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journal homepage: www.elsevier.com/locate/leaquaSaying sorry: Ethical leadership and the act of public apology^{☆,☆☆}Sanderijn Cels^{☆,1}

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A B S T R A C T

How do top representatives exercise ethical leadership in the context of public apologies? This paper examines public apologies made by corporate and government leaders for organizational wrongdoing. Conducting qualitative case-research, our deductive inquiry demonstrates that ethical leadership strategies that have been formulated for organizational contexts are utilized in the public arena and adapted to meet the particular demands of this context. We also inductively derive four aggregate strategies that leaders employ: “articulating values in relation to past and future”; “defining the wrongdoing”; “constructing moral communities” and “differentiating responsibilities”. We discuss the findings vis-à-vis the body of literature on ethical leadership, and identify some thorny ethical issues for further investigation.

Introduction

A decade ago, [Brown and Treviño \(2006, p. 595\)](#) argued that the field of “ethical leadership remains largely unexplored, offering researchers opportunities for new discoveries and leaders opportunities to improve their effectiveness.” Since then, much scholarship has sought to understand the notion of ethical leadership and unravel its workings, whether through efforts to conceptualize the phenomenon or empirical explorations of its manifestations. Underlying many studies, including this one, are the assumptions that norms and values guide actions and that we can study leaders' actions in order to identify and reveal these norms and values—for example, by investigating the decisions that they make in stressful situations ([Selart & Johansen, 2011](#)) or the way they deal with potential conflicts of interest ([Ritvo, Ohlsen, & Holland, 2004](#)).

Public apologies—those instances when leaders, on behalf of the organizations that they represent, acknowledge responsibility for violating a moral norm and express regret—are particularly revealing actions. Yet, such apologies have received surprisingly little attention in the field of ethical leadership, despite their increasing frequency over the last decades ([Gibney, Howard-Hassmann, Coicaud, & Steiner, 2008](#); [Maclachan, 2010](#)). Most news consumers could easily cite a few examples in recent memory. In 2009, for example, Toyota's president apologized in the Japanese National Press Club for a fatal crash that led to the recall of close to 4 million cars ([Tabichi & Maynard, 2009](#)). In 2010, British Petroleum (BP) CEO Tony Hayward apologized for the Gulf oil spill in a video advertisement. He referred to it as “a tragedy that never should have happened” and said that he was “deeply sorry” ([BP, 2010](#)). In 2008, Australian Prime Minister Kevin Rudd apologized in Parliament for laws and policies that inflicted “profound grief, suffering, and loss” to Aboriginal peoples ([Australian Government, 2008](#)). His successor offered government apologies in 2013 for past policies that encouraged unwed mothers to give up their babies for adoption to married couples. In 2015, in a video statement on YouTube,

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the CEO of Volkswagen said he was sorry for cheating to evade emissions compliance standards for some diesel-fueled car models (Volkswagen, 2015).

Apologies are relevant to the study of ethical leadership for at least three reasons. First, they are *moral* acts in the sense that they intend “to restore conflicts and somehow restore an antecedent moral order” of which both offender and victims are part, but which has been violated (Tavuchis, 1991, p. 113). (The terms ethical and moral are interchangeable in this paper.) Through apologies, leaders publicly re-subscribe to the moral principles that have been violated. In doing so, they have to make judgments about the nature and scope of the violation and the exact principles underlying the wrong, while considering the political, legal, and financial consequences of those judgments. For example, does a Dutch government representative apologizing for postcolonial misdeeds express regret for *all* the postcolonial atrocities that the Dutch army committed in Indonesia, or does he single out a few especially violent excesses? While the first option might inspire moral praise from Indonesian addressees the latter might be a prudent hedge against a massive number of potential claims for financial compensation.

Second, apologies require leaders to define specific moral entities. These include at least a party to which the apology is addressed (often called the “victim group”) and a party that violated a norm (the “perpetrator” or “offender” group) on whose behalf leaders speak (Lazare, 2004; Smith, 2008; Tavuchis, 1991). They have to decide who exactly owes the apology and who owns a moral right to receive it. These are consequential decisions. Does the Toyota chief speak on behalf of the entire company or does he single out a specific department that has committed a wrong? Does the BP executive address merely those directly affected by the oil spill, or does he extend the message to the public at large (BBC, 2015)?

Third, apologizers have to establish themselves as moral authorities who are capable of directing people's attention to the issues at stake (Trevino et al., 2000). For their statement to carry weight they must be seen as persons who can speak decisively about norms and values (Friedman, 1990). More precisely, they have to make sure that 1) their audiences accept their judgments in matters of right and wrong; 2) they appear capable of leading their organization towards higher moral ground; and 3) they are able to implement practical measures to do better and not repeat the wrong. The German CEO of Volkswagen, who apologized for cheating over emission standards compliance, asked explicitly for trust in his leadership and do better, but he was fired just a few days after making his statement (Volkswagen, 2015).

In a highly-mediatized arena, leaders' vulnerability as moral authorities is on vivid display. Having to admit wrongdoing does not enhance their moral standing, and doing so before a wronged party while cameras are rolling increases their vulnerability. The addressees may well refuse the gesture. Leaders can do their best to generate a favorable response, but it remains to be seen if the victims and the wider public are willing to accept the statement. If they do not, their reply will “...presumably be understood by the offender as the withholding of forgiveness,” states philosopher Griswold (2007, p. 58), which could further embarrass the apologizer.

Moreover, media outlets are free to spin the story however they like, and the media's “wish for décor, plots, for cliffhangers, or for [...] conflicts” (Hajer, 2009) gives the resulting productions and presentations their own “media logic” (Berger, 1988, p. 204). This logic often follows a “logic of drama” that tends to paint actors as villains and victims—“characters which lie in men's minds,” in the words of philosopher Mead (1934, p. 257). It is often the fate of the apologizer to play the first character and meet the expectations that come with it—by profusely accepting blame. (Media may well enjoy the spectacle of a well-paid CEO crawling in the dust.) Thus, leaders must satisfy the media's hunger for a full mea culpa while trying to avoid alienating those they lead by implicating them all in villainy. In attending to the media logic on one side and the representative function of the leader on the other, the act of apology becomes something of a tightrope walk.

Up until this point, public apologies have been discussed in studies of ethical leadership from a practical and normative point of view (Barling, 2014; Johnson, 2009; Kellerman, 2006). Little theorizing has been done around this phenomenon. There are several reasons for this. First, descriptive studies in the field have tended to focus on *organizational* leadership, directing attention towards every day, internal actions within organizations rather than performances made in the public arena. We have no data of internal apologies that are offered behind closed doors in organizational contexts – which is unfortunate, because this internal act of ethical leadership would lend itself well for research that is informed by theories of organizational ethical leadership. Next, despite the recent increase of *public* apologies they are still relatively rare. They are not an obvious starting point for research—especially when research aims to arrive at generalized statements about specific leadership interventions and their effects. As a result, the body of literature on ethical leadership does not provide a full conceptual framework for qualitative analysis of public apologies by organizational leaders. To arrive at such a framework, those who wish to study these acts can borrow concepts from works that are tightly positioned in other academic areas. (Apologies have been the subject of theoretical study in many disciplines, including linguistics, philosophy, sociology, anthropology, and psychology.) Alternatively, they can ignore existing frameworks and rely on grounded theory (Glaser and Strauss, 1967). A third option is to identify a framework in ethical leadership theory that can function as a starting point for empirical research, and to pair deductive analysis with inductive inquiry. Looking to theory avoids the risk of throwing out the baby with the bath water: before engaging in grounded theory approaches, one can establish if, and how, existing frameworks fall short.

Through deductive and inductive inquiry of government and corporate cases, we aim to identify the strategies that apologizers employ to exercise ethical leadership in the context of public apologies. These strategies have remained understudied, and our expectation is that the avenue of analysis taken in this paper will enable scholars to build on and expand theory of ethical leadership. We will end this article with a discussion of the findings, their relevance vis-à-vis the body of literature on ethical leadership, and suggestions for further research.

Approach

The question that we seek to answer is how leaders assert ethical leadership—consciously or not—when they apologize in public.

Existing studies have demonstrated what strategies leaders use in organizational contexts; our objective is to establish the strategies that they employ when they engage *public* moral discourse. The framework of [Brown, Hartman and Treviño \(2000\)](#), [Brown et al. \(2005\)](#), [Brown and Treviño \(2006\)](#) will be key to the investigation: it has established a set of strategies that a leader can employ to meet the conditions to exercise effective ethical leadership. An effective ethical leader must, in short, ensure that people perceive him or her as a moral person who is worthy of trust and respect, who treats other people fairly, and whose calls to moral action are not in vain. These strategies are employed in everyday contexts that may be demanding and stressful, but that are less extraordinary than the settings in which public apologies take place.

The content of this article rests on two core concepts: ethical leadership and apology. Adhering to Brown and Treviño's well-known definition, we understand ethical leadership to be the “demonstration of normatively appropriate conduct through personal actions and interpersonal relationships, and the promotion of such conduct to followers through two-way communication, reinforcement, and decision-making” ([Brown et al., 2005](#), p. 120; [Brown and Treviño, 2006](#), p. 595–597; [Eisenbeiss, 2012](#); [Mihelic et al., 2010](#); [Van den Akker et al., 2009](#)). We understand apology to be a speech act in which a (sometimes symbolic) offender addresses victims and includes at least a reference to the violation of a moral norm, an acknowledgement of responsibility for the wrongdoing, and an expression of regret. The requirements included as basic elements of this definition are drawn from salient apology studies ([Blatz, Schumann, & Ross, 2009](#); [Celermayer, 2009](#); [James, 2008](#); [Lazare, 2004](#); [Tavuchis, 1991](#)). The use of the term “act” references the phenomenological tradition that treats an “act” as a way in which people constitute social reality through language, structure, and, in the words of philosopher [Butler \(1988, p. 519\)](#) “all manner of symbolic social sign.”

The public apologies included in our research all focus on organizational wrongdoing rather than personal matters. They feature leaders who step outside organizational boundaries as the public face of their organization and perform a moral act in a forum that is accessible to audiences at large: for example, a press conference, a public hearing, or a video released on the internet. These acts are scrutinized and interpreted by diverse social actors in the “public realm”—the arena in which ideas, media, institutions, and practices all contribute to the dynamic generation of publics and public opinions ([Low and Smith, 2006](#)).

The reliance on [Brown and Treviño's framework \(2000, 2005, 2006\)](#) has significant implications: the literature review is limited to descriptive studies that discuss ethical leadership according their definition.² There are numerous interesting studies about the phenomenon that are omitted, as they conceptualize it in a different way. We also omit noteworthy studies into ethical leadership and its specific causal effects, as their focus on the explanatory power of an independent variable is not relevant for the purposes of this paper.

