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Say You're Sorry: How Apology Demands Undermine Reconciliation by Threatening Transgressors' Power

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ABSTRACT

Apologies are widely regarded as a crucial step in reconciliation, yet they are not always offered voluntarily. When transgressors do not apologize, victims may demand an apology to restore their sense of power. In this research, across four studies (total $N = 869$) we investigate how transgressors react when faced with a solicited apology. We propose that being explicitly asked to apologize decreases transgressors' feelings of power and increases transgressors' anger towards victims, ultimately leading to increased avoidance of victims. The pilot study and Study 1, utilizing a micro-narrative approach, suggested that while victims feel better after soliciting an apology, transgressors feel worse and seek to avoid the victim. In Study 2, using an experimental design, we found support for our full proposed model—transgressors have increased intentions to avoid the victim after being asked to apologize, mediated by the feeling of less power, but more anger. Study 3 replicated the significant serial mediation, this time using a dictator game design in which the real-time behavioral reactions of participants were examined. In Study 4, we tested whether transgression responsibility represents a boundary condition for the proposed serial mediation process. Together, these findings challenge the prevailing assumptions about the positive role of apologies and reveal a paradox: soliciting apologies may undermine the very reconciliation it aims to achieve, particularly when responsibility is ambiguous, contested, or not fully acknowledged by the transgressor.

Interpersonal transgressions, violations of social norms that cause harm, disrupt relationships and trigger a cascade of responses aimed at restoring justice and equilibrium. (Heider 1958; Miller 2001; Murphy and Hampton 1988; Vidmar and Miller 1980). Specifically, the primary psychological need for victims' post-conflict is to address their threatened sense of power—an essential requirement for reconciliation (Shnabel and Nadler 2008). Research has consistently demonstrated the effectiveness of apologies in conflict resolution (Fehr et al. 2010; Utikal and Fischbacher 2010). Offering apologies not only enhances victim forgiveness and facilitates reconciliation between the two parties (e.g., Wallace et al. 2008; Kelln and Ellard 1999) but also addresses the victim's compromised sense of power by empowering them to accept or decline the apology (Petrucci 2002; Shnabel and Nadler 2015).

Nonetheless, a pertinent question emerges when we consider scenarios where an apology is not immediately extended. Is an apology ever demanded? While we are living in a second “age of apology” (e.g., Brooks 1999; Gibney 2008) in which apologizing has become the norm, it also means that receiving an apology has become an expectation, highlighting the likelihood that apologies can be explicitly demanded. This is also supported by the public media – in 2022 Forbes published 110 articles on apologies and *The New York Times* published 560 articles about apologies. A large majority of these articles center around public apologies made by companies and public figures, often-times in response to explicit public demands for apologies. In support of this trend, opinion pieces have appeared in publications like the *New York Times* offering advice on “How to Get

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Someone to Apologize” (Shapiro 2021). Scholars have also demonstrated that apologies at the workplace are frequently given by individuals even when they do not feel they have actually transgressed (Li et al. 2023). This increased norm of apologizing has led to victims questioning the perceived sincerity of apologies (Okimoto et al. 2015). Yet what happens when apologies are not offered freely, but demanded? Although apology demands are increasingly visible in public and professional life, little is known about their psychological consequences, particularly for those asked to apologize. We argue that apology demands shift inaction into moral refusal, creating a perceived loss of autonomy that can backfire on reconciliation.

In the present manuscript, we document the apology-solicitation phenomenon in workplace contexts and examine its subsequent implications for the post-interpersonal conflict reconciliation process. We do not argue that all apology solicitations undermine reconciliation. Instead, we propose that apology solicitations are particularly likely to backfire when transgression is ambiguous, contested, or not fully acknowledged by the transgressor. This is especially important given that ambiguity about felt transgression responsibility in workplace contexts is frequent. Indeed, in a recent study, 41% of participants reported that they felt low transgression responsibility the last time they apologized, and participants estimated that, on average, nearly half (48%) of their workplace apologies occurred without feeling they had done anything wrong (Li et al. 2023). Converging evidence further suggests that apologies frequently occur in the absence of clear self-blame (Mu and Bobocel 2019). Overall, our inquiry also gains particular relevance in light of the growing pressure on organizations to cultivate and sustain peaceful work environments (Sull et al. 2022).

