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When apologizing hurts: Felt transgression and restoration efforts

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Summary

Apologizing is important for conflict resolution and relationship reconciliation, yet apologies often fail to restore the damaged relationship. While much research has been devoted to investigating the victims' reactions upon receiving an apology, in this paper, we adopt an apologizer-centric approach and explore the phenomenon of apologizing with no felt transgression (vis-à-vis when there is felt transgression) along with its affective and reconciliation outcomes for the apologizer. Based on Appraisal Tendency Framework, we predict that apologizing with no felt transgression will lead to reduced guilt and increased anger in the apologizer, which will result in a decreased level of their restoration efforts towards the victim. In addition, we further hypothesize about the role of organizational conflict cultures in influencing the relationship between apologizing and restoration efforts via guilt and anger. Study 1 uses a micro-narrative procedure and an inductive data analysis approach to demonstrate the varied situations and motivations of employees apologizing with (no) felt transgression, Study 2 utilizes an experimental design to examine the mediation effect, and Study 3 employs the critical incident technique to test our whole research model. Our hypotheses were largely supported across our studies. Theoretical and practical implications are discussed.

KEYWORDS
anger, apology, conflict culture, felt transgression, guilt, restoration efforts

1 | INTRODUCTION

Imagine being in charge of an important presentation where another team is responsible for certain statistics to be included in the presentation. While making the presentation, it becomes clear that the statistics were not correct and thus your boss was visibly upset. While you are not directly responsible for those statistics, you are the only one presenting. In this case, would you apologize to your boss even if it is not your fault?

Apologizing is one of the most ubiquitous reactions after having transgressed, and the extant literature has largely demonstrated the effectiveness of an apology in resolving interpersonal conflicts (e.g., Fehr et al., 2010; Fehr & Gelfand, 2010; Frantz & Bennigson, 2005; Utikal & Fischbacher, 2010). In particular, a transgressor's apology has been found to be a strong tool to elicit victim forgiveness and foster reconciliation between two parties (e.g., Kelln & Ellard, 1999; Wallace et al., 2008).

However, despite the importance of apology in addressing conflicts, there are several aspects about which scholars lack comprehensive knowledge. First, the context within which an apology is offered—especially at the workplace—is often simplified in the current literature. To be more specific, while the current literature on apologizing typically assumes that employees apologize because they have done something wrong, incidents such as the one mentioned above may also lead to the offer of an apology. Therefore, real-life cases of apologizing can be more complex than the current literature depicts. Second, there is limited understanding with respect to the downstream consequences for the apologizer (Leunissen et al., 2014), because existing studies have tended to focus on victim-related outcomes after receiving an apology, such as forgiveness (Adams, 2016; Basford et al., 2014; Fehr & Gelfand, 2010; Hornsey et al., 2020). Lastly, the dispersed studies on individuals' own reactions towards their apology revealed that apologizing could elicit mixed emotions within the apologizer (e.g., Dhami, 2016; Exline et al., 2007; Leunissen et al., 2014; Zaiser & Giner-Sorolla, 2013), which further points to a need for clarifying when and why different emotions might emerge after apologizing, along with its associated behavioral outcomes.

Synthesizing the questions above, in the current research, we provide the first investigation of *apologizing with no felt transgression* at the workplace and examine how this experience may affect the apologizer's follow-up emotions and restoration efforts, compared to when there is felt wrongdoing from the apologizer's perspective. We define apologizing with no felt transgression as when an employee apologizes despite not feeling responsible for the event that occurred and/or believing no harm was caused by their actions, based on a body of evidence that shows that transgressors are often likely to deny or downplay the negative consequences of their actions and to attribute the causes of the adverse event as being external (Adams & Ena Inesi, 2016; Baumeister et al., 1990; Zechmeister & Romero, 2002). For example, an employee might apologize to a supervisor for a mistake at work only because it is implicitly demanded by the supervisor; an employee could apologize to colleagues for being late for a meeting only to avoid annoying others; or an employee might also apologize to a coworker for unintentionally offending them in a joke only to maintain relational peace. Under such situations, the employee might subjectively feel they are not at fault because there is no harm caused or it was not their intention to do so, yet they might still apologize for different reasons (e.g., Mu & Bobocel, 2019). However, such instances of apologizing at the workplace have received little attention from scholars.

To examine apologizing with no felt transgression in interpersonal relationships within organizations, we adopted a mixed-method design and focused on patterns between apologizing with no felt transgression and the apologizer's relationship restoration efforts (e.g., Zheng & van Dijke, 2020) through guilt and anger as the mechanisms, with avoidant conflict cultures in organizations as the moderator (see Figure 1 for the research model). Study 1 employed a micro-narrative procedure where participants either recalled an instance at the workplace in which they apologized when they felt they had done something wrong or an instance where they had apologized even though they felt they had not transgressed. The text data was inductively coded, and the varied contexts and motives for apologizing as well as the different affective outcomes after apologizing were identified and compared. This primary study provides rich insights on apologizing behavior at the workplace as it contains a wide variety of actual experiences. Study 2 employed an experimental design and examined apologizers' restoration efforts towards the victim when there was actual wrongdoing versus when there was no felt transgression, along with anger and guilt as two affective mechanisms. This study complements Study 1 by demonstrating internal validity as we strictly controlled for the instance of apologizing. Last, Study 3 adopted a critical incident technique and tested our whole research model. The results of this study supported our predictions and further offered insights about the prevalence of apologizing with no felt transgression, as participants freely recalled the last time they apologized at the workplace and self-identified whether they believed they were at fault or not.

Our research makes several important contributions. First, we advance the literature on apologizing and conflict management by introducing apologizing with no felt transgression, and we draw scholarly attention to the more nuanced nature of apologizing behavior at work. Anecdotal evidence implies that employees might regularly apologize even when they believe it is not their fault, such as when they are under political pressure or face interpersonal tension. In

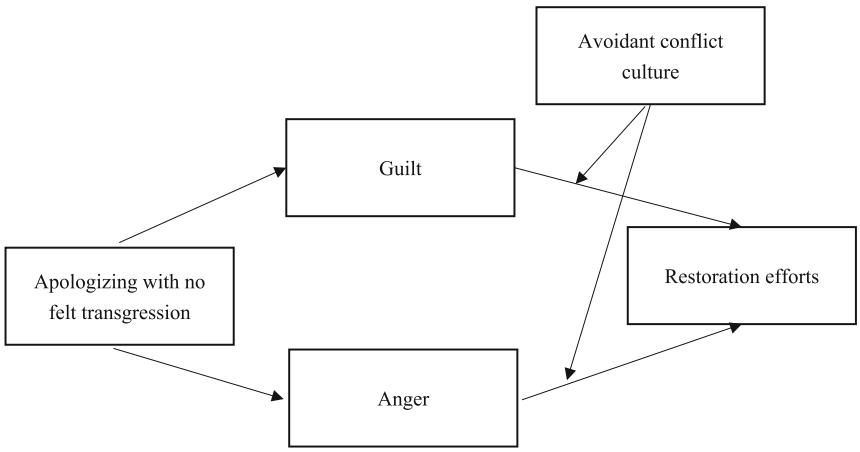

FIGURE 1 Research model

addition, apologizing might also be a normative script that employees are used to following in certain cultures (e.g., Maddux et al., 2011) regardless of whether they are indeed at fault or not. Notably, it is possible that apologizing with no felt transgression could yield divergent outcomes for apologizers as compared to apologizing with felt transgression, yet this possibility has not been explored in the extant literature. Our work thus extends previous research and sheds light on the heterogeneity of apologizing behavior in itself.

Second, by adopting an apologizer-centric approach when studying the relationship between apology and reconciliation, we challenge the widely held perception that an apology is always beneficial for the reconciliation process. While workplace reconciliation has been defined as "an effort by the victim to extend acts of goodwill toward the offender in the hope of restoring the relationship" (Aquino et al., 2006, p. 654), recently, the literature has started to conceptualize reconciliation as a process that involves both transgressors' and victims' efforts and has called for a more nuanced examination of transgressors' perspectives and the related barriers to the reconciliation process (e.g., Dhami, 2016; Mu & Bobocel, 2019; Okimoto et al., 2013; Zheng & van Dijke, 2020). Again, existing literature has implicitly assumed that apologies are offered by transgressors and has neglected the possibility that apologies can also be offered by individuals who are not at fault. Accordingly, the current research points towards the need to establish mutual agreement regarding the existence of a wrongdoing conducted by the apologizer before concluding apologies can be an all-purpose solution to interpersonal conflicts. Therefore, we provide new insights to the literature regarding when apologizing could perpetuate, rather than resolve, conflicts (e.g., Mu & Bobocel, 2019; Zheng et al., 2016).

Lastly, we highlight that whether apologizers feel they have transgressed or not is a crucial factor that influences apologizers' downstream emotions and behavior. Previous studies have suggested that apologizing can elicit mixed feelings (e.g., Dhami, 2016; Exline et al., 2007; Leunissen et al., 2014; Zaiser & Giner-Sorolla, 2013), yet less is known about why this might happen. Drawing upon Affective Tendency Framework (ATF: Smith & Ellsworth, 1985; Lerner & Keltner, 2000), here, we identify apologizing with or without felt transgression as a key factor that might help in explaining the inconsistent and incomplete findings from the extant literature. We suggest that apologizing with no felt transgression (vis-à-vis apologizing with felt transgression) will decrease apologizers' guilt and increase their anger towards the victim, ultimately resulting in reduced reconciliation efforts. Our work thus brings clarity on the emotional and reconciliation outcomes of apologizing for apologizers.