Theoretical foundation

In this section we further discuss the leadership theory developed by Brown, Treviño, and fellow thinkers, which informs the framework of analysis. How, theorists asked, do those at the top of organizations assert *ethical* leadership? Various answers have been offered. As [Frisch and Huppenbauer](#) conclude, “several leadership theories have embraced ethics as an integral part of their conceptualization” (2014, p. 24), including theories of authentic leadership ([Avolio & Luthans, 2006](#); [Gardner, Avolio, Luthans, May, & Walumbwa, 2005](#)), charismatic leadership ([Howell & Avolio, 1992](#)), (authentic) transformational leadership ([Bass & Steidlmeier, 1999](#); [Burns, 1978](#)); and spiritual leadership ([Fry, 2003](#)).

Building on theories of authentic, spiritual, and transformational leadership, [Brown and Treviño \(2006\)](#) set out to conceptualize and operationalize the notion of executive ethical leadership, resulting in foundational work that has been widely quoted throughout the last two decades.

A first set of descriptive studies builds upon the initial part of Brown's and Treviño's definition: the leader's “demonstration of normatively appropriate conduct through personal actions and interpersonal relationships” (i.e., being an ethical person). Studies zoom in on individual leaders' character, values, traits, and actions, and how these can guide others to higher moral ground—and improve an organization's bottom-line performance (e.g., [Treviño et al., 2000](#), p. 130; [King, 2008](#); [Mackie, Taylor, Finegold, Daar, & Singer, 2006](#); [Mayer, Aquino, Greenbaum, & Kuenzi, 2012](#); [Plinio, 2009](#)). This personalist perspective focuses on one's particular “moral identity” as the key to leading effectively and ethically ([Zhu, Avolio, Riggio, & Sosik, 2011](#)). Recent studies indicate that the effects of this form of ethical leadership are diverse, can be observed directly or indirectly, and depend on multiple variables (e.g., [Ogunfowora, 2014](#); [Van Gils et al., 2014](#); [Walumbwa et al., 2012](#); [Zhu, He, Treviño, Chao, & Wang, 2015](#)).

A second cluster of descriptive studies directs attention towards the latter part of Brown's and Treviño's definition —“the promotion of [ethical] conduct to followers through two-way communication, reinforcement, and decision-making”—which puts the moral action of “followers” at the center ([Kellerman, 2008](#)). Some works suggest that leaders should explicitly tell others what to do. Comparing leaders to parents, Brown and Treviño state that they should decide what moral principles are relevant and what others should do to honor these (2000, p. 133). Other authors treat the promotion of values as a process whereby a leader helps others in the organization articulate values and objectives, and facilitates efforts to embody these in practice (e.g., [Bass and Steidlmeier, 1999](#); [Ciulla, 2004](#); [Price, 2006](#); [Weaver, Trevino, & Agle, 2005](#)). Leaders create “a living conversation about ethics, values, and the creation of value for stakeholders” ([Freeman and Stewart, 2006](#)). Since this paper stays close to the views of Brown and Treviño, it is assumed that this conversation is not open-ended. In parental fashion or not, leaders steer it by articulating the values around which others should coalesce and which should form the basis of future action.

² See for a recent comprehensive review: [Brown et al., 2014](#).

Strategies

Brown and Treviño argue that ethical leadership rests on two pillars: being a moral person and being a moral manager (Brown, 2007; Brown & Treviño, 2006; Brown et al., 2000). Personifying the values that they seek to promote, ethical leaders display specific characteristics, including integrity, honesty, and trustworthiness (Brown et al., 2005). Integrity is treated as a code of conduct and encompasses the other two traits (Treviño et al., 2000, p. 129). Honesty is concerned with candor; trustworthiness has to do with followers' expectations of leaders' consistency in words and deeds. This consistency, goes the rationale, adds to their credibility, which can be understood here as predictability.

Prudently dissecting the notion, Palanski and Yammarino (2009, p. 406) have refined Brown and Treviño's concept of integrity, defining it as a mode of conduct that demonstrates consistency between words and actions. Van den Akker has pinpointed trustworthiness as “a psychological state comprising the positive expectation that another party will perform particular actions that are important to oneself, coupled with a willingness to accept vulnerability which may arise from the actions of that other party” (Van den Akker et al., 2009, p. 105). The notion of honesty, however, is has not been scrutinized in leadership literature, which tends instead to merge it with the notion of integrity, even though it is a problematic concept in itself. (When is someone telling enough of the truth? If we take reality to be a social construct, what part of reality should leaders highlight, and what parts can they ignore, without being perceived as dishonest? And given the rapidly evolving insights in decision sciences, to what extent can leaders strategically “frame” information and play upon individual biases and other behavioral tendencies without appearing dishonest?)

Brown and Treviño argue that moral persons also display commitment to their values through actions. Their words are aligned with their deeds—they strive to “walk the talk” and “do the right thing” (Treviño et al., 2000; Treviño et al., 2003). What exactly this means depends on the context (Frisch & Huppenbauer, 2014), but care and respect for others is what underlies their actions (Crews, 2011). Being a moral person is thus a necessary but not sufficient condition for ethical leadership: because of it, other actions in the managerial realm become possible and meaningful, and taken together, these actions, by the rationale of Brown, Treviño, and fellow scholars, constitute ethical leadership.

One action of moral management that Brown and Treviño distinguish is the creation of a moral reputation based on leaders' personal histories (Shamir & Eilam, 2005; Treviño et al., 2000). This reputation is not to be taken as a superficial construct; on the contrary, the personal narrative reveals a leader's authentic self (Sparrow, 2005; Treviño et al., 2000, p. 129). In large organizations where many employees do not know their bosses very well and interact with them rarely, if at all, ethical leaders should not hesitate to share their personal narratives (Treviño et al., 2000, p. 128). In the words of social psychologists Krumm and Corning, ethical leaders have to pin down and demonstrate “moral credentials”: pieces of evidence presented as part of a “moral track record” that adds to their credibility (Krumm & Corning, 2008, p. 689).

Another action that Brown and Treviño distinguish concerns promoting an ethical culture within the organization (Brown & Treviño, 2006; Treviño et al., 2003; Treviño, Brown, & Hartman, 2003; Treviño, Weaver, Gibson & Toffler, 1999). Ethical leaders consciously create such a culture by making ethics part of the organization's agenda. They set moral objectives and direct attention to ethical imperatives (Treviño et al., 2000). They also articulate the values and norms that others should be concerned about and orchestrate a conversation about these norms and values with and between the people whose efforts are vital to achieving moral and practical objectives.³

A third action in the realm of moral management is role modelling. Because ethical leaders embody integrity, honesty, and trustworthiness, goes the rationale, they also serve as ethical role models (Lasthuizen, 2008; Treviño & Brown, 2004). They show their followers what actions to take and lead them in the direction of moral action (Caldwell et al., 2008; Treviño & Brown, 2004; Weaver et al., 2005).

Finally, ethical leaders “[foster] their followers' moral behavior by setting clear moral standards and expectations and creating ground rules for moral conduct” (Van den Akker et al., 2009, p. 103). They not only call upon others to act in ways that honor the relevant values and norms (“moral action” or “ethical conduct”), they also create concrete opportunities to do so and implement a disciplinary system to hold others accountable. Rewards for ethical behavior and sanctions for unethical behavior are integral to the organizational accountability system (Treviño et al., 2003; Van den Akker et al., 2009).

Finally, Brown and Treviño's framework of ethical leadership pays attention to outcomes, including followers' ethical decision making, prosocial behavior, satisfaction, motivation, and commitment (Brown and Treviño, 2006, p. 596). Brown et al. (2005) have developed an Ethical Leadership Scale (ELS) —a 10-item questionnaire (with a 7-point Likert scale) to measure ethical leadership behaviors. The questionnaire is directed at followers because, the theorists (2005) argue, the phenomenon of leadership is best studied by asking those who are led.

Research approach

Based on the need for theory building and informed by the nature of the central inquiry (the question of “how” ethical leadership is exercised), we chose to do qualitative research, using the case study method (Dooley, 2002; Yin, 2003). We expected that the examination of similarities and differences within and between multiple cases could allow us to generate findings that were valid beyond one apology case and could support further theorizing (George & Bennett, 2005; Yin, 2003).

³ This notion differs from “communitarian leadership,” a notion promoted in Christians and Merrill (2009), in which bettering community and society at large is crucial.

Case selection

Elo et al. note that, “There is no commonly accepted sample size for qualitative studies because the optimal sample depends on the purpose of the study, research questions, and richness of the data” (2014). Given the relative paucity of data on the subject of public apologies, and assuming that public apologies all generate attention on the internet (and can thus be retrieved), we first sought to retrieve N in its entirety: all public apologies issued in English by executives, in the public and private sector, between 2013 and 2015.

Specifying the attributes of N, we choose for a form of theoretically-guided purposive sampling that allows for data retrieval to be guided by the research question (Creswell, 2007). Lincoln’s and Guba’s (1985) criterion of “credibility” in sampling was a guiding factor in ensuring that bias was reduced in the case selection. The following choices were made.

First, the choice for recent cases (2013–2015) was based on the expectation of availability and accessibility of resources, and coincides with the increased incidence of public apology practices (Ancarno, 2015; Maclachan, 2010; Okimoto, Wenzelf & Hornsey, 2015).

Second, the choice for apologies in English was informed by the uniformity of language, which makes it possible to compare statements. There was no requirement that the apology be issued exclusively in English—only that it come from a primary source. For example, an apology originally offered in German but later officially re-issued in English would be included. An apology issued in Japanese and then translated by media outlets would be omitted.

Third, the choice to focus on apologies from executives was informed by the state of existing theory: the work of Brown and Treviño builds on research on corporate executives, and to facilitate comparison, we included apologies of those with executive powers and a formal mandate to speak on behalf of their organization: heads of government and executive agencies within government and CEO’s of for-profit organizations. The decision to include both government and for-profit entities was based on the observation that leaders in both sectors have recently offered public apologies. Lacking comparative research on this topic, we wondered if notable differences existed between the strategies of corporate and government leaders.

Fourth, in order to define *public apologies*, we turned to theory of apology. This body of literature articulates the textual elements that comprise an apology. Some basic elements are relatively undisputed, including an expression of regret, a reference of a wrongdoing (e.g., stating that a specific action was “wrong”), and an acknowledgement of responsibility for the wrongdoing (James, 2008). If the party making the statement does not acknowledge responsibility, the statement is considered a “statement of regret.” Recognizing the need for what Morse, Barrett, Mayan, Olson, and Spiers (2016) refer to as “completeness”—that is, a thorough and comprehensive representation of the phenomenon in question, we included both apologies and statements of regret as long as they encompassed the three basic elements described above. Both can be seen as public acts of ethical leadership and are thus relevant for the purposes of our study.