Our research contributes to the conflict resolution and power literature in several ways. First, while scholars have researched apologies that were coerced by third parties (Risen and Gilovich 2007; Jehle et al. 2012), we are the first, to our knowledge, to systematically examine the interpersonal act of victims directly soliciting apologies from their transgressors, an increasingly common but understudied phenomenon in workplace settings. Second, we identify a novel psychological mechanism, perceived loss of power, that helps explain why soliciting an apology can paradoxically backfire. Specifically, rather than promoting reconciliation, being asked to apologize can trigger power threats in transgressors, leading to anger and avoidance toward the victim. This finding complicates the dominant view of apologies as uniformly constructive and reveals a dark side of apology norms. Third, we extend the emerging literature on the downstream consequences of post-transgression responses by focusing on the transgressor’s perspective - a perspective that remains underexplored (Gollwitzer and Okimoto 2021). By uncovering how a well-intentioned social act can provoke defensive withdrawal, our research opens new avenues for understanding conflict escalation and failed reconciliation in organizational life.

1 | The Desire for Apologies

To grasp how transgressors react when faced with a solicited apology, it is essential to examine the reasons underlying such

solicitations. Scholars have put forth a needs-based model of reconciliation elucidating the responses of both victims and transgressors post-conflict (Shnabel and Nadler 2008). This model draws from the “Big Two” dimensions of judgment: power and the moral-social dimension (Abele and Wojciszke 2013). The model posits that, following a conflict, both victims and transgressors experience psychological needs that must be met to restore the relationship. Victims primarily seek to reclaim their threatened sense of power, namely traits such as their strength, competence and influence, while transgressors strive to repair their tarnished moral image and secure acceptance, namely traits such as morality, warmth and trustworthiness (SimanTov-Nachlieli et al. 2013; Shnabel and Nadler 2015).

The apology-forgiveness cycle is viewed as a potent exchange to address these needs of empowerment and acceptance and in turn to facilitate reconciliation. When transgressors apologize, they effectively acknowledge wrongdoing (SimanTov-Nachlieli et al. 2013; Shnabel and Nadler 2015). In return, this acknowledgment can foster forgiveness from the victim (Fehr et al. 2010; Hodgins and Liebeskind 2003; Maio et al. 2008)—a gesture which can fulfill the transgressor’s need for acceptance and reduce the threat to their moral identity (Shnabel and Nadler 2015). Expressions of forgiveness not only reassure transgressors, but they also have been shown to empower victims—making the victims feel increased power, a greater value consensus with the offender, and ultimately a greater sense of justice (Wenzel and Okimoto 2010). Given these dynamics, it is hardly surprising that there is an increased desire for apologies (Okimoto et al. 2015).

Yet while apologies may serve victims’ needs for empowerment, they impose psychological and reputational costs on transgressors, which may shape how they respond when apologies are not voluntary. Apologizing is characterized as a mode of communication exchange in which image-based costs and benefits are balanced (Chaudhry and Loewenstein 2019). When apologizing, transgressors take on blame for the conflict (Chaudhry and Loewenstein 2019). This act may enhance their moral image, but it often comes at the cost of their perceived competence (Kim et al. 2006). This could explain why physicians, despite their patients’ desires, are sometimes reluctant to offer apologies (Gallagher et al. 2003). These dynamics also align with the observation that transgressors who refuse to apologize tend to experience an increase in self-esteem and a greater sense of power and control (Okimoto et al. 2013). Thus, transgressors may be hesitant to offer apologies post-conflict.

2 | How Do Transgressors React to Apology Demands?