2 | THEORETICAL DEVELOPMENT

2.1 | Apology and reconciliation

Apologies are defined as "admissions of blameworthiness and regret for an undesirable event that allow actors to try to obtain a pardon from audiences" (Schlenker & Darby, 1981, p. 271) and often consist of a verbal expression of regret and acknowledgement of responsibility (Kim et al., 2004). As a costless gesture (e.g., Chaudhry & Loewenstein, 2019), apologizing has been found to be a powerful tool to facilitate victim forgiveness and restore trust (e.g., Risen & Gilovich, 2007; Schniter et al., 2013; Tabak et al., 2012; Utikal & Fischbacher, 2010). Indeed, apologies serve several important social functions: By apologizing, the apologizer restores the standing of the victim (e.g., Ohbuchi & Sato, 1994), reaffirms the social rules that have been broken (e.g., Darby & Schlenker, 1982), and demonstrates willingness to recommit to the relationship (e.g., McCullough et al., 1998). As a result, there are ample studies examining when an apology is more likely to elicit forgiveness (e.g., Fehr & Gelfand, 2010; Frantz & Bennigson, 2005; Kim et al., 2004; Santelli et al., 2009; Struthers et al., 2008; Zheng et al., 2016).

While the literature has largely focused on victims' reactions towards an apology, research on the apologizer's perspective is more limited, and contrary to the beneficial effect of an apology on victims' perceptions of reconciliation, the effect of apologizing on apologizers is occasionally negative. For example, Exline et al. (2007) found that apologizers can feel regret after apologizing, and Okimoto et al. (2013) found that apologizing can reduce individuals' feeling of control and self-esteem. More recently, Mu and Bobocel (2019) found that apologizers' perceptions of reconciliation can be impaired depending on their motivation for apologizing. In sum, to develop a comprehensive understanding of the reconciliation process, research is still required to explore apologizers' reactions and behaviors after their apologizing.

2.2 | Apologizing with no felt transgression

Although the current research on apologizing behavior often implicitly assumes that the apologizer recognizes their own fault (e.g., Fehr & Gelfand, 2010; Howell et al., 2012; Leunissen et al., 2013; Zaiser & Giner-Sorolla, 2013), there is also suggestive evidence that individuals might apologize with no felt transgression. For example, Mu and Bobocel (2019) collected varied instances of apologizing at work and found that employees could apologize out of motivations such as personal expedience (i.e., "the transgressor is motivated to quickly resolve conflict and offers an apology in hopes of appeasing victims and moving past the situation," p. 915) or fear of sanctions (i.e., "the transgressor fears not apologizing may cause backlash against them and is motivated to apologize to avoid retaliation from victims or reprimands from higher authority or other parties," p. 915). This implies that sometimes employees might apologize for reasons other than feeling that they did something wrong. More broadly, superfluous apology—when individuals apologize for events for which they are obviously not culpable (e.g., "I'm sorry about the bad weather")—is also a tactic people may use to increase interpersonal trust (e.g., Brooks et al., 2014). Therefore, the phenomenon of apologizing with no felt transgression has been somewhat touched upon in the previous literature, yet its outcomes for apologizers remain unclear.

A natural question then is why employees would apologize without any felt transgression at the workplace. While it is reasonable to assume that employees might apologize to customers with no felt transgression due to display rules and job demands (e.g., Grandey, 2003), we believe that it is also not uncommon for them to apologize to other organizational members, such as their coworkers, as it can bring certain benefits for the apologizers. First, cooperation and collective behaviors among organizational members are typically expected in organizations (e.g., Chen et al., 1998; Tjosvold & Tsao, 1989), and apologizing is a costless way to restore interpersonal trust (e.g., Ali et al., 2017; Kim et al., 2004; Ohbuchi et al., 1989). Given that harmonious relationships with organizational members bring potential benefits to employees such as task-related support and the fulfillment of their need for belongingness (e.g., Colbert et al., 2016), employees might be motivated to maintain interpersonal acceptance by offering apologies when faced with conflicts. Relatedly, research has also shown that employees believe apologizing can quickly address the conflict, demonstrate one's professionalism, or avoid further punishment (e.g., Mu & Bobocel, 2019). Thus, it is plausible that employees might apologize to other organizational members even when there is no felt transgression, although the existence of this phenomenon and its consequences have yet to be explicitly examined.

2.3 | Apologizing with no felt transgression, guilt, and anger

Apologizing can lead to complex negative emotions within apologizers. For example, Exline et al. (2007) found that apologizing may lead to the emotion of regret, and Zaiser and Giner-Sorolla (2013) found that apologizing could further increase apologizer's negative feelings towards the victim. However, scholars lack a systematic understanding of why certain negative emotions are more likely to arise, and more importantly, what implications these bear for relationship reconciliation. Gaining a more comprehensive understanding of apologizers' emotional reactions after apologizing is imperative, because reconciliation is ultimately a process that involves both apologizers' and victims' efforts (e.g., Gollwitzer & Okimoto, 2021), and successful reconciliation is crucial for healthy and fulfilling professional relationships.

To address this puzzle, we use Appraisal Tendency Framework (ATF) as our overall theoretical grounding. Going beyond a valence-based approach towards emotions, ATF takes into account the varied appraisal processes associated with specific emotions and demonstrates that even emotions with the same valence can yield distinct individual judgments and behaviors (e.g., Han et al., 2007; Lerner & Keltner, 2000). This theory also refers to dimensions that differentiate people's emotional experiences based on their cognitive appraisals (e.g., Ellsworth & Smith, 1988; Scherer, 1999). Previous literature has categorized these appraisals into six dimensions: certainty, pleasantness, attentional activity, anticipated effort, control, and responsibility (e.g., Lerner & Keltner, 2000, 2001; Smith & Ellsworth, 1985). Considering these appraisals together with emotions can helpfully distinguish between specific perceptions and behavioral tendencies. For example, although anger and fear are both negative emotions, they yield opposite effects on risk perceptions and behaviors. Specifically, while anger makes people perceive events as predictable and under human control, fear makes people interpret events as unpredictable and under situational control (e.g., Lerner & Keltner, 2001).

In the current paper, we study (decreased) guilt and (increased) anger as two emotional consequences of apologizing with no felt transgression and how these emotions further motivate or inhibit the apologizer's restoration efforts. Two appraisal dimensions that are highly relevant for the phenomenon of apologizing with no felt transgression are individual control and other's responsibility. Control refers to whether the individual perceives the event to be under human control or controlled by external factors (e.g., situational), while responsibility reflects the degree to which the self or another person is perceived to be responsible for initiating the event (Smith & Ellsworth, 1985). Previous literature has documented that guilt is characterized by high individual control and low other's responsibility – specifically, guilt arises when a negative event is under human control and is brought about by one's own behavior (e.g., Tracy & Robins, 2006). In contrast, anger is also characterized by high individual control, but it bears high other's responsibility, such that anger arises when a negative event is perceived to be under human control but is brought about by other people (e.g., Lerner & Keltner, 2000).

We first predict that an apology with no felt transgression decreases the apologizer's guilt towards the victim. Guilt is a moral emotion that is elicited by interpersonal harm, and it stimulates transgressors to repair the damaged relationship (e.g., Baumeister et al., 1994; Tangney et al., 2007). Relatedly, de Hooge (2012) found that a transgressor's feelings of guilt reduced only after the victim was compensated; in contrast, if the transgressor did not undertake any reparative actions, the transgressor was still likely to feel guilty (see also Donohue & Tully, 2019). Moreover, when there is felt transgression and the apologizer attributes the negative event to their own behavior, apologizing might not be sufficient to restore the relational equilibrium and apologizers are still likely to feel a certain level of guilt (de Hooge, 2012). However, in the absence of felt transgression, the apologizer might either perceive the harm caused as minimal or might not perceive any responsibility for it. As a result, the apologizer is likely to believe they owe nothing to the victim. Therefore, we predict that when apologizing with no felt transgression (vis-à-vis when there is felt transgression), apologizers would feel lower levels of guilt.

> **H1a.** Apologizing with no felt transgression (vis-à-vis apologizing with felt transgression) is negatively related to guilt.

We next predict that apologizing with no felt transgression is positively related to anger. For apologizers who did transgress, apologizing means nothing more than an admission of their wrongdoings and expression of regret. However, in situations where the apologizer feels that they have not transgressed, apologizing implies that they

erroneously present themselves as a transgressor and take on the responsibility for the false accusation. By apologizing for something that is someone else's fault, apologizers can feel unjustly treated. One negative emotion that is typically triggered by such aversive environmental conditions is anger (e.g., Barclay & Skarlicki, 2009; Gibson & Callister, 2010; Kuppens et al., 2003; Lindebaum & Geddes, 2016; Miller, 2001; Pillutla & Murnighan, 1996; Porath & Pearson, 2012) which, as mentioned before, constitutes an appraisal that another person is responsible for the harm caused (e.g., someone to blame, Lazarus, 1991). At the workplace, one of the primary antecedents of anger is unjust treatment (see a review from Gibson & Callister, 2010), and in instances of apologizing with no felt transgression, apologizers take on undeserved responsibility for a false accusation, which can lead to feelings of unjust treatment (Mikula et al., 1990). Accordingly, we predict that apologizing with no felt transgression will increase the apologizer's anger.

H1b. Apologizing with no felt transgression (vis-à-vis apologizing with felt transgression) is positively related to anger.

