

Apologies aren't as good as people imagine they'll be

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We all want an apology when someone does us wrong. But a new study, published in *Psychological Science*, a journal of the Association for Psychological Science, finds that people aren't very good at predicting how much they'll value an apology.

Apologies have been in the news a lot the last few years in the context of the [financial crisis](#), says David De Cremer of Erasmus University in the Netherlands. He cowrote the study with Chris Reinders Folmer of Erasmus University and Madan M. Pillutla of London Business School. "Banks didn't want to apologize because they didn't feel guilty but, in the public eye, banks were guilty," De Cremer says. But even when some banks and CEOs did apologize, the public didn't seem to feel any better. "We wondered, what was the real value of an apology?"

De Cremer and his colleagues used an experiment to examine how people think about apologies. Volunteers sat at a computer and were given 10 euros to either keep or give to a partner, with whom they communicated via computer. The [money](#) was tripled so that the partner received 30 euros. Then the partner could choose how much to give back—but he or she only gave back five euros. Some of the volunteers were given an apology for this cheap offer, while others were told to imagine they'd been given an apology.

The people who imagined an apology valued it more than people who actually received an apology. This suggests that people are pretty poor forecasters when it comes down to what is needed to resolve conflicts.

Although they want an apology and thus rate it as highly valuable, the actual apology is less satisfying than predicted.

"I think an apology is a first step in the reconciliation process," De Cremer says. But "you need to show that you will do something else." He and his authors speculate that, because people imagine that apologies will make them feel better than they do, an [apology](#) might actually be better at convincing outside observers that the wrongdoer feels bad than actually making the wronged party feel better.

Provided by Association for Psychological Science

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