The solicitation of an apology is a tool in the negotiation of power and blame in the aftermath of conflict. Similar to a negotiation over the sale price of a house in which the potential buyer can choose to negotiate an agreement with the seller or exit the negotiation and take an alternative option (e.g., buy a different house, stay in their current housing situation), transgressors interacting with victims post-conflict can choose to engage in this negotiation of power and blame, or choose an alternative option. Said another way, when not explicitly asked, transgressors may freely choose whether to apologize to victims

(i.e., negotiate) or not (i.e., exit the negotiation). Many things may dictate transgressors' willingness to apologize including the extent to which they believe their actions are to blame or the closeness of their relationship with the victim. In the parlance of negotiations research, the likelihood of an individual continuing to negotiate with a partner is strongly dictated by their best alternative to the negotiated agreement (BATNA), here, their best alternative to apologizing to the victim (Kim and Fragale 2005; Sebenius 2017). Strong alternatives are a source of power in negotiation contexts, and when an individual has strong alternative options, they are generally less incentivized to continue to negotiate with another when it does not offer a strong benefit. In the absence of a solicited apology, transgressors are likely to see *not* apologizing as a strong alternative to apologizing, giving transgressors a sense of power.

With this framework in mind, we suggest that when victims solicit apologies, transgressors' best alternatives (i.e., not apologizing) are effectively weakened, leading to decreased feelings of power. Post-conflict, transgressors face two choices. They may choose to grant the victim an apology, or they may choose not to do so. However, when a victim explicitly demands an apology, the transgressor's best alternative to giving an apology (i.e., choosing not to apologize) changes from being an act of omission, in which the transgressor does not do anything post-conflict, to an act of refusal, in which the transgressor rejects the victim's request. By soliciting an apology, victims take away transgressors' ability to do nothing post-conflict and force them to either consent or refuse to apologize. By shifting inaction to refusal, apology demands not only constrain behavior, but also recast silence as morally loaded (e.g., Shnabel and Nadler 2015; Wenzel and Okimoto 2010). The explicit refusal to apologize carries significant costs to a transgressors' moral image, as it suggests they are unwilling to take responsibility and thus undermines perceptions of their trustworthiness and commitment to shared relational norms (Shnabel and Nadler 2015). Therefore, when transgressors are asked to apologize, their best alternative to apologizing becomes worse; in effect, they lose negotiation power relative to the victim because their best alternative deteriorates (Lee and Tiedens 2001; Pinkley 1995; Thibaut and Gruder 1969). Although this shift occurs at the level of negotiation dynamics, we expect it to carry psychological consequences as well. Research suggests that losses in relative negotiation power are tied to subjective feelings of personal power (Pinkley 1995; Thibaut and Gruder 1969); that is, losing negotiation power can make individuals feel less powerful overall.

In the case of apology solicitation, feelings of powerlessness arise not from a change in general social standing, but from a specific threat to one's autonomy: the transgressor's response options are publicly constrained. Being asked to apologize turns what might have been a passive omission into an active moral decision—refusal. This forced choice dynamic may trigger reactance, a well-documented emotional response to perceived threats to freedom and control (Deng et al. 2018). In this way, apology demands function as subtle but potent acts of interpersonal dominance, challenging the transgressor's moral identity and agency. As a result, apology solicitations may be perceived not as reconciliatory gestures, but as interpersonal overreach—a form of moral accusation that implies the transgressor failed to take responsibility unprompted. In organizational settings, this can resemble other forms of mistreatment such as incivility or micromanagement,

both known to elicit anger and withdrawal (Booth et al. 2017; Domagalski and Steelman 2005). Thus, apology demands may trigger anger not despite their reconciliatory intent, but precisely because they are perceived as moral intrusions that undermine the transgressor's autonomy.

This anger is not merely a private emotion; it shapes how transgressors behave toward those who confront them. While anger is often associated with approach-oriented behaviors like confrontation, how it is expressed depends heavily on context. In professional or hierarchical settings, individuals who feel constrained may suppress direct expressions of anger and instead resort to indirect coping strategies, such as withdrawal or avoidance (Cortina and Magley 2009; Petkanopoulou et al. 2019; Tibubos et al. 2014). In these environments, overt displays of anger, especially when directed at a perceived victim, can breach organizational norms around emotional control and civility (Carver 2004; Carver and Harmon-Jones 2009). Consequently, avoidance becomes a strategically muted form of resistance: one that allows transgressors to regulate their emotional discomfort without violating workplace expectations (Booth et al. 2017; Geddes et al. 2020; Spencer and Rupp 2009). Thus, in the aftermath of apology solicitation, avoidance may serve as a socially permissible outlet for anger that cannot be openly expressed.