2.4 | Guilt, anger, and restoration efforts

Relationship restoration efforts are offered in order to obtain the victim's forgiveness and repair the damaged relationship (e.g., Ren & Gray, 2009; Tabak et al., 2012). While providing an apology is often a common step, relationship restoration efforts also encompass additional actions, such as compensation, that are focused on achieving forgiveness. According to ATF, an emotion—once experienced—triggers a cognitive predisposition to evaluate future events in a way that is consistent with the appraisal that activated the emotion (Lerner & Keltner, 2000). As such, emotions lead to a number of automatic reactions (e.g., physiological and behavioral) that help individuals quickly deal with the problems at hand (e.g., Frijda et al., 1989; Keltner & Gross, 1999), and different emotions activate different behaviors. For example, fear is accompanied by appraisals of high uncertainty and therefore increases one's risk-averse behaviors for future events (Lerner & Keltner, 2001), and shame is associated with perceiving oneself as worthless and motivates avoidant behaviors (Schmader & Lickel, 2006). In a similar vein, we illustrate below how guilt and anger can yield differential effects on the apologizer's restoration efforts.

We expect that relationship restoration efforts will reduce when the apologizer feels less guilt towards the target. In interpersonal exchanges, the misconduct of an individual creates a kind of "debt" that they owe to the victim—the larger the transgression, the larger the debt (Exline et al., 2004; Shnabel & Nadler, 2008)—and the emotion of guilt prompts the individual to offer compensations or other prosocial behaviors towards the victim with the aim to cancel the debt and restore the relational equilibrium. Research has consistently found that guilt is an adaptive emotion in its role of relationship maintenance (e.g., Ausubel, 1955), and it stimulates transgressors to take reparative actions such as compensation, cooperation, and compliance (e.g., Baumeister et al., 1994; de Hooge et al., 2007; Freedman & Fraser, 1966; Ketelaar & Tung Au, 2003; Lewis, 1971; Lindsay-Hartz, 1984). In fact, when elicited by guilt, the urge to repair a damaged relationship can be strong enough that a transgressor might appease the victim by violating important moral norms (e.g., de Hooge et al., 2011; Li & Jain, 2021). This is also in line with ATF, which suggests that guilt is associated with the tendency to perceive high human control and self-responsibility, such that guilty individuals would be more motivated to work on relationship reconciliation by engaging in restoration behaviors. To summarize, we expect that a decreased level of guilt will reduce the apologizer's motivation to engage in relationship restoration efforts towards the victim.

H2a. Guilt will mediate the relationship between apologizing with no felt transgression and restoration efforts.

Based on ATF, anger encompasses feeling another person's actions are blameworthy and violating what "ought" to be. As such, anger has often been characterized as an emotion that motivates confrontation and hostility (see a review from Carver & Harmon-Jones, 2009). However, Geddes et al. (2020) suggested that workplace anger rarely turns into aggression: Employees are more likely to suppress their anger rather than direct it towards violence or confrontation. Related literature has found that anger suppression is frequent in organizations (e.g., Begley, 1994; Booth et al., 2017; Geddes & Callister, 2007), and Cortina and Magley (2009) found that employees adopted different strategies to cope with anger and workplace injustice, including avoiding the target of anger (see also Linden et al., 2003). Relatedly, Spencer and Rupp (2009) pointed out that, when facing customer injustice, employees who were angry engaged in emotional labor because anger expression was inappropriate (see also Rupp & Spencer, 2006). This is also consistent with ATF as anger is associated with the tendency to perceive the event as high in human control but low in self-responsibility, and in line with this appraisal, angry employees could choose to intentionally shift away from the blameworthy person to comply with organizational regulations. Hence, we predict that, at the workplace, angry apologizers are likely to suppress their anger and withdraw from interactions with the victim, hence reducing their restoration efforts.

H2b. Anger will mediate the relationship between apologizing with no felt transgression and restoration efforts.

2.5 | The moderating role of organizational conflict culture

Organizations differ in their shared norms that specify how workplace conflicts should be managed. While employees might hold distinct preferences for conflict management strategies, organizational conflict

culture serves as a strong external force that shapes employee reactions to conflicts (Johns, 2006). Scholars have identified three distinct organizational conflict cultures, namely, dominating conflict cultures (i.e., cultures that encourage active confrontation in order to publicly win conflicts), collaborative conflict cultures (i.e., cultures that encourage active and cooperative discussion of conflicts), and avoidant conflict cultures (i.e., cultures that encourage passive and agreeable employee reactions to conflicts) (e.g., Choi, 2013; Gelfand et al., 2012).

Of particular relevance to employee restoration efforts is the *avoidant conflict culture*, as it emphasizes harmonious relationships in the workplace (Gelfand et al., 2012). Under such a culture, conflicts are assumed to be dangerous, and organizational members are expected to suppress expressions that may lead to conflict as well as engage in behaviors that may reduce instead of escalate active confrontation or discussion of conflicts (Gelfand et al., 2012). Therefore, while we believe that apologizing with no felt transgression will lead to increased anger and decreased guilt in the apologizer, we predict that an avoidant conflict culture will affect how these emotions shape the apologizer's restoration efforts.

We expect avoidant conflict cultures to amplify the positive relationship between guilt and restoration efforts. Guilt stimulates individuals to proactively take actions to restore the damaged relationship (e.g., Amodio et al., 2007; Baumeister et al., 1994; Schmader & Lickel, 2006). More broadly, guilt motivates individuals to reinforce communal norms that are characterized by mutual concerns and positive treatments (e.g., Baumeister et al., 1994). Therefore, interpersonal harmony might be achieved by the guilty apologizer's desire and efforts to reconcile with the victim. Relatedly, under avoidant conflict cultures, where conflicts are expected to be avoided and relational harmony is key (e.g., Choi, 2013; Kozan, 1997), guilty apologizers should be more motivated to repair the relationship and prevent further conflicts in future interactions with the victim.

H3a. Avoidant conflict culture will moderate the positive relationship between guilt and restoration efforts, such that the relationship is stronger when avoidant conflict culture is high.

Additionally, previous literature has found that employees are less likely to express anger when organizational norms are less confrontational (Aquino et al., 2004). As such we would expect that when organizations have avoidant conflict cultures, under which confrontational behaviors are not rewarded and employees are supposed to collectively shy away from addressing conflicts (e.g., Gelfand et al., 2012; Zhang & Wei, 2017), employees would be less likely to act with passive or active hostility. Instead, employees would be incentivized to seek and create harmony, reducing overt or implicit expressions of anger and potentially increasing restoration efforts. Accordingly, when perceived avoidant conflict culture is high, we believe that our previously hypothesized negative relationship between anger and restoration efforts should be weakened.

H3b. Avoidant conflict culture will moderate the negative relationship between anger and restoration efforts, such that the relationship is weaker when avoidant conflict culture is high.

To be clear, like other organizational cultures that refer to employees' shared attitudes about certain norms, organizational conflict cultures "guide organizational members' attitudes and behaviors, and thereby reduce the range of individual variation in strategies used to manage conflict in organizations" (Gelfand et al., 2012, p. 1132). In other words, conflict culture should yield more power in regulating employee behavior (vis-à-vis internal feelings) when facing a conflict. As noted by Gelfand et al. (2012), employees in organizations that adopt avoidant conflict cultures demonstrate agreeable gestures when they in fact could not disagree more (Perlow, 2003), implying that avoidant conflict cultures might have stronger effects on employees' behavior for dealing with conflicts vis-à-vis their emotions. Relatedly, Weingart et al. (2015) also suggested that cultural factors have a direct influence on the ways in which organizational members express themselves and intervene in conflicts. Therefore, we do not expect avoidant conflict culture to moderate the relationship between apologizing with no felt transgression and emotions, but we suggest that it would influence employees' restoration efforts upon feeling the emotions of guilt and anger.

Bringing together our above arguments, we postulate that apologizing with no felt transgression reduces the apologizer's restoration efforts through decreased guilt and increased anger. In addition, we expect the mediation effects to be moderated by organizational avoidant conflict cultures:

H4a. Avoidant conflict cultures will moderate the indirect relationship between apologizing with no felt transgression and restoration efforts through guilt, such that the indirect effect is stronger when the level of avoidant conflict culture is high.

H4b. Avoidant conflict cultures will moderate the indirect relationship between apologizing with no felt transgression and restoration efforts through anger, such that the indirect effect is weaker when the level of avoidant conflict culture is high.

3 | METHODS

3.1 | Overview of studies

In the current paper, we adopted a mixed-methods design to shed light on the phenomenon of apologizing with no felt transgression at the workplace. Study 1 used a micro-narrative procedure where participants were randomly assigned to one of two conditions and were asked to recall a time they apologized with or without felt transgression at the workplace. We inductively coded this data to

systematically compare the differences between apologizing with and without felt transgression from the apologizer's perspective, and we generated rich descriptions of the different incidents and motivations of their apologizing behavior. By doing so, we offered some first glimpses into the possible causes, contextual factors, and emotional outcomes of apologizing with no felt transgression, as well as how this phenomenon could be naturally different from apologizing with felt transgression.

Study 2 utilized an experimental design in which we provided a workplace scenario that was adapted from a participant's narrative in Study 1, and we also measured the two affective mechanisms of guilt and anger along with participants' restoration intentions. While Study 2 provided high internal validity for our results, Study 3 increased the external validity of our findings by adopting the critical incident technique and asking participants to freely recall the last time they apologized to other organizational members and self-identify their felt transgression, along with other variables of interests. Given the various nuances and potential situations in which apologies may be made at the workplace, the critical incident technique permitted a broader range of apology situations to arise and facilitated participants' recall of contextual details concerning the incident (e.g., Carnevale et al., 2021). Unlike the highly controlled experimental design in the previous two studies, Study 3 elicited diverse workplace apology incidents and further investigated the prevalence of apologizing with no felt transgression at the workplace, the role of organizational conflict cultures, and the effect of other relevant factors such as relational closeness (Riek, 2010) and victim power (Zheng & van Dijke, 2020). Taken together, our studies provided triangulating evidence of our hypotheses and jointly contributed to a better understanding of apologizing with no felt transgression at the workplace.

