given attribution theory, it is probable that victims will be more prone to avoidance, withdrawal or revenge (Bordia *et al.*, 2014) following conflict. The tendency to withdraw after an offence suggests that the motivation to cooperate will be minimal. Nevertheless, forgiveness is a pro-social process by which the above negative motivations toward the offender may be reduced and replaced by positive motivations (McCullough, 2000) such as willingness to cooperate.

Brown (2003) establishes that attitudes toward forgiveness and actually forgiving are distinct and that having positive attitudes toward forgiveness does not necessarily mean that an individual is more forgiving. Prior literature also suggests that once an offender has gone through causal attribution process and has tendered an apology, it is now up to the victim to receive an apology and move toward relationship restoration. While the victim's response to the apology may depend on many factors (e.g. intensity of wrongdoing, McCullough *et al.*, 2003), findings in this area suggest that after an apology, most victims are usually satisfied and are able to forgive (Schumann, 2012) and restore relationships.

Furthermore, forgiveness scholars (Worthington, 2000; Freedman and Enright, 1996) debate whether forgiveness should be given by the victim regardless of the victim's disposition or apology from the offender. In fact, some forgiveness theorists (Freedman and Enright, 1996) suggest that forgiveness is a moral obligation and should be given regardless of apology. Yet, recent studies show that forgiveness may be more facilitated through pro-social variables such as trust (e.g. that the offences will not be recommitted; McNulty, 2010) and respect (i.e. the transgressor is concerned and cares for the well-being of the victim). These are characteristics that underlie the willingness to cooperate (De Cremer, 2002; Smith *et al.*, 1995). It consequently follows that beyond being a pro-social process, forgiveness may facilitate the willingness to cooperate.

Also, Karremans and Van Lange (2004) explored the link between forgiveness and pro-relationship responses and found a positive connection between forgiveness and readiness to accommodate and sacrifice. Altogether, the current study argues that in the

face of conflict, individuals who are more forgiving are also likely to be more willing to cooperate. Thus:

H3. In the context of conflict, actual forgiveness will be positively linked to an individual's willingness to cooperate.

Forgiveness as a mediator in the relationship between perceived apology sincerity, attitude toward forgiveness and willingness to cooperate

Hatcher (2011) argues that apologies that appear to be sincere are more successful at increasing reconciliation (Risen and Gilovich, 2007; Tomlinson *et al.*, 2004), while I have argued in *H2b* that the disposition to forgive is connected with behavior forgiveness (*H1a* and *H1b*). Indeed, individuals with cooperative disposition are motivated to understand and uphold social group norms, satisfied by group interactions and are expectant of cooperative behavior from others (Chatman and Barsade, 1995). However, is there a possibility that the impact of apology and the attitude toward forgiveness on willingness to cooperate is realized through actual forgiveness (behavior)? To date, researchers have mixed findings about the impact of dispositional forgiveness on actual forgiveness. Eaton *et al.* (2006) found that dispositional forgiveness did not predict state forgiveness. However, recent studies suggest a significant and positive relationship between dispositional and state forgiveness (Brown and Phillips, 2005; Berry *et al.*, 2005). The answer to the above question should not only improve our understanding of the role of actual forgiveness in conflicting parties' willingness to cooperate after a conflict but also extend efforts in reducing the negative impact of conflict on interactional outcomes.

Moreover, we are aware that apology and forgiveness trigger reconciliation and relationship restoration (Risen and Gilovich, 2007). In line with attribution theory, conflicting parties may appraise the conflict event and offer and receive apology. Such reappraisals impact future expectancies, affect and ultimately behavior (Martinko and Thomson, 1998). In this regard, Karremans and Van Lange (2004) found that forgiveness is associated with pro-relationship responses (e.g. intention to cooperate). Although there are suggestions that forgiveness need not be present to foster cooperativeness (Bottom *et al.*, 2002), scholars (Karremans and Van Lange, 2004) have shown that even small fluctuations in levels of forgiveness are related to prosocial behavior, and that a lack of forgiveness significantly reduces cooperation. I argue in the current study that forgiveness has a mediating role to play in fostering cooperation after conflict. This is because forgiveness allows a person to focus on more satisfying goal pursuit (Synder and Heinze, 2005) such as willingness to cooperate.