In summary, we propose that apology demands, though intended to promote reconciliation, may backfire. By reducing transgressors' sense of power, such demands elicit anger, which is managed through avoidance.

Formally:

Hypothesis 1. *Soliciting an apology from a transgressor increases the transgressors' intentions to avoid the victim.*

Hypothesis 2. *The effect of apology solicitation on victim avoidance is mediated by a sequential process: reduced felt power increases anger, which in turn promotes avoidance.*

3 | Scope of the Theoretical Model

In the present research, we specifically focus on apology solicitations in the workplace context because organizational relationships have structural and psychological features that are likely to shape how transgressors interpret and respond to being asked to apologize. First of all, the increased concern for impression management at the workplace can provide strong reasons for individuals to refrain from apologizing voluntarily (Bolino et al. 2008). Individuals might fear image-based costs when apologizing, such as being perceived as less competent (Chaudhry and Loewenstein 2019). Additionally, apologies are often seen as an admission of guilt and may in some contexts expose individuals or organizations to increased legal liability (Robbennolt 2003). Overall, these reduced incentives to apologize voluntarily may lead individuals to perceive apology solicitation as a necessary means.

Second of all, unlike in close relationships, which are typically governed by communal norms that emphasize mutual responsiveness, workplace relationships are characterized by exchange norms that foreground responsibility tracking, and negotiations of inputs and outputs (Clark and Mills 1979, 1993). These exchange norms may increase the likelihood of apology solicitations by

legitimizing explicit requests for accountability when responsibility is ambiguous or not voluntarily assumed. At the same time, these exchange norms might sharpen how the solicitations are interpreted. Rather than being interpreted as relationship-promotive gestures, apology solicitations at the workplace might be even more likely to be construed as transactional demands or power-assertive acts that shift reputational costs on to the transgressor (Chaudhry and Loewenstein 2019), increasing the likelihood of defensive and negative reactions.

At the same time, workplaces restrict how openly people can respond in moments of conflict. Even when individuals feel angry, directly confronting a coworker can violate norms around emotional control and professionalism (Carver 2004; Carver and Harmon-Jones 2009). In that kind of setting, avoidance often becomes the easiest option as it allows people to manage frustration without escalating the conflict (Cortina and Magley 2009; Booth et al. 2017; Spencer and Rupp 2009). Although we focus on workplace contexts, we do not suggest that these dynamics are unique to organizational relationships. Instead, we argue that organizational life makes these processes particularly salient and provides a particularly relevant context for understanding how apology solicitations may unintentionally create distance rather than repair relationships (Geddes et al. 2020; Petkanopoulou et al. 2019; Tibubos et al. 2014).

Importantly, we also do not assume that apology solicitations will unfold similarly across all conflict situations. One key dimension that varies across interpersonal transgressions is whether the individual feels responsible for the transgression. On one hand, when responsibility is clear, an apology request may feel expected and may function as a straightforward prompt toward repair. On the other hand, when responsibility is contested, being asked to apologize may feel more like a moral accusation that pressures someone into conceding wrongdoing (Chaudhry and Loewenstein 2019). In these cases, solicitation may be especially likely to threaten the transgressor's sense of autonomy. Accordingly, in the present research we also explore whether transgression responsibility shapes when apology solicitations are most likely to elicit powerlessness, anger, and avoidance.

4 | Overview of Studies

In order to explore the consequences that soliciting apologies have for relationship reconciliation, we used a mixed-methods design. In the pilot study, we focused on the victim's perspective using a micro-narrative procedure in which participants were asked whether they had ever explicitly asked someone to apologize to them and then recalled the details. This data was inductively coded to offer some understanding into the reasoning behind why victims solicit apologies, as well as the context in which this is likely to occur and the emotional responses to this behavior. Study 1 followed a similar design; however, this study focused on the perspective of the transgressor in order to shed light on how transgressors feel after an apology has explicitly been asked from them. Both of these micro-narrative studies specifically asked participants to focus on the organizational context. The pilot study and Study 1 also served to understand the prevalence of the phenomenon in the

workplace. Study 2 allowed for causal inference of our theoretical model by utilizing an experimental design in which participants were randomly assigned to imagine themselves in a specific workplace scenario. In Study 3, we used an interactive decision-making game to test the real-time behavioral reactions of individuals who have been asked to apologize after they had committed a transgression. In Study 4, we used another vignette to experimentally manipulate transgression responsibility to test it as a boundary condition for the proposed serial mediation model.