A last descriptor concerned word count: to maximize opportunities to analyze and compare statements within the limits of resources, we selected statements of 750 words and over. Graneheim and Lundman (2004) suggest that a word count may be a useful and unbiased way of ensuring parsimony while emphasizing depth. We refrained from adding more descriptors, as we did not want to run the risk of omitting any relevant units of analysis or introducing bias.

Assuming that all the public apologies meeting our selection criteria were newsworthy when issued, we started a broad search in the Factiva and LexisNexis academic databases. These databases were chosen because, first, they include all articles published by major English-language newspapers, company profiles, and the records of US federal and state cases; and, second, searches in these databases can be replicated and produce similar results. In both databases, we searched for items that contained the words “official apology” or “statement of regret.” Given the vast number of news outlets, we assumed it was unlikely that a public apology would be covered without being called either an “official apology” or a “statement of regret” by a single news organization. An additional Google search, using descriptors such as “government apology” and “corporate apology,” resulted in the identification of just one additional unique apology, confirming this assumption.

The searches on Factiva and LexisNexis together generated over 1000 potentially relevant articles for each year in the study period. We saved the articles for reference, identified leads to unique public apologies, and sought to obtain verbatim apology statements with a comprehensive web search. For each unique apology identified, we permitted ourselves up to twenty minutes to locate the original statement. Those we found were recorded in a directory. For example, the search in both databases for the year 2015 yielded a total of 1595 articles in the result list; these provided leads to 104 unique apologies; and subsequent web searches traced 65 verbatim statements that were saved in the directory.

To choose the final cases for analysis, we applied our selection criteria to the statements (statements of 750 words or more, made or officially issued in English by persons in executive positions, and containing the three basic apology elements). The directory included a wide range of statements in terms of word count. The majority of apologies consisted of concise statements; just a few met our criterion for length. (In 2015, for example, the standard deviation was 435.8 with a mean of 269.5.) After completing this last stage, a total of 5 cases met the full set of criteria above.

This sample meets Lincoln’s and Guba’s, 1985 standards of credibility, dependability, confirmability, and transformability. It is important to reiterate that our research is not aimed at establishing causal relationships, for example, between a leader’s strategy and its effects. This would require a larger number of cases. Instead, we try to answer what social scientist Yin calls a “how question” (1994). Seeking to build theoretical understanding of a relatively new phenomenon, our theory-driven purposive sampling strategy yielded a small yet rich pool of data upon which to draw. Table 1 presents an overview of selected cases, in chronological order.

Table 1

Overview of cases.

Year & Apologizer	Wrongdoing	Forum	Victims	Word count
2013, Kathleen Sebelius, Secretary of the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services	Malfunctioning of healthcare.gov , the online marketplace to seek and buy health insurance policies, part of the implementation of the Affordable Care Act	Hearing of the US House of Representatives/Committee on Energy and Commerce	All users of the website who have experienced malfunctions	820
2014, Enda Kenny, Prime minister of Ireland	Policy that forced women and girls to do unpaid labor in laundries run by Roman Catholic congregations between 1922 and 1996 (called the “Magdalene laundries”)	Irish (national) parliament	Estimated 10,000 women affected, of which appr. 25% was sent to “the laundries” by government	2086
2014, Mary Barra, CEO of General Motors	Defect ignition switch in GM car models, causing the key to autonomously shift positions while driving & subsequent of over 2,6 million GM cars	Hearing of the US House of Representatives/Committee on Energy and Commerce	Families of 13 victims who died in car accidents because of the faulty ignition switch & all car buyers affected by the recall	798
2015, Michael Horn, President & CEO of Volkswagen Group of America	Cheating (with the help of software) on emissions standard performances of circa 500,000 diesel-powered cars. The cars appeared to be cleaner in tests than they were in practice, and were sold on the US market.	Hearing of the US House of Representatives/Committee on Energy and Commerce	Buyers of the 500,000 cars at issue	1287
2015, Greg Selinger, premier of Manitoba, Canada	Assimilation policy of the provincial government in the 1960s–1980s, which forced members of Indigenous Peoples to give up their children for adoption or foster care (known as the “Sixties Scoop”)	Manitoba (provincial) parliament	Estimated 20,000 children plus their family members affected by the “Sixties Scoop”	1131

Research design

The research consisted of two components: background research of the public apologies and analysis of public apology statements. Data analysis occurred in two stages, each of which included several rounds of analysis. We first conducted a deductive inquiry using a uniform matrix for coding consisting of pre-determined categories of analysis (Creswell, 2013) based on extant ethical leadership theory. Subsequently, we conducted an inductive inquiry to capture emerging themes that arose out of the interactions with data that had not been adequately captured in the deductive phase. This stage included analysis of research findings across cases to identify not only common themes, but also potential differences between government and corporate apologies.

Background Research

Before interpreting the data, we conducted background research to establish: (1) the wrongdoing for which the apology was offered, including its moral characteristics (e.g., magnitude, longevity), for which we utilized Jones's framework of “moral intensity” (1991); (2) the extent in which the apologizer was involved in the wrongdoing; and (3) events leading up to the apology, including interactions between apologizer and victims, such as negotiations about material compensation. (In the presentation of the research results, we explain why these topics were the focus of our background research.) Understanding that the facts of wrongdoings—and even the apologies themselves—are often publicly contested, we used fact-based keyword searches to retrieve scholarly contributions (especially oft-cited works) in Google Scholar, Jstor, and ProQuest. We hoped this would help us produce reliable accounts grounded in relatively undisputed information.

Data analysis

Preparation

We then turned our attention to the data set and began to systematically reduce data into concepts and ideas in a two-stage process (Boyatzis, 1998; Schreier, 2012). To enhance comprehensiveness and sound interpretation of the data two coders were involved, who were trained in the ethical leadership approach and engaged in a process of immersive reading and re-reading of the apology texts (Burla et al., 2008). They utilized Excel throughout the research because of their in-depth knowledge of the spreadsheet program. The apology texts were reorganized at the statement level with a total of 461 units. For example, a text of 2086 words was divided into 66 statements. One statement consisted of a coherent utterance (1 to 4 sentences). Statements could be regarded as independent of each other – that is, unrelated “in a way that they have no logical or empirical implications for choices among other units” (Krippendorff, 1980, p. 57). For example, a statement from the Volkswagen executive consisted of the following two sentences (Volkswagen, 2015):

“[We] commit to regular and open communication with our customers, dealers, employees, and the public as we move forward. As first steps, we have set up a designated service line and website to be a channel for this communication, and I have sent a letter to every affected customer.”

Table 2
Coding framework (stage 1 of coding).

Code	Strategy	Definition
Category BMP: "Being a moral person"		
BMP1	Personifying values	Connecting organizational values with "authentic" self or own actions (Brown et al. 2005; Treviño et al., 2000)
BMP2	Having integrity	Demonstrating consistency in values, words and actions (Brown et al. 2005; Treviño et al., 2000)
BMP3	Being honest	Truth telling in all (non) adversarial) circumstances (Brown et al. 2005; Gupta & Van Wart, 2015; Treviño et al., 2000)
BMP4	Being trustworthy	Making known one's values; Demonstrating consistency in one's values, words, actions in past, present and future (predictability) (Brown et al., 2005; Gupta & Van Wart, 2015; Treviño et al., 2000)
BMP5	Caring	Showing respect and concern for others' vulnerability, which may arise from one's actions (adapted from: Van den Akker et al., 2009)
Category BMM: "Being a Moral Manager"		
BMM1	Creating a moral reputation	Demonstrating personal moral behavior with the help of life stories, references to specific moments in past/present/future (Brown et al., 2005, Brown and Treviño, 2006; Shamir & Eilam, 2005; Sparrow, 2005; Treviño et al., 2000)
BMM2	Creating an ethical organizational culture	Articulating values and norms at stake (agenda setting in organization); Facilitating and partaking in an organizational conversation about values and norms (Brown & Treviño, 2006; Treviño, Weaver, Gibson, & Toffler, 1999; Treviño et al., 2003)
BMM3	Ethical role modelling	Demonstrating desired moral behavior so followers in organization will follow and go in right direction (imitating) (Brown et al., 2005; Lasthuizen, 2008; Weaver et al., 2005)
BMM4	Promoting ethical behavior	Facilitating, systematically rewarding & punishing (un)ethical behavior in organization (Treviño et al., 2003; Van den Akker et al., 2009)

Another example is this statement, also comprising two sentences, from the Irish prime minister (Ireland, 2014):

"At the conclusion of my discussions with one group of the Magdalene Women, one of those present sang 'Whispering Hope.' A line from that song stays in my mind: 'When the dark midnight is over, watch for the breaking of day.'"

Deductive inquiry

For the next stage of data analysis, we designed a coding matrix to introduce as much uniformity into the process as possible (Elo et al., 2014). At first sight it seemed logical to rely on the ELS: Brown et al. (2005) had operationalized their framework, resulting in a list of observable (measurable) leadership behaviors. However, because the ELS relied followers' assessment of these behaviors, it was not suited for our research purposes. Instead, we returned to the literature, distinguished the clearly outlined strategies described, and used these to create first-order codes (Mayring, 2000) to capture each strategy. Seeking to preserve the nuances of each strategy that Brown, Treviño et al. (2005) formulated, we developed a matrix that is presented in Table 2.

Using this matrix, the two coders independently analyzed manifest and latent content (Krippendorff, 1980), meeting twice to clarify questions and discuss discrepancies, in keeping with Graneheim and Lundman's (2004) assertion that a dialogical approach to coding maximizes conformability and credibility. We hypothesized that, while the ethical leadership framework could account for certain elements of the apology texts, we would also need further descriptive refinement. Yet, a substantial proportion (31.7%) of the total text could be captured using the coding framework. The figure below presents the percentage of text in each apology that could be accommodated in the deductive analysis.

We discarded 29.9% of units of analysis as not relevant for the purposes of further developing theory of public apologies through the lens of ethical leadership. These statements (grouped under "not relevant" in Fig. 1) included remarks related to the procedure and setting of the apology. For example, the CEO of General Motors, speaking at a hearing of a committee of the US House of

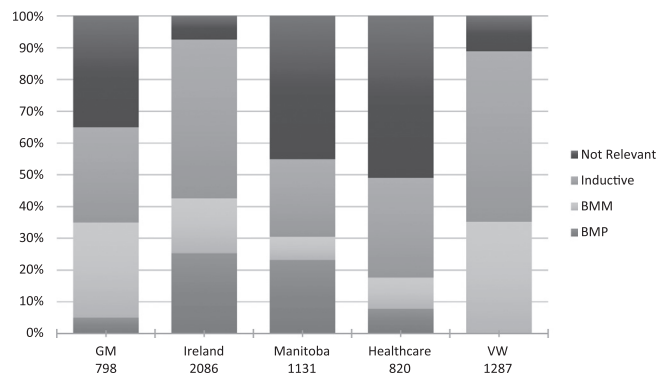


Fig. 1. Coding categories per case (in percentages).