Furthermore, we are aware that victims may experience empathy during the causal attribution process by taking the perspective of the transgressor (McCullough *et al.*, 1997). Research demonstrates that taking perspective of another in need is associated with prosocial behaviors [e.g. altruism and cooperation (Takaku, 2001)] and the inhibition of destructive aggressive reactions (Arriaga and Rusbult, 1998). In this regard, Takaku (2001) argues that the awareness of times when the victims themselves were transgressors may remind them of how difficult it is to take personal responsibility for offence, thus resulting in fundamental attribution error (Ross, 1977). These attributional changes may give rise to positive emotion toward the offenders to increase the likelihood of not only forgiving but also cooperating in future. Altogether, I propose

that forgiveness will mediate the relationship between apology sincerity, attitudes to forgiveness and willingness to cooperate after conflict. Thus:

H4a. The relationship between perceived apology sincerity and willingness to cooperate will be mediated by forgiveness.

H4b. The relationship between attitudes to forgiveness and willingness to cooperate will be mediated by forgiveness.

Method

Participants

A total of 358 students (38 per cent male and 62 per cent female) were recruited from a university in South East Queensland, Australia, to complete the survey on apology, forgiveness and willingness to cooperate, given workplace conflict. Participants ranged in age from 16 to 20 years (47.1 per cent) and from 41 to 50 years (0.60 per cent). Overall, majority of the sample had a high school education (71.6 per cent) and were currently employed (86.4 per cent). The participants also worked (full time/part time) in business organizations within industry settings such as retail (15.0 per cent) and hospitality (18.9 per cent), engineering (2.2 per cent), government (2.5 per cent), education (9.7 per cent), banking/financial (6.1 per cent), healthcare (3.9 per cent) and other business settings (e.g. entertainment, telecommunications, legal/law, sales, community, etc., 41.7 per cent, see Table I).

Participant characteristic	Frequency	(%)
<i>Ethnicity</i>		
Caucasian	197	54.90
Asian	132	36.80
African	3	0.80
Indian	8	2.20
Middle Eastern	2	0.60
Indigenous Australian	1	0.30
Torres Strait Islander	1	0.30
Other	8	2.20
Did not disclose	5	1.40
<i>Type of employment</i>		
Permanent	51	14.20
Contract	21	5.80
Seasonal	6	1.70
Temporary	36	10.00
Casual	177	49.30
Other	19	5.30
<i>Work mode</i>		
Full-time	52	14.50
Part-time	213	59.30
Other	37	10.30

Table I.
Participants'
characteristics for the
study

Procedure

After obtaining ethical clearance from the relevant ethics committee, I procured a gate keeper's consent from the lecturer (gatekeeper) of one of the major undergraduate courses in management to collect data. Participants were also given the project information sheet and consent forms. The information sheet detailed the aims of the project, issues around anonymity and confidentiality. Participants completed the paper-and-pencil survey in person, and the survey was not part of the course requirement and no rewards were offered.

Measures

The measures were self-report ratings of: conflict type (i.e. relationship, task and process), level of forgiveness, perceived apology sincerity and willingness to cooperate. Participants were asked to reflect on the most recent disagreements they experienced in their workplace and then circle the appropriate response to items on the disagreement they have experienced. Respondents were also instructed to visualize in their minds the interactions of an event (i.e. conflict) and think about someone (in conflict) who had hurt them unfairly and deeply. Respondents then rated their experience, their perceived apology sincerity, attitudes toward forgiveness, actual forgiveness and willingness to cooperate by circling the most accurate response where 1 = strongly disagree and 7 = strongly agree.

Conflict type. The conflict scale measured the degree to which participants identified their recalled conflict as task-related, relationship-related or process-related. The scale was adapted from Jehn's (1995) Intergroup Conflict Scale and consisted of 14 items. For relationship conflict, participants rated the agreement with short descriptions of conflict type scenarios as being reflective of their workplace experiences ["I experienced disagreement about non-work (e.g. social or personality) things"] and an alpha score of 0.87. For task conflict, participants similarly rated their agreement with their reflections (e.g. "I had task-related arguments / disagreements", $\alpha = 0.94$) and for process conflict (e.g. "I experienced disagreement about the way to do things in the team", $\alpha = 0.86$). All items were measured using a seven-point scale from 1 "Strongly Disagree" to 7 "Strongly Agree".

Perceived apology sincerity. The extent the participants thought their transgressors were sincere in their apologies was measured on the perceived apology sincerity scale. The two-item scale was adapted from the apology scale (Bachman and Guerrero, 2006). For example, initial items such as "To what degree did your partner offer you a sincere apology for his/her actions?" became "To what extent did the offender offer you a sincere apology for her/his words or actions?". Items were measured using a seven-point Likert scale indicating 1 "Not at all" to 7 "Completely sincere" and $\alpha = 0.93$.