For the main variable of interest—apologizer's felt transgression—we employed different operationalizations. Studies 1 and 2 are experimental designs in which participants were randomly assigned to either the *apologizing with felt transgression* condition or the *apologizing with no felt transgression* condition. This dichotomized measure in the first two studies served as a proof of concept (e.g., Banerjee et al., 2017), while Study 3 used a continuous variable since apologizers are likely to experience transgression on a spectrum.

3.2 | Study 1: Method

3.2.1 | Participants and procedure

As most research on apologies has not considered that disagreement could exist between the apologizer and the victim regarding the existence of a transgression, no studies have investigated the differential effects of apologizing with versus with no felt transgression at the workplace. Therefore, we first collected qualitative data by prompting participants to write micro-narratives (e.g., Baumeister et al., 1990) to systematically compare the differences between apologizing with and with no felt transgression at the workplace. In total, 253 participants were invited to participate in this study via the online platform Prolific. Participants were randomly assigned to one of two conditions: the *felt transgression* condition versus the *no felt transgression* condition. The exact instructions are as below (with the text for the no felt transgression condition in brackets):

Please recall and write about an instance from your workplace where you had apologized to a colleague or coworker at work after you felt that you did something wrong (even though you believed you did not do anything wrong).

That is, you felt you had transgressed and accordingly apologized to this other colleague or coworker (you felt you had not transgressed but still ended up apologizing to this other colleague or coworker).

Please describe the situation with as many details as possible. In your description, please take a first-person perspective (e.g., I apologized to …), and try to be as clear as possible, so that somebody who was not there understands what you did. Please use maximum 200 words.

After writing about such an event, all participants responded to questions asking why they apologized and how they felt after apologizing. As a manipulation check, the micro-narratives were manually corroborated during the qualitative coding to ensure participants were recalling instances in line with the condition to which they were randomly allocated. Two participants were removed from the analysis because they did not recall having apologized with no felt transgression, resulting in a final sample of 251 participants (95 females, $M_{age} = 35.52$; no felt transgression condition: $n = 122$, felt transgression condition: $n = 129$), residing and working as full-time employees ($M_{tenure} = 14.61$ years) in a variety of industries in the UK. The majority of participants worked in services (60.8%), followed by retail (11.2%), public administration (7.2%), finance/real estate (6.8%), manufacturing (5.2%), and transportation/utilities (4%). The micro-narratives were then qualitatively coded following an inductive approach to capture the array of responses regarding the incident, to whom the participant apologized, why the participant apologized, and how the participant felt towards the other person. Participants' affective reactions were grouped to capture those that expressed only negative feelings, only positive feelings, neutral feelings, and a mix of both positive and negative feelings. Incidents and stated reasons for apologizing that were broadly similar were grouped together, but the inductive analysis focused on staying as close to participants' words as possible, such that the results reflect the diverse range of incidents and stated reasons for apologizing that were present in the data.

3.3 | Study 1: Results

The majority of participants recalled apologizing to colleagues (69.29%) and superiors (25.20%), but participants also recalled apologizing to customers, clients, and subordinates. Table 1 shows that participants in the felt transgression condition most frequently mentioned incidents in which they made some sort of mistake in their work and subsequently apologized for it (37.21%). Participants in the no felt transgression condition most frequently mentioned incidents in which they were blamed or decided to take responsibility for someone else's mistake (27.87%) or incidents that involved causing

TABLE 1 Study 1: Apologizing incidents

Incident	Illustrative extract	Apologizing with *no felt* transgression	Apologizing *with* felt transgression
Accused of not following policy/acting inappropriately	"I apologized to my supervisor for allowing a customer a discount even though my manager had approved it"	16 (13.11%)	1 (0.78%)
Blamed/took responsibility for other's mistake	"I was confident that they had made the mistake but I knew that it would be better to share any responsibility because that colleague was already in trouble at work with the supervisor"	34 (27.87%)	2 (1.55%)
Disagreement with the other person	"I had a colleague who repeatedly undermined other colleagues and I called him out on it. He accused me of belittling and bullying him so I took him aside and apologized for making him uncomfortable and raising the issue so publicly."	19 (15.57%)	5 (3.88%)
Made mistake at work	"During a meeting at work I had given the wrong statistics out. The data wasn't up to date."	5 (4.10%)	48 (37.21%)
Unintentional damage in relationship	"I apologized to a coworker after making a joke she found offensive."	26 (21.31%)	30 (23.26%)
Unintentionally caused delay/ inconvenience at work	"I apologized to my boss because I was late to work and I could not make it for a surgical procedure on a patient because my car broke down on the way to work."	6 (4.92%)	8 (6.20%)
Wrongly blamed colleague of mistake	"I apologized to a coworker after accusing them of delivering a report late when in fact it was on time—the tracking system had broken"	3 (2.46%)	11 (8.53%)
Yelled/rude at work	"One time I got so stressed at work due to overload of customers and I got angry with my colleague because he was standing around doing nothing so I had to shout at him to get moving"	13 (10.66%)	24 (18.60%)
Totals		122 (100%)	129 (100%)

unintentional damage in the relationship with the other person (21.31%), which included events such as accidentally offending the other person (e.g., in a joke), getting involved in office gossip, or inadvertently taking another person's food, drink, or desk. The third most frequently mentioned kind of incident in the no felt transgression condition involved disagreements with the other person (15.57%), which included instances of having differing opinions with a superior or colleague or having requested something of a colleague that the colleague did not understand or comply with. Thus, the micro-narrative data provided numerous illustrations of situations in which employees are wrongly accused, end up taking the blame for someone else, or unintentionally inconvenience others, among other incidents, for which the individual then apologizes although they perceive they are not at fault. Moreover, even for the same type of transgression (e.g., unintentional damage in the relationship), there were disagreements regarding felt transgression, which again points to the subjectivity of such interpretations.

Participants also explained in their micro-narratives why they had apologized, as shown in Table 2. The majority (62.79%) of participants in the felt transgression condition said they apologized because they recognized their own fault or that they were in the wrong; the other most frequently stated reasons were because they had caused difficulties or delays for their colleagues (10.85%) or because they felt bad or guilty (9.30%). As for those who apologized despite feeling they had not transgressed, a variety of motivations were expressed, of which the most commonly stated reason was to maintain peace (27.05%). It can also be noted that desires to maintain peace may be related to feeling that apologizing is easier than arguing (6.56%), although we kept these separate to reflect the variety in participants' responses. Besides this, other commonly mentioned reasons were because the participant decided to take responsibility for the incident (13.11%) (e.g., on behalf of a colleague or one's team), because it was perceived to be the professionally right thing to do (9.84%) (while another 7.38% felt it was more broadly the right thing to do), or

TABLE 2 Study 1: Motivations for apologizing

Why participant apologized	Apologizing with *no felt* transgression	Apologizing *with* felt transgression
Accused by someone else	3 (2.46%)	1 (0.78%)
Asked by someone else	8 (6.56%)	0
Avoid punishment	5 (4.10%)	1 (0.78%)
Caused difficulties/ delays for colleagues	2 (1.64%)	14 (10.85%)
Easier than arguing	8 (6.56%)	0
Felt bad/guilty	6 (4.92%)	12 (9.30%)
Maintain peace	33 (27.05%)	0
Other was offended/ hurt	11 (9.02%)	5 (3.88%)
Other was superior rank	2 (1.64%)	0
Professionally right thing to do	12 (9.84%)	8 (6.20%)
Recognized own fault/wrong	7 (5.74%)	81 (62.79%)
Right thing to do	9 (7.38%)	4 (3.10%)
Took responsibility for incident	16 (13.11%)	3 (2.33%)
Totals	122 (100%)	129 (100%)

because the other person felt offended or hurt so the participant apologized (9.02%). This micro-narrative data thus illustrated that people may apologize even when they do not feel they have done something wrong to maintain peace, follow implicit social norms, or to appease the offended party.

Comparing the two conditions, apologizing with no felt transgression was related to many more negative feelings towards the other person: While only 33.33% ($n = 43$) of those who felt they did transgress expressed solely negative feelings, 67.21% ($n = 82$) of those who felt they had not transgressed expressed only negative feelings. Conversely, 30.23% ($n = 39$) of those who felt they had transgressed expressed positive feelings towards the other person, while only 7.38% ($n = 9$) of those who felt they had not transgressed expressed positive feelings towards the other person. The most frequently mentioned negative feelings in the felt transgression condition were guilt (37.21%) and embarrassment (16.28%); in the no felt transgression condition, participants reported having a worsened perception of the other (34.15%), feeling annoyed (23.17%), and angry (17.07%), which are shown in Table 3. It is also noteworthy that no participants in the no felt transgression condition mentioned any feelings of guilt, and no participants in the felt transgression condition expressed any anger.

Finally, Table 4 provides additional illustrative extracts from the data regarding participants' different reactions to apologizing with and with no felt transgression. Certain interesting relational dynamics emerged: Participants in the no felt transgression condition did not feel personal responsibility for the incident or perceived no harm caused,

TABLE 3 Study 1: Range of negative emotions expressed

Negative emotions expressed	Apologizing with *no felt* transgression	Apologizing *with* felt transgression
Angry	14 (17.07%)	0
Annoyed	19 (23.17%)	6 (13.95%)
Bad	11 (13.41%)	6 (13.95%)
Disappointed	4 (4.88%)	1 (2.33%)
Embarrassed	1 (1.22%)	7 (16.28%)
Guilty	0	16 (37.21%)
Misunderstood/ worried	4 (4.88%)	2 (4.65%)
Perception of other worsened	28 (34.15%)	4 (9.30%)
Unappreciated	1 (1.22%)	1 (2.33%)
Totals	82 (100%)	43 (100%)

Note: This table reflects data only from participants who expressed solely negative feelings ($N = 125$, 49.80% of the full sample).

but where mixed or neutral feelings were expressed, these were often in reference to recognizing that the incident was stressful or tense. Nonetheless, negative reactions were most common when apologizing with no felt transgression. In many cases, the participant's perception of the other person worsened, including feeling the other "was a cow," "immature,", "sensitive," or "petty and controlling." Fourteen participants expressed anger, frustration, irritation, resentment, and even animosity. Another participant admitted, "I try to avoid them as much as possible," and another pointed out, "I now don't rush to help if asked, now see him being lazy and petty for no reason."