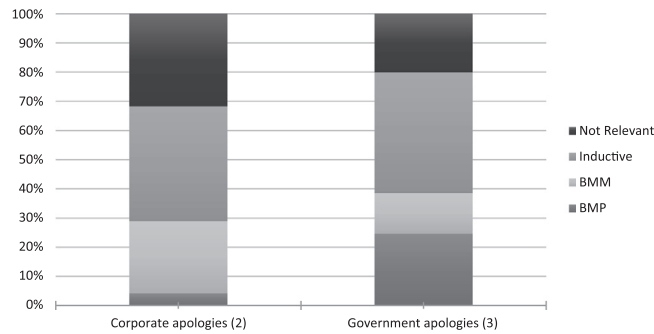


Fig. 2. Distribution of coding categories between corporate and government apologies (in percentages).

Representatives, said, “I would now be happy to answer your questions. Thank you.” They also included comments that were unrelated to the notion of ethical leadership, the wrongdoing, and/or the offer of (moral) repair. For example, the apology from the US secretary of health and human services for a malfunctioning website ([Healthcare.gov](https://www.healthcare.gov), 2015) that frustrated citizens' efforts to sign up for health insurance included statements that served to promote a legislative act. (For example: “The 85% of Americans who already have health coverage are protected with new rights and benefits.”)

We conducted a cross case analysis to analyze how codes were distributed among corporate and government apologies (Fig. 2). (The insights that derived from constant comparison across cases throughout the research are included in the results and discussion sections.)

The coding process yielded an inter-rater level of agreement of 91%. Scott's Pi, Cohen's kappa, and Krippendorff's alpha were calculated to ensure a sufficient standard of reliability (Miles & Huberman, 1994). The results are tabulated in Table 3.

Inductive inquiry

We then entered the second stage of data analysis, using an inductive approach. Generally speaking, inductive approaches in qualitative analysis aim to condense the data into summarized systematic forms. In the process, a clear link is drawn between the research question and the data to capture emerging themes and ideas. Inductive approaches are used widely in the social sciences (e.g., Huetterman, Doering, & Boerner, 2013). As Katz (1983) notes, they are useful for developing ideas in an immersive manner, consistent with an approach to theory generation and elaboration

The inductive phase captured 37.9% of the total units of analysis retained. First, all potential themes were discussed among the researcher and the coders. This was followed by a process of clustering for convergence of emerging themes (Katz, 2015). This extensive process was dialogical, with discussion of each unit of analysis occurring alongside an interrogation of whether the proposed themes accurately captured content. This resulted in an iterative reshaping and refining of the emergent themes that sought to account for as much of the data as possible.

We then validated the themes by coding data—this time with sentences rather than statements as the unit of analysis—into the proposed inductive categories. This was an iterative process of coding, discussion, and re-coding to develop a common understanding of the dataset. 70.1% of the text was coded into the proposed themes, while the remainder was discarded for irrelevance. The threshold frequency for discarding a theme in the results in the initial round of coding was one: the isolated presence of one theme in a text would be discarded after discussion between coders and researchers. The threshold frequency for retention that we set for the last round was more ambitious: one theme had to be present in at least 3 apology cases in at least 2 units of analysis in each apology case.

The inductive themes were captured in two layers. In the first one we gathered 7 themes. Seeking underlying patterns we further integrated and categorized these results, and arrived at 4 aggregate ethical leadership strategies.

Table 3

Inter-rater reliability coefficients (stage 1 of coding).

Codes	Percent Agreement	Cohen's Kappa	Krippendorff's Alpha (nominal)
BMP1	98.5%	0.66	0.66
BMP2	99.0%	0.828	0.829
BMP3	98.5%	0.792	0.793
BMP4	99.5%	0	0
BMP5	98.5%	0.901	0.901
Not captured	100.0%	1	1
BMM1	100.0%	1	1
BMM2	96.9%	0.796	0.796
BMM3	98.0%	0.591	0.591
BMM4	99.0%	0.884	0.884
Not captured	91.3%	0.759	0.757
Not Relevant	97.4%	0.94	0.94

Results

Background of the cases

All apology cases selected were subjected to a background investigation focused on three ethical dimensions: (1) the moral characteristics of the wrongdoing (what harm was done?); (2) the proximity of the apologizer to the wrongdoing (was he or she formally responsible for what happened?); and (3) prior interactions between the apologizer and victims about moral and material repair (were there any ongoing negotiations between representatives of both parties?).

We considered the moral characteristics of the wrongdoing because the sampling process had revealed that the wrongdoings that were central to public apologies varied widely in terms of their “moral intensity” (Jones, 1991). We used 3 of the elements of Jones’s conceptual framework to investigate the moral dimensions of the wrongdoings: magnitude of the harmful consequences; immediacy or longevity of effects (the length of time between the wrongdoing and its effects, and/or the prolonged existence of harmful effects); and concentration of effect (relationship between the number of people affected and the magnitude of harm).

We also considered proximity to the wrongdoing because we assumed that this factor would affect opportunities to employ specific strategies of ethical leadership. Strategies related to “being a moral person” will fail if leaders’ actions contradict the values they claim to embody. For example, if the CEO apologizing on behalf of Volkswagen has personally approved the cheating scheme, a strategy designed to present himself as an honest leader will fall flat. We established proximity by identifying the position and formal responsibilities of the leader at the time of the wrongdoing.

We considered prior interactions after observing the effects of this factor on a recent public apology. In 2013, the Dutch government apologized for postcolonial atrocities in Indonesia specifically in response to a court order. As such, it was not a “spontaneous” demonstration of ethical leadership. This observation led us to question whether and how forcing leaders into apologies would affect the strategies of ethical leadership they employed. If the apology is compulsory, do leaders employ ethical leadership strategies to a different or lesser degree?

We will re-introduce these aspects of the apologies in the discussion of the results as they point to opportunities for future research. It is important to reiterate that our research did not aim to formulate variables and test their mediating power: the number of cases under scrutiny is too small ($n = 5$) to make generalized statements about causal links; there is too much variation in these ethical aspects; and, most importantly, our research is descriptive in kind. The results of the background investigation are presented in Table 4.

Table 4

Ethical aspects underlying the apology-cases.

	Moral intensity of the wrong	Proximity	Prior interactions
US Dep. of Health (2013)	Magnitude of harm: 0 deaths, frustration over malfunctioning website # Affected: Unknown number of users of a website Longevity: 1 month	Apologizer was formally responsible for the wrong	No negotiations
Ireland (2014)	Magnitude of harm: 0 deaths, material losses, loss of self-esteem and wellbeing, lifelong trauma # Affected: 10,000 women Longevity: 7 decades (1920–1990s)	Apologizer was not involved and carried no direct political responsibility	Settlement with victims had been reached prior to the apology
General Motors (2014)	Magnitude of harm: Deaths in car accidents; inconvenience because of recall of car models # Affected: 124 casualties in crashes of which 13 were known at the time of the apology # Affected by recall: 6.2 million car owners worldwide at the time of the apology Duration: Unknown	Apologizer became CEO of GM after the wrong had been committed, but was employed by GM at the time the wrongdoing took place	Ongoing negotiations with federal prosecutors about financial (criminal) settlement
Manitoba (2015)	Magnitude of harm: 0 deaths, loss of self-esteem and wellbeing, lifelong trauma # Affected: 20,000 children, plus unknown # family members Longevity: Decades (1960s–1980s)	Apologizer was not involved and carried no direct political responsibility	Settlement with victims had been reached prior to the apology
Volkswagen (2015)	Magnitude of harm: 0 deaths, frustration among buyers # Affected: 500,000 buyers of VW car models Longevity: Unknown	Apologizer was not directly involved in the wrong, but was employed by VW at the time the wrongdoing took place	Ongoing negotiations with US federal and California regulators about financial (civil) settlement

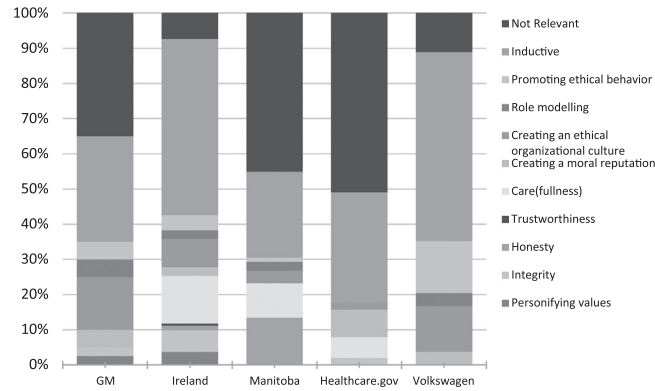


Fig. 3. Distribution of strategies in each apology case in percentages (stage 1 of the coding).

Results of the deductive analysis

An overview of the results of the deductive analysis, which we elaborate on below, can be found in Fig. 3

Strategy: “being a moral person”

The first set of strategies aims to create a moral identity by making known one's virtuous traits and actions, thereby positioning oneself as the right person to speak about matters of right and wrong. Only one apologizer made an effort to personify moral values; the other four made almost no relevant references. Only the Irish prime minister included 3 references to how his own actions reflected values at stake, saying, for example,

“I believe I speak for millions of Irish people all over the world when I say we put away these women because for too many years we put away our conscience.”

The Volkswagen, GM, and [Healthcare.gov](#) cases included few strategies to make the leader appear to be an honest, trustworthy, and caring person with integrity. The Irish PM, however, employed strategies related to integrity (absolute frequency: 10) and care (22), and the Manitoba government leader employed strategies related to honesty (11) and care (8). The Manitoba apology for the assimilation of Indigenous peoples acknowledged “inconvenient truths” about what had happened to the victims without obscuring or lessening the lasting impact of the harm, which theorists associate with honesty. For example, the apologizer stated:

“Across Canada, the number of adoptees is estimated to exceed 20,000 First Nation, Métis and Inuit children. By separating these children from their families, they were stripped of their culture, language and traditions... The reality is that...the effects of the Sixties Scoop remain with us today. The human impact on families and communities are profound and cannot be easily reconciled.”