Forgiveness scale. Forgiveness was measured with an adapted scale from Guerrero and Bachman (2006)'s forgiveness scale. Given our interest in actual forgiveness, respondents indicated the extent to which they forgave their conflicting partners using a seven-point Likert scale (1 = "Not at all", 4 = "In progress" and 7 = "Complete forgiveness". Items on the scale include "To what extent have you forgiven the person you rated as the offender on this attitude scale".

Attitude to forgiveness scale. Additionally, attitude toward forgiveness was measured with an adapted Brown and Phillips (2005)'s attitude to forgiveness scale. The attitude to forgiveness scale consists of six items measuring participants'

general attitudes about the merits of forgiveness (e.g. “I believe that forgiveness is a moral action”, “It is admirable to be a forgiving person”). Participants indicated their level of agreement with each statement on the attitude toward forgiveness on a scale ranging from 1 (Strongly Disagree) to 7 (Strongly Agree) and $\alpha = 0.70$.

Willingness to cooperate. Scott *et al.* (2003)'s willingness to cooperate scale was adapted to measure willingness to cooperate. For example, the original item “I am willing to share information with offending employee about work” became “I am willing to share more information with offending employee about work after a conflict event”. Other items on the scale include “I am willing to enhance communication with offending employee working on the same project” and “I am willing to cooperate with the offending employee to get the work done”. All scales had a seven Likert anchor, e.g. from 1 “Strongly Disagree” to 7 “Strongly Agree” and $\alpha = 0.86$. The items in this scale were very different from those in the Tomlinson *et al.* (2004)'s scale that measured willingness to reconcile with a scenario and items such as “What is the likelihood that you would continue a business relationship with Pat.” In sum, willingness to cooperate and reconcile are differently conceptualized and measured.

Results

The aim of this study is to examine the connection between conflict, apology, attitudes to forgiveness and willingness to cooperate after a workplace conflict. Based on the proposed model (Figure 1), it is necessary to conduct a mediation analysis. Hence, analysis of the mediating role of forgiveness in both models was undertaken using PROCESS (Hayes, 2012) and by using the bootstrapping Model 4 template for data analysis. Results are based on 10,000 bootstrapped samples and are judged to be significant if the 95 per cent confidence intervals (CI) for the indirect effect do not go through 0 (Hayes, 2012).

Preliminary analyses

Table II presents the means, standard deviations and correlations for conflict and each of the variables within the model.

Confirmatory factor analysis

A series of confirmatory factor analyses were conducted to test the factor structures of these measures. Perceived apology sincerity, attitudes toward forgiveness and actual forgiveness items loaded onto the latent constructs with a root mean square error approximation (RMSEA) of 0.07, comparative fit index (CFI) of 0.97 and a normative fit index (NFI) of 0.96. Measures of willingness to cooperate also reflected good model fit with an RMSEA of 0.04, a CFI of 0.99 and an NFI of 0.98. Conflict measures had a good model fit (RMSEA = 0.08, CFI = 0.95, NFI = 0.93).

Control variables

Preliminary analyses using a series of one-way between subject ANOVAs were conducted to determine whether demographic variables such as gender, age, ethnicity or tenure were associated with key variables within the model. These revealed that scores of willingness to forgive were linked to gender [$F(1,253) = 4.33, p = 0.039$] and length of tenure [$F(4, 225) = 2.82, p = 0.026$]. Perceived apology sincerity was also associated with gender [$F(1, 319) = 12.56, p < 0.001$], as well as ethnic background [$F(8, 308) = 2.62, p = 0.010$]. Additionally, attitude toward forgiveness was also found to be