3.4 | Study 1: Discussion

By randomly allocating participants to either the apologizing *with no felt transgression* or the apologizing *with felt transgression* condition, a diverse array of micro-narratives was collected that shed further light on apologies at the workplace. These inductive findings illustrated that the interpretation of a transgression can be ambiguous. Furthermore, the themes identified here are also in line with previous research on apology motives that classified self-blame, fear for punishment, personal expedience, and guilt reduction as common motives for apologies at the workplace (Mu & Bobocel, 2019). However, since the present study distinguished between apologizing with and with no felt transgression, some additional nuances emerged that build on these motives. For example, rather than feeling self-blame, some participants decided to *take on* the blame or responsibility. While fear of punishment did not emerge per se, participants did express a concern for doing the "right thing." Personal expedience, or wishing to maintain peace and move on, was the most frequently mentioned apology motive for those who felt no transgression. Finally, Study 1 also provided preliminary evidence that apologizing with no felt transgression may result in worsened affective outcomes and impede the reconciliation process.

TABLE 4 Study 1: Illustrative extracts of how participants felt about apologizing

Illustrative extracts	Apologizing with *no felt* transgression	Apologizing *with* felt transgression
Positive	They were my supervisor so I had a respectful relationship with them anyway. I wanted to get into their good books again so they'd think better of me.	I respected them more, they could of been very angry at what I did but they instead were understanding.
	I still believe I was in the right however having apologized I still maintain a good relationship with this person, so ultimately it was the right thing to do	I felt relieved, because I had done my best to clarify the situation (before perhaps a complaint was made against me).
Negative	I felt resentment and lost a lot of respect. The response to my apology was used as an opportunity to further berate me and claim I was unprofessional. It was incredibly patronizing and so I did not waste my time trying to help her in future.	I felt nervous that this lateness would be held against me during our rescheduled meeting.
	I felt angry as it was clear he just wanted to blame someone and that person was me.	I felt sorry for them and I felt a little upset that perhaps I had caused for some trust to have been broken between us.
Mixed positive & negative	I felt like I apologized for something that wasn't wrong but that it was reassuring for the other person	[I felt] a bit silly and embarrassed but better to apologize and not let it fester
	I was happy that the situation was over with if I'm honest. It was a very stressful event.	I felt better for being honest but still frustrated with myself that I had made the error in the first place.
Neutral/no change	I felt fine and hopefully the situation will not occur again.	[I felt] fine, we all knew it was just stress related and I had never done anything like this before
	[I felt] like we were on even ground, we both understood where the other was coming from	I felt the same as usual, we went back to our usual interaction. We are all human and will always make mistakes or interpretations that are incorrect.

Next, we ran an experimental scenario-based study to establish the causal relationship and to better control for the incident and the context of the apologizing behavior. In this study, we measured the specific affective mechanisms of guilt and anger, along with participants' restoration efforts towards the target of their apology as outcomes.

3.5 | Study 2: Method

3.5.1 | Participants and procedure

Overall, 200 full-time employees from MTurk participated in this study. Thirty-six participants were removed for failing the attention check designed for the scenario (described below), and in total, 164 responses were included in the final analysis (68 females, $M_{age} = 38.87$).

Participants read a workplace scenario where they took responsibility for another colleague's mistake by apologizing—a commonly mentioned type of incident of apologizing with no felt transgression in our Study 1 data—and were randomly assigned to one of two conditions: *felt transgression* versus *no felt transgression* (see Appendix A for the full description of the scenarios). According to the scenario, wrong department numbers had been presented at a full-day office offsite meeting. Tensions arose the next day in the office as team members discussed that presenting the wrong numbers had reflected poorly on the department and told the participant that they had made a mistake in presenting those numbers. Next, in the no felt transgression condition, the participants read that they felt they had *done nothing wrong* because it was *another colleague* that had presented those numbers but apologized anyways to the team by saying sorry. The participants in the felt transgression condition instead read that they felt that they had *made a mistake* as *they were the ones* to present the wrong numbers and thereby apologized to the team by saying sorry. As an attention check, all participants responded to whether they made a mistake by presenting the wrong numbers, and 36 participants were removed for failing this question in the corresponding condition (e.g., those who believed they were the one who made a mistake with presenting wrong numbers in the no felt transgression condition). After reading this scenario, participants responded to our measures, followed by questions about their demographic information.

3.5.2 | Measures

Manipulation check

One item assessed the participant's perceived transgression: "According to this scenario, I feel that I had made a mistake at the offsite," rated from 1 = *strongly disagree* to 5 = *strongly agree.*

Relationship restoration effort

We used five items from the Transgression Appeasement and Reconciliation Checklist developed by Tabak et al. (2012) that are common conciliatory gestures from a transgressor (see also Zheng & van Dijke, 2020). The original checklist contains 19 items, and we selected

five items based on face validity considering the vignette. Participants indicated how likely they are going to conduct the following behaviors to their colleagues: "show concern for their condition," "show concern for the relationship," "offer them a gift or a favor," "ask for forgiveness," and "assured them that you are trustworthy" after apologizing, rated from 1 = *extremely unlikely* to 5 = *extremely likely* ($\alpha = .62$).

Guilt

Previous literature suggested that feelings of guilt are often accompanied with regret and self-blaming (Zeelenberg & Breugelmans, 2008). Therefore, participants responded to how they would feel towards their team members on three items: guilty, self-blame and regret from 1 = *not at all* to 5 = *extremely* ($\alpha = .87$).

Anger

Following Yip and Schweitzer (2019), we used three items to assess anger. Participants responded to how they would feel towards their colleagues on three items: angry, annoyed, and irritated from 1 = *not at all* to 5 = *extremely* ($\alpha = .92$).

3.6 | Study 2: Results

Table 5 demonstrates summary statistics, correlations, and reliabilities across all variables.

3.6.1 | Manipulation check

An independent-sample *t* test was used to assess whether the manipulation of the different conditions was successful. Participants in the felt transgression condition ($M = 3.87$, $SD = 1.25$) significantly agreed more that they had made a mistake at the offsite meeting than participants in the no felt transgression condition ($M = 2.05$, $SD = 1.37$), $t(162) = 8.78$, $p < .001$, $d = 1.39$.

3.6.2 | Guilt, anger, and restoration efforts

Independent-sample *t* tests were used to assess the difference between the two conditions for guilt, anger, and restoration efforts. Participants in the no felt transgression condition showed significantly less guilt ($M = 2.14$, $SD = 1.11$) than participants in the felt transgression condition ($M = 3.63$, $SD = 0.90$), $t(162) = -9.06$, $p < .001$, $d = 1.47$. Participants in the no felt transgression condition also showed significantly more anger ($M = 3.24$, $SD = 1.06$) than participants in the felt transgression condition ($M = 2.66$, $SD = 1.36$), $t(162) = 3.07$, $p = .004$, $d = 0.48$.

Importantly, participants in the no felt transgression condition showed significantly lower restoration efforts ($M = 3.28$, $SD = 0.82$) than participants in the felt transgression condition ($M = 3.90$, $SD = 0.52$), $t(162) = -5.42$, $p < .001$, $d = 0.90$.

3.6.3 | Mediation

A mediation analysis was conducted using the PROCESS Macro (Hayes, 2013), Model 4. We calculated the 95% bootstrap confidence interval based on 5,000 iterations with anger and guilt as simultaneous mediators. The no felt transgression condition was coded as 1 and the felt transgression condition as 0. There was a significant correlation between no felt transgression and the two emotions (guilt: $b = -1.49$, $se = 0.16$, $p < .001$; anger: $b = 0.58$, $se = 0.20$, $p = .004$), supporting H1a and H1b. Next, both emotions significantly predicted restoration efforts (guilt: $b = 0.26$, $se = 0.05$, $p < .001$; anger: $b = -0.13$, $se = 0.04$, $p = .001$). In addition, the indirect effect of the two emotions was significant (guilt: $b = -0.38$, $se = 0.09$, 95%*CI* [−0.56, −0.22]; anger: $b = -0.07$, $se = 0.04$, 95%*CI*[−0.16, −0.01]), supporting H2a and H2b.

3.7 | Study 2: Discussion

Study 2 provided support for our proposed effect of apologizing with no felt transgression (vis-à-vis apologizing with felt transgression) on apologizer's reduced restoration efforts and demonstrated the mediation effects of guilt and anger. However, there are several limitations in Studies 1 and 2: First, both studies are experimental designs where participants were randomly assigned to one condition; therefore, the results provided limited insights regarding the frequency of apologizing with no felt transgression at the workplace; second, contextual influences (i.e., avoidant conflict cultures) have yet to be explored. Study 3 addressed these limitations by adopting a critical incident technique to account for a potentially wide variety of incidents

TABLE 5 Study 2: Correlations and descriptive statistics

Variable	Mean	SD	1	2	3	4
1. Felt transgression manipulation	3.15	1.58				
2. Guilt	3.04	1.22	0.51***	(.87)		
3. Anger	2.89	1.28	−0.31***	0.02	(.92)	
4. Restoration efforts	3.65	0.72	0.31***	0.50***	−0.24**	(.62)

Note: $n = 164$. A higher score on felt transgression manipulation indicates higher perception of transgression. Coefficient alpha reliabilities are reported on the main diagonal in parentheses.
$p < .01$.*$p < .001$.