Strategy: “being a moral manager”

The second set of strategies examined in the deductive analysis included managerial strategies aimed at the apologizer's organization, including the promotion of ethical behavior and the creation of an ethical culture, by, among other actions, articulating the values and norms at stake and creating the conditions for a conversation among followers about these values and norms.

None of the apologies included elaborate life stories or anecdotes that could demonstrate leaders' involvement in the moral issue at stake (BMM1). Yet, two apologies, both from government officials (representing [Healthcare.gov](#) and Ireland) made reference to what we will call a “personal moral track record” (absolute frequency for both: 2). The US secretary of health and human services mentioned twice that she had worked relentlessly for a moral cause. She said in her introduction, for example:

“I left my position as Governor of Kansas, 4½ years ago, for the opportunity to continue work I have been doing for most of my over 35 years of public service—to expand the opportunities for all Americans, regardless of geography or gender or income, to have affordable health coverage.”

Strategies to create an ethical organizational culture (BMM2) could be found in all but one apology ([Healthcare.gov](#)). The Irish head of government mentioned a range of actions undertaken by his government to study and consider the wrongdoing at issue; the apologizer from Volkswagen expressed organizational aspirations for the future:

“We will rebuild the reputation of a company that more than two million people worldwide, including dealers and suppliers, rely upon for their livelihoods.”

The apologies of the Irish government and Volkswagen included several examples of efforts to promote ethical behavior within the organization by means of rewards and punishments (BMM4). (The absolute frequency of these remarks was 7 and 8, respectively.) In the latter case, the CEO mentioned sanctions in the context of aspirations to do better in the future:

“First, we are conducting investigations on a world-wide scale into how these matters happened. Responsible parties will be identified and held accountable.”

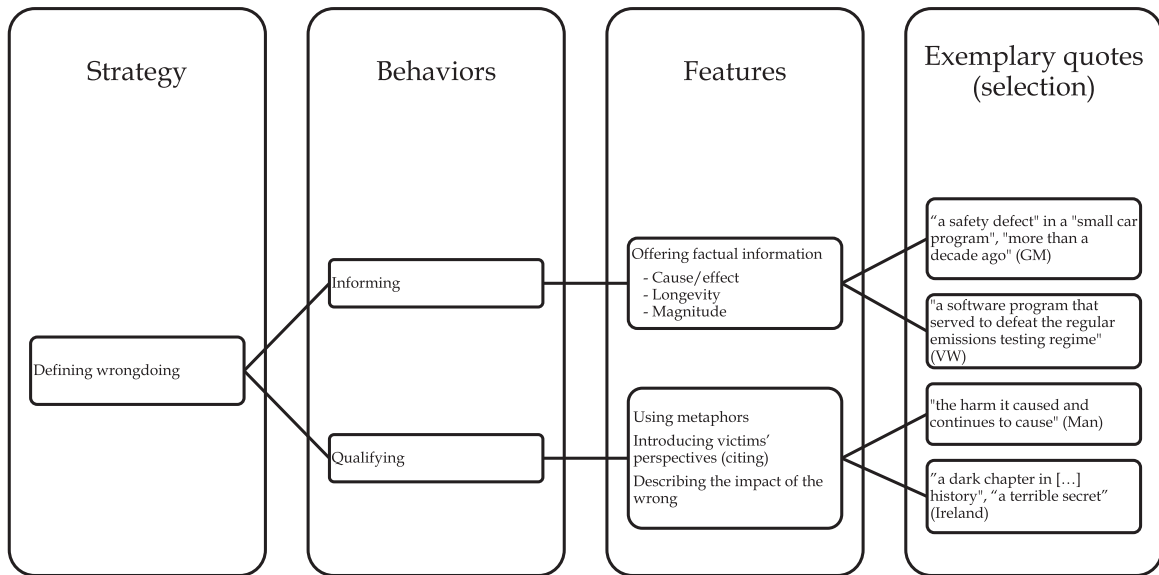


Fig. 4. Overview of "defining wrongdoing".

Results of the inductive inquiry

In the inductive part of the inquiry, 4 different aggregate strategies surfaced in the data set. In the section below, we include a short description of the strategy, followed by a discussion of the research results with exemplary quotes.

Defining wrongdoing

Wrongdoing has the potential for multiple interpretations and corresponding values. Leaders guide audiences towards a specific understanding of what happened, offering information and qualifications. Informing involves selecting and highlighting facts about the transgression, and engage audiences' cognitive processes; qualifying involves meaning making and addressing questions of identity, values, emotions, and perceptions. Fig. 4 provides an overview of strategies and behaviors for defining wrongdoing, illustrated with statements from the apologies.

All apologizers offered some factual information about, for example, the duration of the wrong. The premier of Manitoba spoke of "a practice of forced assimilation" that "extended well beyond the 1960s." Both corporate apologizers briefly referenced ongoing investigations by external parties to establish the facts in apologies for recent wrongdoings. The VW CEO, however, described technical details of the wrongdoing in combination with actions taken by the company to disclose the wrongdoing:

"On September 3, 2015, Volkswagen AG disclosed at a meeting...that emissions software in four-cylinder diesel vehicles from model years 2009-2015 contained a "defeat device" that could recognize whether a vehicle was being operated in a test laboratory or on the road."

As for qualifications, the two corporate leaders offering apologies for recent wrongdoings (still under formal investigation) included few details. For example, the CEO of General Motors spoke only twice in total of the malfunctioning ignition switch that had led to deadly car accidents, and did so using the terms "safety defect" and "a problem" that needed to be "fixed." The Volkswagen CEO described the wrongdoing simply as a "software program that served to defeat the regular emissions testing regime" and his comments remained limited to referencing "events" that were "deeply troubling." The apology for the botched roll-out of [HealthCare.gov](#) was similarly pithy in describing the website's "flawed launch" and accompanying "error messages, timeouts, and slow response times."

The heads of governments spent relatively more time on qualifying previous government policies that caused harm. For example, the Manitoba premier qualified the historical wrongdoing as "difficult truths" and a "historical injustice" with effects that "remain with us today." The Irish prime minister spoke of the laundries as a site of "physical," "psychological," and "social" incarceration; referenced a resulting "stigma" based on "untrue and offensive stereotypes;" and qualified what happened as the "failure" of society. He stated: "The Magdalene laundries have cast a long shadow over Irish life over our sense of who we are."

Hence, the research results indicate that all leaders managed "the multiplicity of meanings" of the wrongdoing (Weick, 1979, p. 174). The apologies from the two heads of government included morally and emotionally charged language to acknowledge the extent of the harm done. The apologies from the two corporate executives and the third government leader, however, indicate that by offering few "meaningful" qualifications of the wrongdoing, apologizers may avoid directing attention towards an issue that has already undermined public trust in their organization.

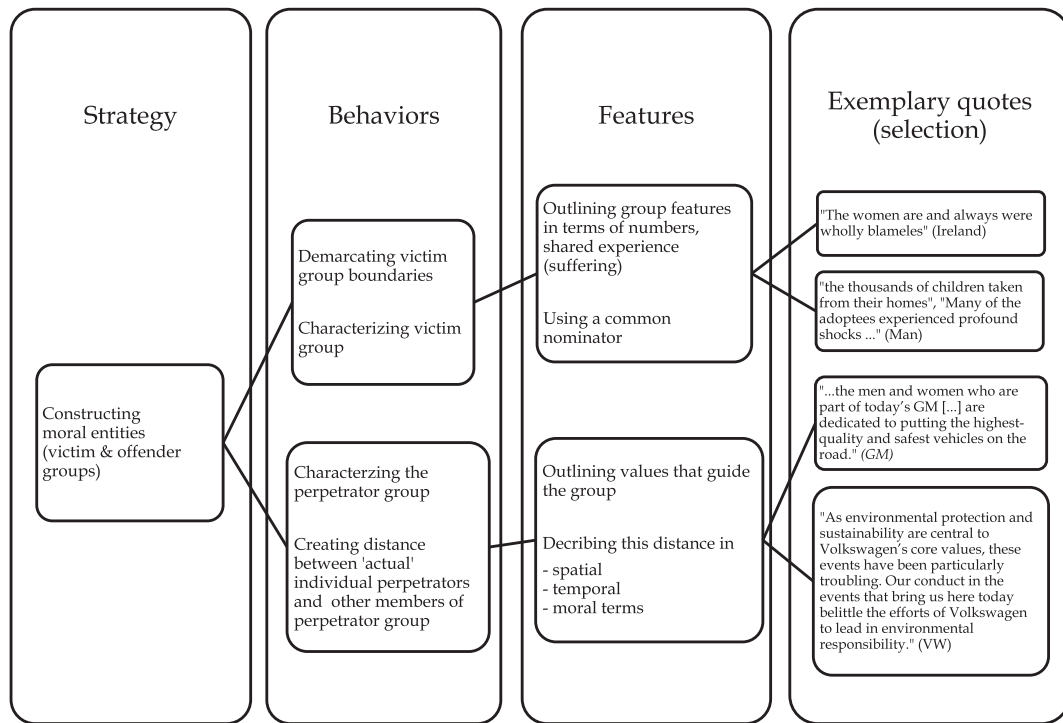


Fig. 5. Overview of "constructing moral entities".

Constructing moral entities

The next strategy that we identified concerns identifying the moral communities at stake. The first comprises the victims—Those to whom the apology is addressed and who have suffered from the wrongdoing. The second moral community is the offender group that carries responsibility for the moral transgression (Fig. 5). Identifying these entities is a strategic effort to discern those affected, demarcating group boundaries and establishing group identities in terms of their shared experiences, articulating relevant values, and applying these to the actions of and the effects on the groups identified

All apologizers made explicit to whom the apology was addressed (the victim group), but, once more, they did so with varying degrees of specificity and detail. In 3 apologies, only the outlines of this entity could be discerned; no common characteristics or vivid descriptions were provided. The US secretary of health mentioned only "way too many Americans" who had tried and failed to register for health insurance at [Healthcare.gov](https://www.healthcare.gov), sharing a frustrating experience. The VW CEO spoke about breaking the trust of "our customers, dealerships, and employees, as well as the public and regulators." The CEO of GM mentioned the victim group just once, saying,

"This begins with my sincere apologies to everyone who has been affected by this recall, especially to the families and friends of those who lost lives or were injured."

In contrast, both the Irish and Manitoba leaders described the victims in detail, offering group characteristics. For example, the Manitoba premier spoke of "thousands of children who were taken from their homes," acknowledging that the number of indigenous people affected was "very large." He added that victims suffered from "intergenerational scars and cultural loss." He elaborated thus:

"Many of the adoptees experienced profound shocks as they lost their heritage, language, families, and their identity. Many of those who later returned to their communities as adults found it equally challenging trying to rebuild their relationships and connect with their culture."