Table II.
Means, standard
deviations and
correlations between
variables

Variables tested in the model	<i>n</i>	<i>M (SD)</i>	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11
1. Gender	358	—	—										
2. Age	355	—	-0.09	—									
3. Ethnicity	354	—	-0.04	0.05	—								
4. Tenure	321	—	-0.02	0.17**	-0.06	—							
5. Task conflict	357	2.92 (1.10)	-0.06	0.13*	0.04	0.17**	—						
6. Relationship conflict	357	2.23 (0.95)	-0.09	0.04	0.04	0.18**	0.57**	—					
7. Process conflict	357	2.59 (1.17)	-0.07	0.05	0.03	0.16**	0.78**	0.52**	—				
8. Attitudes towards forgiveness	320	4.48 (0.96)	0.06	0.02	0.06	-0.06	-0.01	-0.08	-0.05	—			
9. Perceived apology sincerity	322	2.80 (1.05)	-0.20**	-0.04	0.09	-0.13*	-0.03	-0.04	-0.03	0.19**	—		
10. Levels of forgiveness	255	3.44 (1.11)	-0.13*	0.04	0.09	-0.08	-0.13*	-0.20**	-0.15*	0.48**	0.59**	—	
11. Willingness to cooperate	313	4.13 (0.98)	0.02	0.02	-0.03	-0.05	-0.08	-0.07	-0.09	0.37**	0.17**	0.36**	—

Notes: **Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (two-tailed); * correlation is significant at the 0.05 level (two-tailed)

significantly related to gender [$F(1, 317) = 6.16, p = 0.014$] and age [$F(3, 317) = 3.21, p = 0.023$]. Given these associations, all of the above demographic variables were controlled for in the main analyses.

Conflict and forgiveness

As part of the preliminary analysis, the relationship between different types of conflict, forgiveness and willingness to cooperate was examined. Specifically, the results show that relationship conflict is associated with lower scores of levels of forgiveness ($b = -0.22, SE = 0.10, p = 0.030, 95 \text{ per cent CI} = -0.42 - -0.02$). However, while relationship conflict has no significant, direct effect on willingness to cooperate, a negative indirect effect of relationship conflict upon exists via level of forgiveness ($b = -0.07, SE = 0.04, 95 \text{ per cent CI} = -0.14 - 0.01$), suggesting a mediation effect. Task and process conflict were not significantly associated with actual forgiveness or willingness to cooperate.

Main analyses: direct effects

Table III presents a summary of the direct effects. Perceived apology sincerity was positively associated with forgiveness ($b = 0.56, SE = 0.06, p < 0.001, 95 \text{ per cent CI} = 0.44 - 0.68$). Therefore, *H1a* was retained. No significant association between perceived apology sincerity and willingness to cooperate was revealed. Thus, *H1b* was rejected.

Results indicated a significant positive association between attitudes toward forgiveness and actual forgiveness (*H2a*) suggesting that individuals with a greater positive attitude toward forgiveness are also more likely to be associated with increasing forgiveness ($b = 0.50, SE = 0.09, p = 0.001, 95 \text{ per cent CI} = 0.33 - 0.69$), leading us to accept *H2a*. Likewise, individuals who reported an increase in positive attitude toward forgiveness also reported increase in willingness to cooperate ($b = 0.42, SE = 0.10, p < 0.001, 95 \text{ per cent CI} = 0.17 - 0.45$) in support of *H2b*.

Furthermore, it was hypothesized that forgiveness would be positively related to individual's willingness to cooperate with the offender (*H3*). Results showed that increased forgiveness was associated with increased willingness to cooperate ($b = 0.23, SE = 0.07, p < 0.001, 95 \text{ per cent CI} 0.08 - 0.37$). Thus, *H3* was retained.

Variable	<i>B</i>	<i>SE</i>	<i>t</i>	<i>p</i>	95 % bias corrected intervals
<i>Level of forgiveness</i>					
Perceived apology sincerity	0.55	0.06	9.30	<0.001	(0.44–0.68)
Attitude toward forgiveness	0.50	0.09	5.44	<0.001	(0.32–0.68)
<i>Willingness to cooperate</i>					
Perceived apology sincerity	-0.05	0.08	-0.64	0.521	(-0.20–0.10)
Attitude toward forgiveness	0.42	0.10	4.11	<0.001	(0.22–0.62)
Level of forgiveness	0.23	0.07	3.08	0.002	(0.08–0.37)

Notes: Direct effects are considered significant ($\alpha = 0.05$) if the 95 % CI do not contain 0; number of bootstrap samples for bias corrected intervals is 10,000

Table III. Direct effects of the relationship between perceived apology sincerity and attitude toward forgiveness on levels of forgiveness and willingness to cooperate

Forgiveness as a mediator

The results of the indirect effects of forgiveness analyses are summarized in Table IV. An indirect relationship was found between perceived apology sincerity and willingness to cooperate. Although there was no significant total effect ($TE = 0.08, SE = 0.06, p = 0.230, 95 \text{ per cent CI} = -0.05 - 0.20$), however, when actual forgiveness was considered, higher levels of perceived apology sincerity were associated with increased willingness to cooperate ($IE = 0.13, BootSE = 0.05, p = 0.004, 95 \text{ per cent CI} = 0.03 - 0.24$). Therefore, the relationship between apology sincerity and willingness to cooperate is fully mediated by forgiveness, and *H4a* was retained.