(Heng & Fehr, 2022) where participants freely recalled the last time they apologized at the workplace, along with their self-identified felt transgression, emotional reactions, restoration efforts, and the conflict culture in their organization.

3.8 | Study 3: Method

3.8.1 | Participants and procedure

Via the online platform Prolific, 200 participants were invited to participate in this study. While Study 1 randomly allocated participants to reflect on apologizing with felt transgression versus with no felt transgression, Study 3 aimed to better understand apologies at the workplace by allowing participants to freely write about the last time they apologized to someone (e.g., coworker, leader, and subordinate) at the workplace, regardless of whether it was their fault for causing this event. In line with previous research (Basford et al., 2014; Heng & Fehr, 2022; Mu & Bobocel, 2019; Zheng et al., 2016; Zheng & van Dijke, 2020), we utilized the critical incident technique (Flanagan, 1954) to inductively analyze and gather contextual details concerning the workplace apology. The instructions read as below.

Please recall and write about the last time you apologized to someone (e.g., your coworker, leader, and subordinate) at the workplace, regardless of whether it was your fault for causing this event or not. Please describe the situation with as many details as possible. In your description, please take a first-person perspective (e.g., "I apologized to …"), and try to be as clear as possible, so that somebody who was not there could understand what you did.

Participants then responded to measures such as felt transgression and their organizational conflict cultures, and they were also asked to write down the initials of the victim's name, which was then piped into the measure of restoration efforts. After responding to all the questions and measures of the critical incident study and before providing their demographics, participants were asked to indicate what percentage (0–100%) of their apologies at the workplace were given with the feeling that they did not do anything wrong. This question was included to gauge the prevalence of apologizing with no felt transgression at the workplace, and participants read the following instructions.

Overall, what percentage (0–100%) of your apologies at the workplace, in your opinion, are done with the feeling that you did not do anything wrong? Type in the percentage number between 0 and 100 without the "%" sign.

As a content check, the incidents that participants described as the last time they apologized were manually corroborated during the qualitative coding to ensure participants were recalling instances in which they apologized to someone in the workplace. Among these 200 participants, 13 participants self-identified the victim as outsiders of the organization (e.g., family members) and were thus removed from the analysis. The final sample contained 187 participants (146 females, $M_{age} = 32.01$). They had an average tenure of 12.40 years, with 61% having no less than 10 years of working experience. All participants had at least 1 year of tenure, which confirmed they were working professionals. They came from different industries, with 56.85% working in services, 11.17% in retail trade, 10.15% in public administration, 9.64% in finance, insurance, and real estate, and 6.60% in transportation, communications, electric, gas, and sanitary services.

3.8.2 | Measures

Felt transgression

According to our theorizing and the results from Study 1, an apologizer might feel no transgression because they perceive minimum harm or because they believe they were not responsible for the adverse event. We therefore used three items to capture felt transgression. Participants responded to what extent they agree that "I felt fully responsible for causing this incident," "I felt it was my fault for causing this incident," and "I caused harm in this incident" from 1 = *strongly disagree* to 6 = *strongly agree* ($\alpha = .70$).

Guilt

Participants indicated how guilty they felt after apologizing using the same items as in Study 2, from 1 = *none at all* to 5 = *a great deal* ($\alpha = .89$).

Anger

Participants indicated how angry they felt after apologizing using the same items as in Study 2, from 1 = *none at all* to 5 = *a great deal* ($\alpha = .87$).

Restoration efforts

We used the same items from Study 2 from 1 = *never* to 5 = *always* ($\alpha = .77$).

Avoidant conflict cultures

We adapted three items developed by Gelfand et al. (2012) to assess avoidant conflict cultures. The original items were used to assess leaders' conflict management styles, and we adapted the items to measure the shared norm of how organizational members address conflicts: "at my workplace, we will not discuss issues that may lead to conflict," "at my workplace, we will cut off discussion as soon as conflicts arise," and "at my workplace, we will avoid getting involved in conflicts" from 1 = *strongly disagree* to 5 = *strongly agree* ($\alpha = .80$).

Controls

Following the recommendation from Bernerth and Aguinis (2016), we controlled for several factors that might influence the relationship between apologizing with no felt transgression and restoration efforts. First, we controlled for gender, as studies have found that males are less likely to apologize (e.g., Schumann & Ross, 2010). Second, we controlled for relational closeness between the participants and the victim, as individuals are more likely to reconcile with a close other (Riek, 2010). Relational closeness was measured by the Inclusion of Other in the Self (IOS) Scale from Aron and Fraley (1999) such that participants selected one picture that best described their relationship with the victim.

Lastly, we controlled for victim power, as employees might reduce their restoration efforts towards a victim with more power (e.g., Zheng & van Dijke, 2020). Following Aquino et al. (2006), we assessed structural power and let participants self-identify whether the victim was as a supervisor/manager/administrator (categorized as high power), a peer (categorized as equal power), or a subordinate (categorized as low power). Participants who reported the victim as "other" were asked to specify whom this person was. Two independent coders classified participants who indicated "other" ($n = 11$) into one of the categories based on their description. There was no disagreement in terms of classification.

3.9 | Study 3: Results

Table 6 demonstrates summary statistics, correlations, and reliabilities across all variables. The average rating on the felt transgression scale was 3.33 ($SD = 1.19$). For the text analyses, we categorized those with a rating of 3 or less on the felt transgression scale as *low* felt transgression and those with more than 3 as *high* felt transgression. A wide range of incidents of apologizing were mentioned, and 110 participants (59%) reported feeling high felt transgression while 77 participants (41%) reported low felt transgression. Among those who reported they had apologized with high felt transgression, the majority recalled making a mistake in a work task (56.36%; e.g., "I accidently send some confidential information to one of our customers"). Participants who reported low felt transgression described increasing others' workloads (20.78%; e.g., "I apologized to the team I work with for the amount of work I had been asked to get them to do in a short time"), being late or slow to complete a task (12.99%; e.g., "I apologized for my delayed response to an important email due to an event taking place"), and being the bearer of bad news or something outside of their control (11.69%; e.g., "I apologized to a colleague when I found out somebody had been given a promotion instead of them"). Interestingly, 11.69% of participants who reported low feelings of transgression described instances in which they made some sort of mistake (e.g., "I apologized to a colleague for not completing a referral to a provision correctly"), which provides further evidence of apologizers' distinct potential motives (Mu & Bobocel, 2019).

In addition, among 187 responses, 45% of the participants recalled apologizing to a victim with higher power, 37% recalled apologizing to a victim with equal power, and 18% recalled apologizing to a victim with lower power. In the cases where participants felt low levels of transgression, 39% apologized to a victim with higher power, 39% apologized to a victim with equal power, and 22% apologized to a victim with lower power.[1]

Lastly, when participants were asked to estimate what percentage of their apologies in the workplace were offered without felt transgression, the overall average was 48%. More specifically, 58% of the participants indicated that at least half of their workplace apologies were offered with no felt transgression, and only 7% of our participants believed they had never offered an apology with no felt transgression. In sum, these statistics further supported that apologizing with no felt transgression at the workplace is a relatively common experience across individuals.

3.9.1 | Confirmatory factor analysis

The results of a confirmatory factor analyses (CFA) using RStudio (package "lavaan") suggested that the 5-factor model (i.e., felt transgression, restoration efforts, guilt, anger and avoidant conflict culture) demonstrated the best fit to the data ($\chi^2[109] = 189.04$; CFI = .95; TLI = .94; RMSEA = .06), which is significantly better than alternative models, such as the 4-factor model combining guilt and anger as one factor ($\chi^2[113] = 593.09$; CFI = .69; TLI = .63; RMSEA = .15, $\Delta\chi^2[4] = 404.05$; $p < .001$), the 4-factor model combing felt transgression and restoration efforts as one factor ($\chi^2[113] = 441.44$; CFI = .79; TLI = .75; RMSEA = .13, $\Delta\chi^2[4] = 252.04$; $p < .001$), the 4-factor model combing restoration efforts and conflict culture as one factor ($\chi^2[113] = 388.67$; CFI = .82; TLI = .79; RMSEA = .11, $\Delta\chi^2[4] = 199.63$; $p < .001$), or the 3-factor model combining felt transgression, restoration efforts and conflict culture as one factor ($\chi^2[116] = 640.69$; CFI = .66; TLI = .60; RMSEA = .16, $\Delta\chi^2[7] = 451.65$;

TABLE 6 Study 3: Correlations and descriptive statistics

	M	Mean	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8
1. Gender	0.22	0.41								
2. Closeness	3.75	1.76	−0.05							
3. Power	2.29	0.74	0.00	0.12						
4. Felt transgression	3.33	1.19	0.10	0.13	0.13	(.70)				
5. Guilt	2.45	1.21	−0.02	0.13	0.18*	0.40***	(.89)			
6. Anger	1.45	0.83	−0.01	−0.15*	0.01	−0.18*	0.08	(.87)		
7. Restoration efforts	2.14	0.91	−0.06	0.07	−0.17*	0.23**	0.44***	−0.10	(.77)	
8. Avoidant culture	2.48	0.99	0.04	−0.02	−0.06	0.01	0.02	0.20**	−0.06	(.80)

Note: $n = 187$. Gender was coded 0 for *female* and 1 for *male*. Power was coded 1 for *low power*, 2 for *equal power*, and 3 for *high power*. Coefficient alpha reliabilities are reported on the main diagonal in parentheses.
*$p < .05$.**$p < .01$.***$p < .001$.