The Irish prime minister spoke of "extraordinary women" who had been "subjected to profound and studied indifference." He also made explicit that all of them suffered from a similar transgression. For example:

"[I]t was clear that while every woman's story was different, each of them shared a particular experience of a particular Ireland: judgmental, intolerant, petty, and prim."

These two government apologies indicate that the strategy of defining the (victim) community in terms of their shared experience can serve as a form of rehabilitation. In both cases, the apologizers expressed the aspiration for the apology to contribute to the "healing" of the victims. By describing the victims' suffering from the transgression of these, they acknowledged the moral worth of the victims. The strategy thus serves to recognize the victims as moral equals who deserved treatment in accordance with these values.

The corporate leaders, in contrast, tended to speak in detail about the offender group rather than the victim group, emphasizing the moral principles that guided their companies. We will further discuss this strategy in the next section. Both corporate apologizers expressed an aspiration to restore trust in their company among customers and others parties affected. Moreover, leaders created a

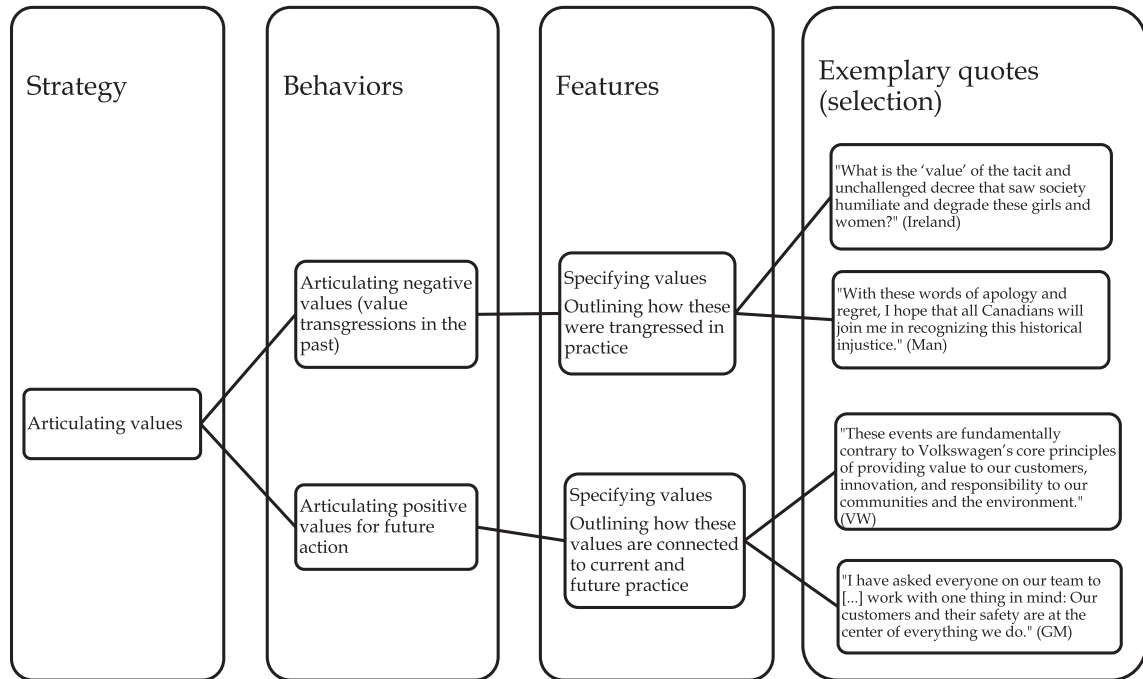


Fig. 6. Overview of "articulating values".

distance between the actual perpetrators and those who were currently included in the organization. Creating temporal distance, the GM leader introduced that the wrong had happened a decade ago, and that "today's GM would do the right thing," while the VW leader mentioned geographical distance, making it clear to US legislators and customers that the wrongdoing had been committed in Germany, while the VW that he represented was embedded in American society.

Articulating values

The articulation of values and norms was evident in all cases. In three cases, leaders articulated negative values and named value transgressions that they associated with wrongdoing (Fig. 6). The Irish prime minister spoke of "ignorance," "arrogance," and putting away "our conscience," among others; the Manitoba premier referenced "injustice" and "cultural genocide." the VW executive mentioned "broken trust," and left it at that.

The heads of government connected these values with past entities, not with present-day society. For example, the Irish prime minister said: "Those 'values,' those failures, those wrongs characterized Magdalene Ireland." The Manitoba premier invited fellow Canadians to not hang their head in shame, but to recognize the "historical injustice"—a gesture that was presented as a moral act separate from carrying responsibility for this injustice. He added,

"I hope they will join me in acknowledging the pain and suffering of the thousands of children who were taken from their homes."

All apologizers introduced values that would be reflected and upheld in the future, such as "social justice" and "compassion" (Ireland) and "safety" (GM). For example, the Irish prime-minister said:

"Today we live in a very different Ireland with a very a different consciousness, awareness—an Ireland where we have more compassion, empathy, insight, heart."

The corporate officials put particular emphasis on the "positive" values that would serve as beacons in the future for their own companies, helping the leaders manage their company's moral reputation, as well as inspiring followers. They sought to define the offender group in terms of the values that their employees subscribe to. The CEO of GM, for example, stated, "Our customers and their safety are at the center of everything we do."

Similarly, the CEO of VW listed a number of values the company hoped to embody:

"These events are fundamentally contrary to Volkswagen's core principles of providing value to our customers, innovation, and responsibility to our communities and the environment. They do not reflect the company that I know and to which I have dedicated 25 years of my life. It is inconsistent that the company involved in this emissions issue is also a company that has invested in environmental efforts to reduce the carbon footprint of our factories around the world. Volkswagen Group has a deep commitment to preserving our environment."

Differentiating responsibilities

The last strategy that emerged from the data concerns defining various responsibilities. Behaviors include creating distance between themselves and past wrongdoing, and promising to take responsibility for present and future actions and for practical

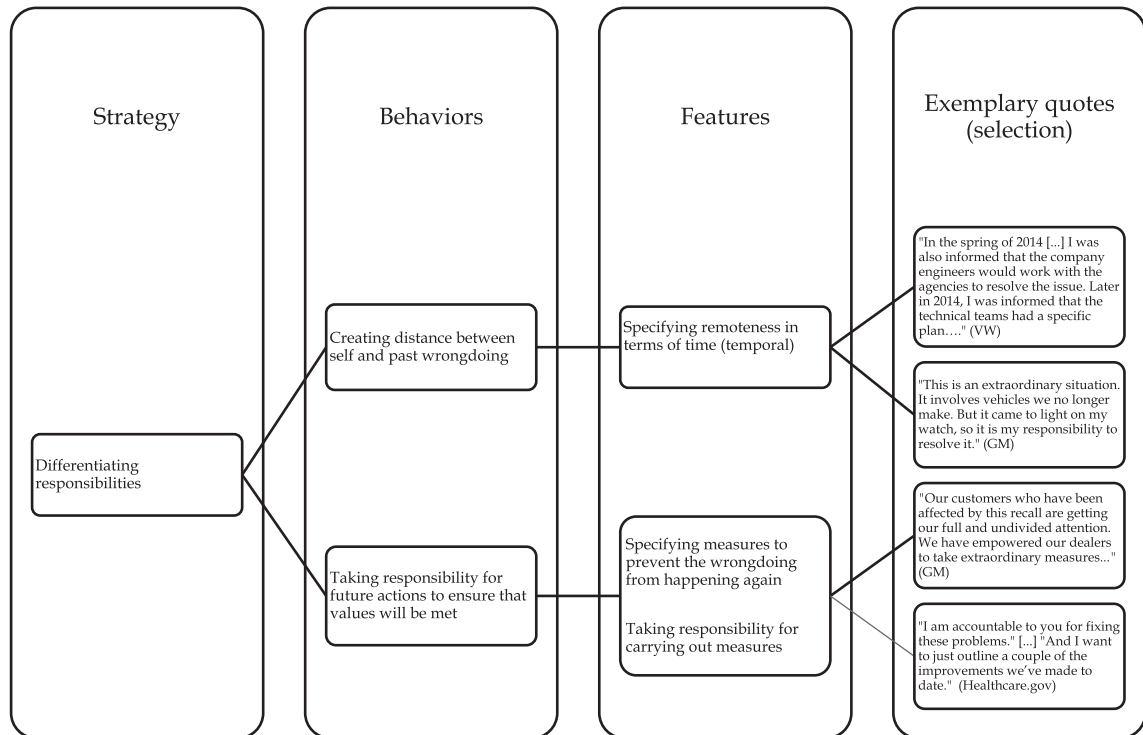


Fig. 7. "Differentiating responsibilities".

measures to ensure the protection and promotion of core values (Fig. 7).

In the two cases in which government leaders apologized for historical wrongdoings, the temporal space between apologizers and past wrongs was self-evident. In both corporate cases, apologizers actively made clear that they were not personally to blame for the harm that was done. For example, the CEO of VW said:

"In the spring of 2014, when the West Virginia University study was published, I was told that there was a possible emissions non-compliance that could be remedied. ...I was also informed that the company engineers would work with the agencies to resolve the issue. Later in 2014, I was informed that the technical teams had a specific plan for remedies...."

With the exception of the VW CEO, all leaders took responsibility for future actions. For example, the US secretary of health and human services said, "I apologize. I am accountable to you for fixing these problems. And I am committed to earning your confidence back by fixing the site." Similarly, the CEO of GM said, "[The wrongdoing] came to light on my watch, so it is my responsibility to resolve it." They committed themselves to specific remedial actions to restore the core values that they had articulated. These measures came in two kinds. A first set of measures, promoted by corporate apologizers, aimed to prevent the wrongdoing from happening again by changing working procedures within the organization.

A second set of measures aimed to soothe uneasiness or pain caused by the wrong by providing relief to those affected. These could include material compensation for victims of government policies, but also measures such as the provision of free loaner cars for car owners affected by a recall. In the corporate cases and the case of Healthcare.gov, the level of detail describing these measures stood in sharp contrast to the lack of detail provided regarding the wrongdoing and its harmful consequences. For example, the CEO of GM announced:

"Our customers who have been affected by this recall are getting our full and undivided attention. We have empowered our dealers to take extraordinary measures to treat each case specifically. If people do not want to drive a recalled vehicle before it is repaired, dealers can provide a loaner or a rental free of charge. To date, we have provided nearly 13,000 loaner vehicles."