An examination of the model also showed a significant total effect ($TE = 0.53, SE = 0.10, p < 0.001, 95 \text{ per cent CI} = 0.34 - 0.73$) and a significant indirect effect ($IE = 0.11, BootSE = 0.05, p = 0.008, 95 \text{ per cent CI} = 0.03 - 0.22$) of forgiveness as mediator between attitudes toward forgiveness and willingness to cooperate. Overall, forgiveness partially mediates the relationship between attitudes toward forgiveness and willingness to cooperate, supporting *H4b*.

Discussions and conclusion

While research in the past decade has investigated the connection between apology and forgiveness where there are transgressions (Eaton *et al.*, 2006; Donnoli and Wertheim, 2012; Maltby *et al.*, 2008; McCullough *et al.*, 1997; McNulty, 2010) and how these might be related to trust (Ferrin *et al.*, 2007; McAllister, 1995; Tomlinson *et al.*, 2004) and in the context of romantic relationships (Brown, 2003; Brown and Phillips, 2005), little research has examined apology and forgiveness in the context of conflict (task, relationship and process) (Schumann, 2012) and willingness to cooperate after conflict. The results of the current research showed that task and process conflict were not significantly related to willingness to cooperate. Ayoko and Härtel (2003) indicated that conflict is often triggered by poor skills, and in this case, apology may not be able to achieve forgiveness as forgiveness will not remove incompetence and task, and process conflicts are often activated when performing tasks needing competence and skills. Similarly, Simons and Peterson (2000) indicated that task conflict is often misattributed as being personal in nature and consequently leading to relationship conflict. Perhaps poor skills and

Table IV. Indirect effect of perceived apology sincerity and attitudes to forgiveness on willingness to cooperate via level of forgiveness

Willingness to cooperate	<i>B</i>	<i>SE</i>	<i>t</i>	<i>p</i>	95 % bias corrected LLCI	95 % bias corrected ULCI
<i>Total effect</i>						
Perceived apology sincerity Attitude toward forgiveness	0.08	0.06	1.21	0.230	-0.05	0.20
<i>Indirect effect</i>	0.53	0.10	5.45	<0.001	0.34	0.73
Perceived apology sincerity Attitude toward forgiveness	0.13	0.08	-	0.004	0.03	0.23
	0.11	0.05	-	0.008	0.03	0.22

Notes: Indirect effects are considered significant ($\alpha = 0.05$) if the LLCI and ULCI do not contain 0; number of bootstrap samples for bias corrected intervals is 10,000

misattribution around task and process conflict may explain why both task and process conflicts were not significantly connected with both forgiveness and willingness to cooperate.

Nevertheless, the preliminary results showed that relationship conflict is negatively associated with actual forgiveness and willingness to cooperate. By definition, relationship conflict includes irritation about personal taste and interpersonal style, disagreements about political preferences or opposing values (De Dreu and Van de Vliert, 1997) and interpersonal incompatibilities (Korsgaard *et al.*, 2008). Research findings in this area suggest that increased relationship conflict is linked with low personal satisfaction, increased distress (De Dreu and Weingart, 2003) and self-conscious emotions of guilt and shame (Chen and Ayoko, 2012). There is a possibility that relationship conflict may trigger increased causal attribution, rumination (Berry *et al.*, 2005; McCullough *et al.*, 2007) and the tendency to blame the offender which may elicit low forgiveness and the lack of willingness to cooperate. Additionally, attribution theory suggests that how individual perceives a situation is a major determinant of his/her behavioral response to the event and that such evaluations may invoke emotions (Weiner, 1985) especially negative emotions which are salient during conflict (Sanford, 2007). The victims of relationship conflict may still have been embroiled in negative emotions that might have further fueled the attribution of blame to their offenders thereby reducing forgiveness and cooperation after conflict. Moreover, the result that the link between relationship conflict and willingness to cooperate is mediated by forgiveness suggests that whether employees cooperate after relationship conflict may depend on the forgiveness extended toward the victim. Altogether, conflict literature is extended by demonstrating that individuals who engage in relationship (than task and process) conflict may engage less in forgiveness (as a strategy of managing conflict) but may be willing to cooperate after a conflict episode when forgiveness is present.