$p < .001$). Last, the 5-factor model also demonstrated better fit than the 1-factor model, ($\chi^2[119] = 1149.42$; CFI = .34; TLI = .24; RMSEA = .22, $\Delta\chi^2[10] = 960.38$; $p < .001$).

3.9.2 | Hypotheses testing

To test our hypotheses and for ease of interpretation, the ratings on felt transgression were reverse-coded and averaged such that a higher score means higher perceptions of no felt transgression. Our results did not change regardless of whether we included control variables. Below we report the analysis with the control variables. Table 7 depicts the regression results conducted to test our hypotheses. The results revealed that no felt transgression was negatively related to guilt ($b = -0.38$, $se = 0.07$, $p < .001$; see Model 1 in Table 7) and positively related to anger ($b = 0.12$, $se = 0.05$, $p = .03$; see Model 2 in Table 7), supporting H1a and H1b. Next, guilt was significantly positively related to restoration efforts ($b = 0.36$, $se = 0.05$, $p < .001$) while anger was marginally negatively related to restoration efforts ($b = -0.14$, $se = 0.07$, $p = .06$). To assess the mediation effect, we employed the SPSS PROCESS Macro (Hayes, 2013) using a bootstrapping procedure (with 5,000 resamples). The analysis revealed a significant indirect effect of guilt ($b = -0.14$, $se = 0.03$, 95%*CI* [−0.20, −0.08]) while the indirect effect of anger included zero ($b = -0.02$, $se = 0.01$, 95%*CI* [−0.041, 0.002]), supporting H2a but not H2b.

H3a and H4a predicted that avoidant conflict cultures will moderate the relationship between guilt and restoration efforts, as well as the mediation effect. The result showed that the interaction term (see Model 3 in Table 7) of guilt and avoidant conflict culture was marginally significant ($b = 0.09$, $se = 0.05$, $p = .07$), and the index of the moderated mediation (Hayes, 2015) excluded zero ($b = -0.03$, $se = 0.02$, 95% *CI* [−0.077, −0.001]), supporting H4a and H4b. Figure 2 shows the simple slopes of restoration efforts at ±1 SD of avoidant conflict cultures. The relationship between guilt and restoration efforts was stronger when avoidant conflict culture was high ($b = 0.47$, $se = 0.08$, $p < .001$) as opposed to low avoidant conflict culture ($b = 0.26$, $se = 0.08$, $p = .001$).

H3b and H4b predicted that avoidant conflict cultures will moderate the relationship between anger and restoration efforts, as well as the mediation effect. The result from the SPSS PROCESS Macro with 5,000 bootstrap samples showed that the interaction term (see Model 3 in Table 7) of anger and avoidant conflict culture was not significant ($b = -0.07$, $se = 0.06$, $p = .23$). The index of the moderated mediation (Hayes, 2015) included zero ($b = -0.01$, $se = 0.01$, 95% CI [−0.026, 0.004]). Therefore, our results failed to support H3b and H4b.

3.10 | Study 3: Discussion

Study 3 replicated and expanded the results from Studies 1 and 2 in multiple ways: First, we demonstrated that apologizing with low levels of felt transgression is a ubiquitous phenomenon in real workplaces. In Study 3, 41% of participants felt low levels of transgression the last time they apologized to someone at work, and on average, participants reported that almost half of their workplace apologies were offered with no feelings of transgression. Moreover, similar apology incidents emerged across Studies 1 and 3, such that apologizing with low felt transgression at the workplace was often related to instances beyond the participant's control, inconveniencing others, or not following a social norm. Once again, personal expedience was a commonly identified motive, but these findings

TABLE 7 OLS regression results of study 3

	Outcome: guilt (Model 1)		Outcome: anger (Model 2)		Outcome: restoration efforts (Model 3)	
Predictor	***b***	***Se***	***b***	***se***	***b***	***se***
Constant	3.26***	0.44	1.15***	0.32	2.75***	0.55
Gender	−0.16	0.20	−0.00	0.15	−0.11	0.14
Closeness	0.05	0.05	−0.07†	0.03	0.00	0.03
Power	0.21†	0.11	0.05	0.08	−0.33***	0.08
NFT	−0.40***	0.07	0.12*	0.05	−0.05	0.05
Guilt					0.14	0.13
Anger					0.07	0.19
AC					−0.15	0.16
Guilt ×AC					0.09†	0.05
Anger ×AC					−0.07	0.06
R^2	0.18***		0.05*		0.31***	

Note: $n = 187$. Gender was coded 0 for *female* and 1 for *male*. Power was coded 1 for *low power*, 2 for *equal power*, and 3 for *high power*. NFT was calculated by reserve-coding and averaging the ratings of felt transgression.
Abbreviations: AC, avoidant culture; NFT, no felt transgression.
†$p < .10$.
*$p < .05$.**$p < .01$.***$p < .001$.

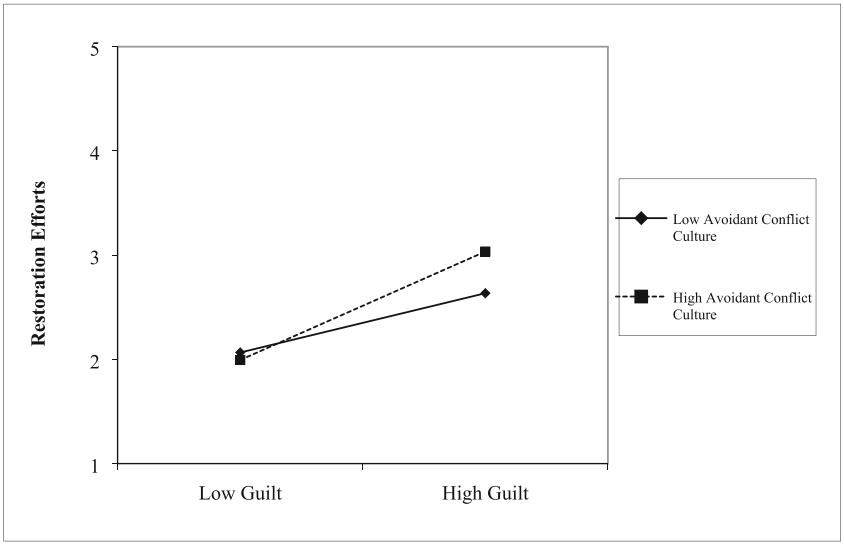

FIGURE 2 Study 3: Interaction between guilt and avoidant conflict culture on apologizer's restoration efforts

also add to previous research on apology motives (Mu & Bobocel, 2019) by showing that guilt reduction motives can be expressed as a broader awareness that others had a negative experience, yet these motives are not tied to personal feelings of transgression. Since participants drew on their most recent apology and reflected on their apologies at the workplace more broadly, these findings shed light on how prevalent such behavior can be in organizations. Second, we investigated the role of organizational conflict culture, and our results showed that avoidant conflict cultures strengthened the relationship between guilt and restoration efforts. However, in the current study, the mediation effect was not significant for anger. Notably, female participants constituted a large proportion of the whole sample in this study, yet controlling for participant gender did not yield a significant effect on the variables of interests. Moreover, the critical incident technique is still limited by participants' ability to recall a workplace apology, and we cannot rule out the possibility that only certain types of apologies tend to be recalled. Nonetheless, the critical incident technique permitted participants to tap into a possibly broader range of workplace apology incidents, which was important for better understanding the nature and prevalence of apologizing with low felt transgression at the workplace.

4 | GENERAL DISCUSSION

In the current research, we investigate a ubiquitous phenomenon at the workplace: when employees apologize without feeling that they have transgressed. Previous studies on apology and reconciliation have not considered that there could be disagreement regarding the existence of a transgression, and there is little prior research examining outcomes when there is ambiguity regarding the occurrence of a transgression in the first place (for an exception, see Adams et al., 2015). Using a mixed-method design, we investigate the nature and the prevalence of apologizing with no felt transgression at the workplace, demonstrate its related affective and reconciliation outcomes from the apologizer's perspective, and illustrate the role of organizational conflict cultures in influencing employees' restoration efforts upon apologizing with no felt transgression.

4.1 | Theoretical contributions

This study contributes to the literature in several ways. We provide the first investigation of workplace apologies when employees do not perceive any wrongdoing. When examining the effect of an apology on reconciliation outcomes, the extant literature is largely based on one critical assumption that the apologizer recognizes their personal responsibility or the harm caused. However, interpersonal transgressions and employees' motives of apologizing at work are complex and ambiguous in nature. Accordingly, the current research advances scholarly understanding of workplace apologizing behavior by demonstrating that employees can often find themselves apologizing with no felt transgression. Our work can thus enhance future theories on apologies and reconciliation by highlighting this under-studied context.

We also contribute to the apology literature by delineating one critical boundary condition that makes an apology less effective in restoring interpersonal relationships. Past research has identified various factors that make victims more likely to accept an apology (e.g., Fehr & Gelfand, 2010; Santelli et al., 2009; Utikal & Fischbacher, 2010), yet there is limited knowledge concerning when offering an apology helps to enhance the relationship from the apologizer's perspective. By adopting an apologizer-centric approach, our work directly answers the call to investigate apologizer-specific antecedents in shaping the reconciliation process (e.g., Mu & Bobocel, 2019) and examines how no felt transgression can yield negative reconciliation outcomes for the relationship.