Discussion

This article started with the observation that public apologies have long been overlooked in studies of ethical leadership. In an effort to promote inquiry, we considered these acts in terms of the various strategies that leaders employ to assert ethical leadership. Building upon the work of Brown, Treviño, and fellow scholars (2000, 2005, 2006), who formulated 9 aggregate strategies for ethical leadership within organizations in more or less ordinary situations (relative to apologies), we tested these strategies in five in-depth case studies of public apologies. Based on the findings, we can establish what "known" strategies were employed, how these were adapted to meet the demands of the public realm (and the particular act of apologizing within it), and what novel strategies emerged.

Considering the organizational orientation of the framework that we utilized, we expected that many of the predefined strategies would be absent. However, some strategies could be identified and, more importantly, our efforts to understand why certain

strategies were not employed in some cases lead to the identification of topics for future research. Additionally, absent empirical research of apologies through the ethical leadership lens, we expected to get substantial results through inductive inquiry and to identify many topics for future research. This expectation was met.

The results of the deductive inquiry showed that leaders continue to employ strategies to construct moral credibility in order to be recognized as moral agents who can make authoritative claims. The research also demonstrated that leaders continue to “articulate values” but are careful to differentiate between past transgressions of specific values and honoring these in the future.

We inductively derived four aggregate strategies that leaders employ, which we discussed in this order: “articulating values” (naming negative and positive values in relation to past and future); “defining the wrongdoing” (offering factual information about, and qualifying what happened, thereby managing the multiplicity of meanings that can be superimposed on the situation); “constructing (moral) communities” (outlining who is in and out of the victim and offender group, and identifying group characteristics); and “differentiating responsibilities” (assigning responsibilities for past wrongs and future actions to various entities, and announcing future measures to remedy the wrong).

In the final part of the paper, we discuss how the implications of the data cut across the framework of analysis and beyond. We will do so in four parts. The first section reflects on the findings and their implications vis-à-vis ethical leadership theory.

In the second section, we suggest that the employment of particular strategies may be interrelated, and speculate on why and how these could be interconnected. Although the avenue of analysis taken in this research—identifying individual strategies—steers towards individual discussions of the strategies, we suggest that these can be considered holistically. This discussion also allows us to touch upon some ethical issues underlying public apologies. We will take the liberty to speculate in this discussion and make suggestions for follow up research. We reiterate, however, that the scope and nature of this research does not allow for making generalized claims about causal relationships.

In the third section, we offer three suggestions for future research, and in the last section, we address the limitations of our research.

Findings vis-à-vis extant literature

Our research supports extant literature in several ways. The results derived from deductive inquiry indicate that strategies for organizational (routine) contexts, as identified by Brown, Treviño and fellow scholars (2000, 2005, 2006), are employed in the context of public apologies. Yet, not all of them appear to be equally relevant.

First, our research indicates that leaders making public apologies rarely engage in self-promoting strategies that direct attention to their values, characteristics, words, and actions.⁴ These “personal” leadership strategies and related role-modelling behaviors are central to theories of authentic, charismatic, and transformational leadership (e.g., Lasthuizen, 2008; Van den Akker et al., 2009), and described in many terms, including “value-based leadership behaviors” (Avolio & Gardner, 2005; Gardner, Avolio, Luthans, May & Walumbwa, 2005; George, 2003; Luthans & Avolio, 2003). The ethical leadership framework that guided our deductive inquiry both draws from, and informs many of these elaborations.

Our research shows that in the context of public apologies, leaders only modestly engage in strategies associated with their own morality. They refrain from trumpeting their praiseworthy qualities and actions, particularly when it comes to their personal trustworthiness and their moral reputation. Instead of touting a “moral track record” (Merritt et al., 2012) around the values transgressed, they commit to leading future actions to restore those values and right the wrong.

The results of the deductive analysis also demonstrate that public apologizers refrain from announcing disciplinary measures within the organization—another strategy in the realm of “moral management” that had been formulated by Brown, Treviño and fellow theorists (2000, 2005, 2006). The research demonstrates weak presence of the strategy to promote and punish (un)ethical behavior among followers by means of a disciplinary system. (One apologizer claimed that wrongdoers within the organization would be held accountable, but concrete measures to enact accountability were not included.) Hence, this part of the original framework appears to become less important. This finding demonstrates that findings of studies on rewards and punishments and their effects within organizations (e.g., Ashkanasy, Windsor & Treviño, 2006; Treviño & Youngblood, 1990) do not translate to a public/external context.

This conclusion seems evident, but when one takes a closer look at the formal authorities of government and corporate leaders, some nuances arise. Within corporations, formal power relations, reporting hierarchies, and disciplinary systems for reward and punishment exist, providing top management with the capacity to “morally manage” their employees (Treviño et al., 2000). When corporate leaders step into the public realm, this capacity evaporates. They have no formal authority over the audiences that hear their apologies, which may include angry consumers who are boycotting their products and legislators who are investigating their missteps. Thus, even when audiences subscribe to the norms and values at stake, executives cannot morally manage audiences as they would their employees.

Heads of governments, in contrast, can have a formal mandate to introduce a disciplinary system to hold people accountable through laws and regulation and, in so doing, promote specific ethical behavior. Many European nation-states, for example, have apologized for taking part in the Holocaust and introduced laws that criminalize the denial of this genocide. Such initiatives, however, are rare. They are preceded by emotional political debate and followed by public controversy in which the freedom of expression and other constitutional protections are invoked (Knechtle, 2008; Smith, 2009). Further, the opportunities and operational

⁴ These include all strategies in the category “being a moral person”, plus “creating a moral reputation” and “ethical role modelling” (BMP1-5 & BMM1, 3).

capacity to *enforce* such laws and regulation are limited. So even though government leaders are uniquely equipped to legitimately “morally manage” citizens, those capabilities are restrained by principle and in practice.

One finding seemed to correspond fully with one of the strategies we classified under “being a moral manager” in the deductive analysis. Brown and Treviño describe “articulating organizational values” for followers to converse about, and coalesce around as a strategy for creating an ethical culture in the organization. This particular strategy has been discussed in the context of transformational leadership (Bass, 1985; Bass & Steidlmeier, 1999; Burns, 1978), for example, in terms of “managerial ethics” and their effects on organizational performance and followers' effectiveness (e.g., Kirkpatrick & Locke, 1996; Shamir & Howell, 1999; Waldman et al., 2001).

Our research adds to existing insights. We observed that leaders who make public apologies not only articulate values that can inspire followers in their own organizations and control the damage done to their organizations moral reputation (Benoit, 1995; Hearit, 2006), but also invoke a second set of values. This second set values, not explicitly observed in the literature, describes *negative* values, or value transgressions, such as social *injustice* and ignorance, associated with the past wrongdoing. Apologizers create a gap between the transgressive values of the past and the values of the present and future, then seek to associate the society or company that they lead with the latter. In affirming these positive values, leaders also avoid fully implicating the followers in the past wrongdoing.

The strategy of “articulating values” emerged in the analysis as well, and strongly correlates with two other strategies that emerged in that phase of analysis: defining the wrongdoing and constructing moral communities. Leaders making public apologies define the central wrongdoing in terms of the negative values they articulate (social *injustice*). They also use these negative values to differentiate between the group that owns a moral right to receive the apology (victims of injustice), and the group that offers the apology (perpetrators of the injustice).

Leaders engage in strategic efforts to call these communities into existence, to paraphrase philosopher Dewey (1954; Fung et al., 2012). They do so by outlining and characterizing the groups: who is in and who is out, and what characteristics the group members have in common. In so doing they drive a wedge between an unspecified set of perpetrators whose past actions are linked negative values (ignorance, lack of compassion) and present day employees or citizens who strive to uphold the positive set of values. This finding supplements leadership studies about group-based strategies. For example, Huettermann (2014) demonstrated that leaders categorize in-groups and out-groups in relation to organizational teams. Our research indicates that they also engage in group-based strategies in public contexts. When speaking to external audiences, apologizers need to clarify on whose behalf they speak. Though they appear before audiences as representatives of a given company or government, they must work to construct the entity that they represent as a moral and social entity—a collective that acts upon certain values. The same goes for the victim group: victimhood is not a given; it is socially constructed (Jacoby, 2015). Hence, the research indicates that in public contexts, leaders construct essential entities to aid audiences' understanding of the parties involved, and in the case of apologies these entities are moral in kind.

Finally, the strategy of differentiating responsibilities fits neatly within the range of “value-based behaviors” that have been distinguished in the literature on charismatic and transformational leadership. Leaders making public apologies do not opt voluntarily for a full *mea culpa*. They emphasize that they take responsibility for implementing future measures to ensure core values, placing themselves on the right side of the moral spectrum and separating themselves from the past in which harm was caused. They associate themselves with “making things right,” to borrow phrasing two of the apologizers employed. These “value-based behaviors,” theorists say, can influence “followers' behavior and attitudes toward performing above and beyond the call of duty” (Sosik, 2005). However, our research indicates that in the context of public apologies, such behaviors may obscure personal involvement or conceal formal responsibility for the harm that has been done. As a result, the question of “whodunnit” may remain a mystery, leaving victims who seek justice unsatisfied.

A holistic interpretation

The findings described above can be considered individually, but we take the liberty of discussing them holistically. Although this discussion is informed by the research, it is speculative in kind.

The first strategies that we considered above concerned the moral credibility and reputation of those apologizing. Whether apologizers speak for businesses or governments, in the public arena, their moral authority cannot be taken for granted (Friedman, 1990, p. 67). With very few exceptions (such as the Dalai Lama, perhaps), leaders do not have a globally established “moral reputation” that makes their judgments readily resonate among their audiences (Treviño et al., 2000). Especially with business leaders, it is often the case that the general public has never heard of the person offering an apology before that person had something to apologize for. For this reason, leaders who take the public stage to make an apology must work to convince audiences to see them as authorities who are capable of making decisive moral judgments—and they must do so at the precise moment when their moral judgment is most in question.⁵

Standing before a wronged party and admitting wrongdoing puts the question of one's moral credibility directly in the spotlight. Audiences, including the victim group, may very well criticize the gesture or reject the statement, embarrassing and further diminishing the credibility of the apologizer. Apologizers can do their best to generate a favorable response, but have little control over audiences' reactions.

⁵ According to Brown and Treviño, leaders of large corporations have to actively establish a moral reputation within organizations as well, because many employees will not know them very well (Brown et al., 2000).

Leaders also run the risk of being damaged by “harms [that] are linked to the peculiarities of the public realm in which interests, power and public relations play a part” (Van Stokkom et al., 2012). They can get caught up in personal attacks when political opponents or competitors use the occasion to criticize their communication style or moral judgments, or when the media uses its considerable power to construct social dramas around the apology. “[The media] frame actions as transgressions, contribute to intensification of conflicts, urge the use of remedial acts, framing [apologies] as (in)sincere, and help the public determine whether the transgressor should be excluded or re-included in the social structure” (Kampf, 2013, p. 155).