Preliminary analysis indicating that ethnicity (i.e. collectives) is related to scores of perceived apology sincerity is also in consonance with prior findings in this area (Hook *et al.*, 2009). Hook and colleagues showed that the willingness to forgive may be more characteristic of collectivistic cultures than individualistic cultures. They explained that their result may be due to the fact that collectivistic forgiveness (than the individualistic) is largely motivated to promote and maintain group harmony rather than inner peace. Additionally, empirical findings suggest that individuals with self-transcendent cultural values are motivated to preserve the welfare of others (Fehr and Gelfand, 2012) and are associated with empathy and feelings of guilt for others' suffering (Balliet *et al.*, 2008). Conversely, individuals with self-enhancing values of achievement and power are motivated to enhance their individual personal interests and have a desire for revenge, war and retributive justice (McKee and Feather, 2008). Attribution theory suggests that beliefs are core to cognitive processing and attribution. This means that differences in beliefs and values are important for the manner in which people from different cultural backgrounds evaluate events and the attribution of blame (Kanz, 2000). Altogether, results suggest that workers' cultural background may affect their perceptions about apology and forgiveness and how these strategies may be used as conflict management strategies in the workplace.

In terms of gender, prior findings in this area are mixed with some studies showing no significant effect for gender on forgiveness and apologies (Hareli and Eisikovits,

2006; Schumann, 2012), while others (Brown, 2003, Brown and Phillips, 2005) indicated that gender impacts apology and forgiveness. The results from the present study also demonstrate that males were more linked with forgiveness and perceived apology sincerity, but females were associated with attitudes to forgiveness corroborating the finding that gender impacts apology and forgiveness. While I did not compare the frequency of apologies offered by men and women in the current research (Schumann and Ross, 2010), the finding that women (than men) in the current study were linked with attitude to forgiveness may explain why women offer more apologies than men. There is a possibility that women (more than men) empathize with their offenders, thereby reducing the intensity of their attribution for a wrong doing such as conflict (McCullough *et al.*, 1997).

Age (31-40 years) was linked with attitude to forgiveness. In particular, DiBlasio and Proctor (1993) found that clinicians beyond mid-life point adopted a more favorable attitude toward forgiveness and had a more developed technique to implement forgiveness. Similarly, prior findings indicated that older people are more established in their disposition. Also, as children grow, they are less conformed to the rules and norms of their environment denoting that as they grow, they become more confident of their own judgment (i.e. internal attribution) (Costanzo and Shaw, 1966). This suggests that there is a possibility that the older one becomes, the more individuals are able to put themselves in the shoes of their offenders thereby facilitating positive attitude to forgiveness and subsequent forgiveness.

Current findings also revealed that perceived apology sincerity was positively associated with actual forgiveness which, in turn, was related to willingness to cooperate. These results are in line with attribution theory that sincere apology may minimize negative emotions (e.g. anger) (Hubbard *et al.*, 2013) to stimulate forgiveness. While Bottom and colleagues investigated cooperation, they were more interested in the effects of opportunistic actions on cooperation and the effects of penance in restoring mutual cooperation in the laboratory (Bottom *et al.*, 2002). Although prior studies have also looked at the link between apology and forgiveness (Aquino *et al.*, 2003; Ferrin *et al.*, 2007; Lewicki and Bunker, 1996; Tomlinson, 2012, Tomlinson *et al.*, 2004), most of these studies were in a controlled laboratory environment and were usually in the context of trust violations and reconciliations. The current study extends theory in this area by conducting a field study on the connection between apology, attitude to forgive, forgiveness and willingness to cooperate (rather than reconciliation) after a conflict event.

Additionally, controversy surrounds the effect of apology on forgiveness with some scholars proposing that apology elicits forgiveness because of the expression of remorse which may, in turn, reduce the offender's concerns about continued offence and vulnerability (Lewicki and Bunker, 1996). Yet, others argue that apology may not elicit forgiveness due to its acknowledgement of guilt and that it may further worsen the negative outcomes of the offence (Schlenker, 1980). The result of the current study however reiterates the importance of sincere apology in activating forgiveness in the victim (Donnoli and Wertheim, 2012; Hubbard *et al.*, 2013), thus shedding more light on the existing controversy in this area.