Furthermore, by examining the affective outcomes of guilt and anger, this work enriches ATF by showing how specific emotions might stimulate or inhibit the apologizer's commitment to relationship

repairment. Prior research has demonstrated that apologizing can engender mixed feelings in the apologizer (e.g., Exline et al., 2007; Zaiser & Giner-Sorolla, 2013; Zechmeister et al., 2004), yet less is known about why this occurs and how it influences the apologizer's downstream behaviors upon feeling these emotions. Given that reconciliation is ultimately a process that requires efforts from both parties, exploring how emotions affect apologizer restoration efforts offers new insights to the research on interpersonal relationships at the workplace (e.g., Ashkanasy & Dorris, 2017; Clark et al., 2019; Ganegoda & Bordia, 2019).

Finally, our work investigates the role of organizational conflict cultures in shaping the reconciliation process among organizational members. Conflict is a fundamental aspect of organizational life (e.g., Argyris, 1971; Walton et al., 1969), and organizations develop distinct norms for conflict management (Gelfand et al., 2012). While organizational conflict cultures have been shown to influence employee well-being and organizational performance (e.g., Chen et al., 2005; Choi, 2013; DeChurch & Marks, 2001; Gelfand et al., 2012; Way et al., 2016), surprisingly little research has been devoted to directly examining how conflict cultures might impact the reconciliation process. In the current work, we found that under an avoidant conflict culture, guilty apologizers were more likely to increase their restoration efforts towards the victim for relational harmony.

4.2 | Practical implications

The finding that apologizing with no felt transgression (vis-à-vis apologizing with felt transgression) engenders negative affective outcomes and impedes reconciliation processes offers practical implications for managers who aim to cultivate peaceful and harmonious employee relationships. Given the importance of relational reconciliation after conflicts, caution needs to be exercised by managers who intervene in conflicts between employees. Our results suggest that apologizing cannot be used as a solution for all conflicts, because the apologizer's reaction is dependent on their perception of the transgression in the first place. Therefore, when dealing with a workplace conflict, managers might need to clarify whether a transgression indeed happened, and whether the "transgressor" recognizes their responsibility before requesting an apology in a non-threatening way.

In addition, although peaceful relationships might be desirable for organizations, managers also need to differentiate between superficial harmony and real harmony (e.g., Zhang & Wei, 2017). For example, an apologizer in conflict avoidant organizational cultures might engage in restoration behaviors to maintain superficial harmony, yet essentially the conflict is not solved and the relationship is not reconciled; only if an apologizer truly desires to repair the relationship, workplace harmony can be achieved under a culture that advocates for peaceful relationships. Therefore, to effectively manage conflicts, managers might need to emphasize the importance of harmony but at the same time encourage open discussion. Under such conditions, apology is less likely to engender feelings of injustice and resentment.

4.3 | Limitations and future directions

Since there is not much existing research on apologizing with no felt transgression, our work has limitations that open possibilities for future research. First, our studies yield inconsistent results on the effect of anger: while anger was significantly related to the likelihood of restoration efforts in the experimental design of Study 2, it was not associated with the frequency of the restoration efforts when participants recalled an actual instance of apologizing. One possible reason is that time plays an important role in influencing the effect of anger on reconciliation. For example, Fischer and Roseman (2007) found that anger is characterized by short-term attack responses but long-term reconciliation. Indeed, there are multiple ways to release anger without hurting other people (e.g., Fitzgibbons, 1986), and anger might only prompt avoidance tendencies in the short term. That said, it would be interesting for future research to study these longitudinal and complex effects of anger on reconciliation outcomes.

Relatedly, there are other possible emotions that could result from apologizing with no felt transgression. In Study 1, we observed various responses from apologizing with no felt transgression, such as worsened perceptions of the victim, which can be related to feelings of empathy (e.g., Clark et al., 2019). Indeed, empathy often results from observing others' suffering (e.g., Fultz et al., 1988; Stellar et al., 2019), and we would expect apologizers' levels of empathy to also reduce when they believe they have caused no harm (i.e., no felt transgression). Therefore, future research might extend our work by mapping out other affective mechanisms that link apologizing behavior with reconciliation outcomes.

Second, there are possible variables that may moderate the effect of apologizing with no felt transgression on reconciliation outcomes. While we only focused on avoidant conflict culture as it is highly related to relational harmony, there are reasons to expect that dominating conflict cultures and collaborative conflict cultures may also play a role. Since organizational members are likely to seek competition and victory in conflicts in dominating conflict cultures (Gelfand et al., 2012), we would expect employees to engage in fewer restoration efforts and engage in more retaliation or revenge when they apologize with no felt transgression. The effect of apologizing with no felt transgression on behaviors such as retaliation or revenge efforts might be driven by individuals wanting to restore their perceived sense of power (Aquino et al., 2006). As such, research investigating dominating conflict cultures could also consider alternative behavioral outcomes and underlying mechanisms than the ones we have discussed. On the other hand, in collaborative conflict cultures, organizational members tend to engage in joint problem-solving and cooperative discussions of conflict (Gelfand et al., 2012); therefore, employees who apologize with no felt transgression might do so in the context of collective constructive dialog and potentially deem any additional steps of restoration unnecessary. Therefore, future research could investigate how apologizing with no felt transgression is incorporated into cooperative discussions of conflict and how cooperative discussions could potentially serve as interventions that minimize the negative effect of apologizing with no felt transgression.

Another closely related moderator is victim power. Previous literature has investigated how power and status influence the reconciliation processes (e.g., Walfisch et al., 2013; Zheng et al., 2016; Zheng & van Dijke, 2020). While these studies have mostly focused on structural power, power differences could also manifest among peers. For example, a co-worker may still hold more power over another employee because they have more valuable resources (e.g., Cobb, 1980). Therefore, power dynamics can exist even among peers, and it would be interesting for future research to explore whether and, if so, how structural power and interpersonal power affect the relationship between an apology with no felt transgression and reconciliation outcomes. Last, there are also cross-cultural differences in one's tendency to apologize (e.g., Guan et al., 2009), and employees under certain cultures might apologize more frequently with no felt transgression. In sum, more research will enrich our understanding of the phenomenon of apology with no felt transgression.

Regarding methods, we acknowledge that any single study in the current article might be insufficient to fully understand the phenomenon of apologizing with no felt transgression at the workplace. To be specific, Study 1 was explorative as it did not test any hypothesis directly, Study 2 did not measure or manipulate any contextual factors, and Study 3 treated the variable of perceived organizational conflict culture as an individual-level variable which could instead be measured at the aggregated level (e.g., Gelfand et al., 2012). In addition, although the critical incident technique has demonstrated advantages for accounting for a wide variety of instances (Heng & Fehr, 2022) and eliciting rich contextual details (Carnevale et al., 2021), it is still based on participants' ability to recall the critical incident, and the possibility that only certain types of apologies with no felt transgression are recalled cannot be ruled out. However, it is also worth noting that congruent evidence for our main hypotheses was provided across these three studies that adopted different research methods. As such, we recommend readers consider all three studies in tandem when evaluating the construct of apologizing without felt transgression. Having said that, further research could elicit apologizing behavior in the moment with behavioral experiments and systematically compare a range of clearly defined apology incidents to gain a more comprehensive understanding of apologizing with no felt transgression. In sum, we encourage future research to leverage different methodologies that could further investigate this phenomenon and the impact of organizational conflict cultures.

Lastly, the operationalization of felt transgression might be further improved in future research. While Studies 1 and 2 utilized experimental designs to demonstrate the contrast between apologizing with and with no felt transgression, in Study 3, we provided a first attempt to measure apologizers' felt transgression at the workplace based on theoretical reasoning and the micro-narratives of Study 1. Nevertheless, based on the current paper, future research might further refine the measurement of apologizers' felt transgression.

5 | CONCLUSION

This research examined the phenomenon of apologizing with no felt transgression at the workplace. Using a mixed-method design, we illustrate when, why, and how frequently such apologizing behaviors occur at the workplace. In addition, we examine two affective mechanisms (i.e., guilt and anger) in linking apologizing with no felt transgression with the apologizer's restoration efforts and explore the role of organizational conflict cultures. We find that apologizers may not agree that a transgression has occurred, and apologizing with no felt transgression can worsen, rather than reconcile, interpersonal relationships. With these findings, we hope to provide a richer understanding of workplace apologizing behavior.

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CONFLICT OF INTEREST

All authors declare that they have no conflict of interest.

ETHICS STATEMENT

All procedures performed in studies involving human participants were in accordance with the ethical standards of the institutional and/or national research committee and with the 1964 Helsinki declaration and its later amendments or comparable ethical standards. Informed consent was obtained from all individual participants included in the study.

DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

The data that support the findings of this study will be available upon request

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ENDNOTE

[1] A larger (smaller) proportion of participants in Study 3 indicated apologizing to superiors (coworkers) than in Study 1. This could emerge from the difference in instructions provided to the participants in the two studies. In Study 3, participants were explicitly asked to recall their *most recent* apology made to someone in the workplace (e.g., *coworker*, *leader*, *subordinate*, etc.) while in Study 1, participants were asked to recall an apology made to a colleague or coworker.

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APPENDIX A

A.1 | Scenarios in Study 2

No felt transgression condition (manipulations in bold for emphasis):

Please imagine yourself in the following scenario:

Imagine that you went for a full-day office offsite where all departments came together to brainstorm the future of their teams. As part of the activities, members from different departments were called upon to present their departments' progress this year. **One of your colleagues articulated your departments progress***.

Next day, when you went to office the situation felt tense. Your team members were discussing how the numbers that were presented were wrong and that this had put the department in poor light. They told you that you had made the mistake in presenting those numbers. **You felt you had done nothing wrong because it was your colleague who had presented those numbers****.

You apologized to your team by saying sorry.

Felt transgression condition (replace phrases above in bold with):

*You articulated your department's progress.

**You felt you made a mistake by presenting those numbers.