In this situation, leaders can hardly be the “attractive” role model that Brown (2007, p.145) state is crucial for ethical leadership. (Attractiveness, in their perspective, is a function of a model's power, status, and nurturance.) After all, one does not eagerly identify with those who are admitting mistakes and risking public humiliation. Yet, apologizers can perhaps serve as role models in the sense that they display a “willingness to turn mistakes into learning experiences and humility” (Brown & Treviño, 2006, p. 100), an “[openness] about their failings” and “acceptance of responsibility”—which are three characteristics that were assigned to ethical role models in the context of personal (not organizational) error in the study by Weaver, Treviño and Agle (2005, p. 320).

Lacking moral standing and unshielded from personal attacks, the apologizer's only defense against the vagaries of public reaction is to employ strategies to create a credible moral identity in the context of public apology, as the literature suggests they do in the context of organizational leadership. To exercise ethical leadership in the public realm, leaders who apologize seek to establish themselves as authorities whose judgments in matters of right and wrong resonate with audiences.

The second set of strategies considered concern the question of “moral management.” These strategies come up against a second defining feature of the public environment: the lack of a like-minded collective. The public realm has no organizational culture.⁶ It is defined by complexity and heterogeneity: we live in multi-cultural, multi-religious, and multi-media societies in which individuals hold their own particular values and beliefs (Van Zoonen & Mihelj 2010). This creates fragmented responses to leaders' public performances, as voices tend to diverge rather than coalesce into consensus (Jablin & Putnam, 2001; Meyer, 2002). In the public realm, a “shared system of meaning” cannot be assumed (Hajer, 2009, p. 57).

A shared system of meaning, however, is required to exercise ethical leadership effectively. It is a necessary condition for a person to “be” a moral authority: a person can only be a moral leader if some kind of group exists that shares similar values. In this notion of leader as moral authority, people surrender their individual judgments and do not need extensive arguments to be convinced by the leader, since the “status of the speaker” is decisive and there is a “belief in the correctness of his commands or utterances” (Friedman, 1990, p. 67, 68). As philosopher Hannah Arendt noted, such authority can be defined in contrast to coercion by force and to persuasion through argument (1998). Hence, authority is not merely located in persons without a social context: it can only exist within like-minded communities in which someone is recognized on the basis of some kind of “social agreement” (Friedman, 1990, p. 84).

This means that when leaders engage in public moral discourse, they must create the moral basis among their followers on which they will be recognized as authoritative spokespersons. In large corporations in which employees do not know company leaders well (if at all) and societies in which citizens do not automatically support the political leader who leads the executive branch of government, people may acknowledge the leader as a formal representative, but to be seen as an effective moral leader, those the apologizer presumes to represent must accept him or her as a moral agent who is entitled to speak on *their* behalf about *their* values. We assume that this is why apologizer articulates positive values: these can inspire followers to accept him or her as moral agent, and to accept his or her proposals to right the wrong and the demands that come with it, such as the demand to comply with rigorous safety standards to prevent the production of hazardous cars. Establishing oneself as a moral authority for the “perpetrator group” can be a challenge because it generally involves disrupting individual self-perceptions as “good” employees or members of a “good” society. One takes little pride in being an employee of a company that cheated on emission standards performance, or a citizen of nation that has “put away our daughters, our sisters, our aunts,” to borrow phrasing from the Irish apologizer.

Simultaneously, leaders must also create a moral basis among the victims. They need to consent to the leader's appointment as proper spokesperson as well: they must see the leader as the one who “ought to” apologize. If they do not, it can undermine the apology's effect. For example, if the Irish prime minister apologizes for the Magdalene laundries, the victims may not be satisfied until they receive a similar gesture from a direct representative of the congregations that ran the laundries on a day-to-day basis. That is why we assume that leaders are, as the government cases demonstrated, take pains to recognize the suffering of the victims.

This can be a complex undertaking. Because a shared system of meaning cannot be assumed in the public realm, the perpetrator group and the victim group may define the wrongdoing differently. For example, they may disagree about which values have been transgressed, who suffered, and the nature of that suffering. Leaders have to make sure that multiple audiences subscribe to the definition of the wrong—or make a strategic choice between the opposing definitions. For example, if they label a violation of a norm as a “mistake that has been made,” as GM's CEO did, they may assuage some guilt on the part of the perpetrator group, but upset the victims. If, on the other hand, they try to appease victims by calling it a “stupid transgression of which we all should be deeply ashamed,” they may alienate followers (especially the ones who had nothing to do with it). In order to appease all audiences, leaders have to “call into existence” social entities that not only acknowledge their status as moral agent, but also subscribe to their definition of the wrongdoing and to the norms and values that they articulate.

Differentiating between a perpetrator group on one hand, and the group that offers regret and has concern for the victims on the other, offers leaders an opportunity to avoid this obstacle. This differentiation recognizes followers' need to maintain some sense of

⁶ Within the organizational context, a more or less coherent “pattern of basic assumptions” exists that provides stability and meaning to a group (Schein, 2004, p. 17).

moral self-worth in spite of the avowed transgression. It offers them the opportunity to acknowledge that the wrongdoing was in fact “wrong” and that the victims have a moral right to receive an apology.

Defining the victim group presents other challenges. Defining this group too narrowly risks excluding and upsetting individuals who also feel victimized by the wrongdoing. On the other hand, casting too wide a net may upset those who suffered particular harm and feel entitled to special reference. Furthermore, a very detailed and vivid recognition of the victims' pain and loss, as the Manitoba and Irish leaders gave, might encourage the victims to demand more compensation than a leader is willing to offer. A shallow description of their suffering, however, might compound the damage and spark protests from victims who feel insufficiently recognized. Thus, outlining the victim group is a strategic calculation: either leaders recognize their suffering and characterize victimhood—for example, by stating that the victims were “wholly blameless”, in case of Ireland—or, if it is impossible to reconcile the needs of victims with other (legal and financial) considerations, they may choose to avoid such characteristics (as the GM and VW CEOs did).

To conclude, leaders have to reconcile a range of needs and speak to multiple audiences who fall outside their scope of control. They have to call upon followers to live up on the moral promise to never repeat the wrong again (e.g., by accepting the implementation of a more rigorous accountability system in the company, or ending discriminatory practices towards Indigenous peoples). Next, they have to persuade the victims to let go of resentment, accept the definition of the wrongdoing and the recognition of their suffering, and consent to the compensation and reconciliation measures that come with the apology. They also have to manage the reputation of their organization (e.g., by buying its stocks and products, or, in the case of government apologies, by taking up certain civic responsibilities). Navigating these demands, leaders may have to make painful choices, and consequently, they may have to define values, victims, and offender identities... “strategically”.

Future research

The discussion above points to several topics for further inquiry. In this section we will point at three hypothetical relationships for future research, which are informed by the results of both the data analysis and the background research of the apology cases.

A first hypothetical relationship that calls for further investigation is a “Responsibility-Care relationship” that has to do with the timeframe between wrongdoing and apology. Data analysis showed government leaders' apologies went into great detail about the suffering; background research demonstrated that these two heads of government apologized for historical wrongs. (Previous governments had enacted policies with majority support, which were perceived as unjust in hindsight.) The question, then, is whether current leaders can potentially to go into more detail about the pain that victims endured when the actions that caused the suffering were taken in the past, not while they were in office. Does the historical nature of the wrong free up some “moral space” for leaders to go into greater detail about the effects of the wrong?

Next, there might be a “Empathy-Liability relationship,” which concerns the status of ongoing negotiations between apologizer and victim about “unsettled business.” Background research of the GM and VW cases indicated that the companies were involved in negotiations about criminal and civil settlements with victims that would have substantive financial implications. Describing victims' suffering in detail could perhaps make the apologizing party liable for large(r) sums of money. Research into the lead-up to the Canadian and Irish apologies, in contrast, made clear that the leaders were not at risk of financial claims: compensation had already been successfully negotiated. In these case, the apologizers were much more elaborate on the harm done to the victims.

Lastly, there might be a “Care-Moral Intensity relationship.” In the case of [Healthcare.gov](#), the moral intensity of the harm was relatively low: the suffering had remained limited to frustration of website users over several weeks, and no physical and material harm had been done. This might explain the absence of strategies to demonstrate great concern for those affected.

Limitations

With this paper, we hope to have served a limited purpose: to better understand how leaders exercise ethical leadership in the context of public apologies. We hope that the findings can inform further theorizing and that a community of scholars will eventually develop a comprehensive ethical leadership theory of public apologies. We did not conduct explanatory research of the effects of specific strategies, or of the conditions under which these strategies or effects are realized. As a result, the findings have no explanatory power, and one cannot gauge the relative “success” of the apologies on the basis of the strategies studied. How audiences react to these strategies, and why, remains to be investigated. Additionally, we did not conduct research of “internal” apologies, that is: statements of regret that are offered by leaders within their organizations – e.g., in private chambers before fellow board members or before a crowd of employees, without press camera's running and even mobile recording devices turned off. As a result, it remains unclear if public apologies differ from their private counterparts and if leaders employ (dis)similar strategies in these settings.

We connected our analysis to just one strand of ethical leadership theory, as developed by Brown, Treviño, and fellow scholars, and zoomed in on the specific practice of public apologies. The objective was to find common themes and patterns through a qualitative multi-case study in order to provide an answer to the descriptive research question, but these answers are not valid beyond cases of public apologies (George & Bennet, 2005; Yin, 1994). Findings cannot be generalized to other (public) settings in which leaders exercise ethical leadership. Hence, this research has touched upon many promising topics that require further exploration. It is expected that sub-themes may emerge within the proposed categories as ethical leadership and apology literature develops and as further theory generation based on larger numbers of cases takes place.

Conclusions

Public apologies are complex undertakings. Leaders of organizations must satisfy victims, but at the same time, not turn away from the concerns of stakeholders and shareholders who may regard apologies as displays of weakness or attempts to implicate them in moral failings. There may also be reasonable concern that, once the apology has been offered, other disenfranchised individuals or groups may begin demanding similar recognition in the public moral realm. There are practical considerations too: while wrongdoing often can have terrible, long-term consequences that must be acknowledged, leaders do not express regret in the hopes that they will become liable for large amounts of money. Organizational leaders offering public apologies must make these various calculations and take issues outside the moral realm into account—and one research project cannot address all these fascinating features. To conclude, apologizing in a public context is a delicate balancing act in which personality and commonality, morality and strategy, and humility and liability all come together. This paper has addressed just few of these acts' many features, and there is much more to be studied.

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