Besides, the present study showed a link between attitude to forgiveness and actual forgiveness. So far, the results on the connection between forgiveness disposition and actual forgiveness are mixed, and most of these studies are focused in dating and

marriage relationships (Berry *et al.*, 2005; Brown and Phillips, 2005). Eaton *et al.* (2006) reported that dispositional forgiveness did not predict state forgiveness, while Brown and Phillips (2005) found a connection between forgiveness disposition and forgiveness state. The current findings confirm that both state and dispositional forgiveness are related in the context of workplace conflict, thus clarifying the mixed results in this area.

Furthermore, the results showed that increased positive attitude to forgiveness is associated with willingness to cooperate. Karremans and Van Lange (2004) established that forgiveness was positively associated with level of intended cooperation (Brown, 2003; Eaton *et al.*, 2006). Although the studies above (Brown, 2003; Eaton *et al.*, 2006) showed that certain traits can inhibit or promote the ability to forgive and actual forgiveness, studies examining these constructs in the context of workplace conflict and willingness to cooperate are limited. The current results extend literature in this area by showing that increased positive forgiveness attitudes, perceived apology sincerity and actual forgiveness may facilitate the willingness to cooperate after a conflict at work.

Limitations and future research

Although this quantitative study bears strength to the current results, it is limited because it is self-report and cross-sectional. While some steps were taken to avoid common method bias [e.g. ensuring construct validity (Conway and Lance, 2010) and protecting respondents anonymity (Podsakoff *et al.*, 2003)], constructs such as sincere apology and forgiveness are private events and are appropriate candidates for self-measures (Chan, 2009). Recent studies also indicate that the problems associated with common method bias are often exaggerated (Spector, 2006). Nonetheless, the current results should be interpreted with caution. Further studies should investigate the constructs with multiple methods.

The results showed that only relationship conflict has a significant association with forgiveness and willingness to cooperate. More research, especially longitudinal studies, is needed to continue to tease out the effects of time and possible power differentials in the association between differing types of conflict and willingness to cooperate in the face of apology, forgiveness, attitude to forgiveness and actual forgiveness. While I have examined the link between apology, forgiveness and willingness to cooperate in the presence of conflict, there is a possibility that the work environment (e.g. climate) may play a key role in this association. Future research should explore the link between work climate, individual's readiness to apologize, forgive and their willingness to cooperate at work after conflict.

Similarly, only perceived sincerity of apology was examined making it difficult to determine whether an increase in willingness to cooperate was elicited by sincerity of apology or a mere occurrence of apology. Future studies should establish the distinctions between these two constructs and test their effects on the willingness to cooperate after conflict.

Finally, the intensity of conflict was not measured in this research. Ayoko and Pekerti (2008) demonstrated that conflict intensity was negatively associated with trust, while intensity of wrongdoing may be an important factor for whether the victim forgives the offender irrespective of apology (Lewicki and Bunker, 1996). Future research should examine the impact of conflict intensity on the link between conflict, apology, forgiveness and willingness to cooperate.

Theoretical implications

The results from the current study have several theoretical implications. The present results indicate that only relationship conflict is negatively and significantly associated with forgiveness and willingness to cooperate after a conflict episode. Even though this relationship was not hypothesized, this is a new and interesting discovery. Conflict researchers have consistently shown that relationship conflict is negatively connected with conflict outcomes (De Dreu and Weingart, 2003). This is because relationship conflict inhibits the goodwill and understanding between co-workers (Deutsch, 1969) which, in turn, constrains performance (Greer *et al.*, 2008). However, little research has examined the connection between conflict types and willingness to cooperate. Indeed, there is less research on the role of apology and forgiveness in attenuating the effects of differing conflict types on employees' willingness to cooperate after a conflict event. The results revealed that relationship conflict is negatively linked with forgiveness and willingness to cooperate. This may be explained by the potential for relationship conflict to trigger negative emotions while impeding goodwill and understanding between employees. Altogether, this result extends theory in the area of conflict management, apology and forgiveness literature by showing for the first time that apology and forgiveness may need to be combined with emotions management (Ayoko *et al.*, 2008) to alleviate the negative effects of relationship conflict on distal outcomes such as employees' willingness to cooperate after a conflict.

Altogether, attribution theory is extended to explain how given conflict, an individuals' beliefs, values, perceptions and cognitive processes may inform his/her evaluations, attribution of blame, attitudes (e.g. to forgiveness), emotions (anger) and reactions (e.g. forgiveness and apology) upon which a decision (e.g. willingness to forgive and cooperate) might be based. For example, the findings indicated that the attitude to forgiveness plays a positive role in actual forgiveness when there is conflict generally. As noted earlier, the findings about the link between attitude to forgive and actual forgiveness are mixed. The current results clarify these mixed findings by confirming the connection between dispositional and state forgiveness (Brown and Phillips, 2005) even in the context of conflict. Likewise, studies that have examined how apology and attitude toward forgiveness impact employees' willingness to cooperate (after conflict) and through actual forgiveness is limited. Beyond reconciliation, the finding that forgiveness mediates the relationship between conflict types, attitude to forgiveness, apology and willingness to cooperate has extended attribution and the theoretical fronts of conflict, apology and forgiveness literature.

Practical implications

From a practical standpoint, the findings from the current study suggest that managers need to be aware of the constructs of apology, attitude to forgiveness and actual forgiveness as well as their role in fostering cooperation after a conflict event. They should also be able to model for their employees the giving and receiving of apology and forgiveness after conflict. Kurzynski (1998) argues that forgiveness is a human resource management strategy that has capacity to become a manager's repertoire in managing conflict. Wise managers and leaders interested in increased cooperation from employees after a conflict event should themselves model a positive attitude to forgiveness and display genuine apology and forgiveness at work.

It was found that relationship conflict was negatively related to apology and willingness to cooperate after a conflict event. This has implications for managing different types of conflict. Conflict management strategies should not be “one size fits all”. Managers and organizational leaders need to understand that different conflicts need to be managed differently, adding to the complexities of managing workplace conflict. In this case, managing relationship conflicts require other strategies in addition to apology and forgiveness.

The fact that tenure, gender and ethnicity are related to apology, attitude to forgiveness and willingness to cooperate suggests that managers need to be more sensitive to the impact of demographics on conflict and individuals’ tendencies to apologize and use forgiveness as a conflict management strategy at work. For example, in the current study, the participants from non-mainstream cultures appear to be more associated with apology and forgiveness. In this respect, employees from such cultural backgrounds may also expect more apologies from people they perceive have hurt them in a conflict event. Therefore, in practice, diversity management training and strategies should include the resolution of conflict through apologies and forgiveness.

While conflict brings tension and anxiety at work (Jehn, 1995), health researchers argue that individuals’ responses to interpersonal offenses have significant implications for their well-being (Witvliet *et al.*, 2001) and that forgiveness especially is therapeutic (Sells and Hardgrave, 1998). This has training implications. Already, studies have shown that training intervention promotes forgiveness (Brown, 2003; Struthers *et al.*, 2005). Managers who would like to see increased productivity, and employee wellbeing should mount intervention training in conflict management and negotiation that focuses on apology and forgiveness to promote employees’ willingness to cooperate and productivity. To use apology and forgiveness as strategies for managing conflict, managers may need to manage emotions arising from conflict and the attribution processes following conflict as well as fostering a climate of apology and forgiveness to assist the development of this virtue in their employees.

Conclusion

The current study has contributed to the growing literature that continues to deepen our understanding of the nexus between apology, forgiveness and willingness to cooperate after a conflict event at work. I examined the relationship between conflict, apology, attitude to forgiveness and willingness to cooperate after a conflict episode. The results demonstrate that although relationship conflict is negatively associated with forgiveness and willingness to cooperate, employees may be more willing to cooperate after relationship conflict in the presence of forgiveness. Likewise, the findings highlight that sincere apologies and a positive attitude toward forgiveness are critical drivers of willingness to cooperate in the face of workplace conflict. These findings extended the literature on conflict, apology, forgiveness and willingness to cooperate at work. The new results from the current study should give leaders and managers the impetus to seek alternative strategies (e.g. apology and forgiveness) in managing workplace conflict in their bid to increase cooperation and performance after conflict.

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About the author

Associate Professor Oluremi Bolanle Ayoko (Remi) is a Associate Professor of Management at the UQ Business School, University of Queensland. She has had extensive teaching experience in tertiary institutions across three nations. Her research interests include conflict, emotions, crisis, leadership, workplace diversity, and territoriality. Remi is on the editorial board of the *International Journal of Conflict Management and Negotiation* and *Conflict Management Research*. She has published widely in highly influential journals such as *Journal of Organizational Behavior*, *Group & Organizational Management*, *Applied Psychology: An International Review*, *Small Group Research* and *International Journal of Conflict Management*. Oluremi Bolanle Ayoko can be contacted at: r.ayoko@business.uq.edu.au

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