5 | Pilot Study

The pilot study served two main purposes: understanding the prevalence of the phenomenon of soliciting apologies and exploring the underlying reasons as well as the contexts in which victims would want to solicit an apology. As such, we collected qualitative data in the form of micro-narratives about participants' experiences with soliciting apologies at work. This is in line with previous research that has gathered micro-narratives to gain more insight into details on workplace apologizing behavior (Mu and Bobocel 2019; Zheng and van Dijke 2020).

5.1 | Methods

5.1.1 | Participants

In total 100 working professionals residing in the US were recruited for this study via the online platform Prolific (39 females, $M_{age} = 35.8$, $SD = 11.74$). The average tenure for participants was 15.57 years; 30.00% worked in professional, scientific, and technical services, 24.00% in other service industries, 18.00% in manufacturing, construction and warehousing, 12.00% in finance and insurance, 11.00% in cultural industries, 5.00% in management of companies and enterprises.

5.1.2 | Procedure

The study started off by asking the participants whether they have ever explicitly asked someone at work to apologize to them. If the participants responded with "No" they were redirected to a question that asked why they have never asked someone at work to apologize to them. This was followed by a question about what percentage of people at their workplace they thought have explicitly asked for apologies. After demographic questions, the survey then ended for them. For participants that indicated that they had asked someone at work to apologize to them they were prompted to recall this specific incident and were guided through this recall by having to answer several questions requiring qualitative answers. The instructions before the questions read as below:

You will now be asked to recall a time where you explicitly asked someone at work to apologize to you. Take a moment to remember this specific incident - who was this person, what was the incident for which you asked them to apologize for, how did you ask them to apologize, how did you feel and how did this person react after you made the ask? Please keep these details in mind as you answer the questions below.

Participants were then asked to answer what the role of the person was (e.g., colleague, manager, subordinate), what they had asked the individual to apologize for, how they explicitly asked the individual to apologize, why they felt that in this specific case an explicit request for an apology was needed, how they felt after asking this person to apologize and how the person reacted after they asked them to apologize. After answering these questions, the participants then rated what percentage of people at their workplace they thought had explicitly asked for an apology. Lastly, participants responded to demographic questions.

All micro-narratives were qualitatively coded with an inductive approach (Thomas 2006) to understand why the participants solicited an apology, for what incident the apology was supposed to be for, how the participant felt afterwards, and how the person that they had solicited the apology from reacted. For the participants who indicated that they had never apologized we also coded their responses for why they had never solicited an apology.

5.2 | Results

5.2.1 | Prevalence and Motives for Soliciting (vs. Not) Apologies

In regard to the prevalence of apology solicitations, 26.00% of participants in the sample recalled having solicited an apology. This is significantly greater than the 11.52% (SD = 12.41) that participants predicted had solicited an apology at work, $\chi^2(1, N = 100) = 5.96, p = 0.015$. In examining the reasons why participants solicited apologies we found that the majority sought to protect or restore their own image (34.62%, see Table 1). This was closely followed by a desire to correct the transgressors' behavior and wanting the transgressor to take responsibility or be aware of what they did (26.92%). In total 23% mentioned as the primary reason that they felt hurt and therefore thought the apology was warranted.

We also examined the reasons why the 74.00% of participants had never solicited an apology (see Table 2). The majority of

individuals indicated that it was not because they would not do it, but because there had never been an incident for which they felt an apology was needed, that is, no transgression was severe enough or, if it was, then the apology had already been given. The second most common reason was due to a solicited apology not being perceived as sincere, and the third most common due to the individual not being confrontational. How the solicitation itself would be perceived was a concern for only a small minority of participants. Thus, the majority of participants did not refrain from soliciting an apology because they were not comfortable doing so, but rather because they did not believe it would have the intended effect.

5.2.2 | Affective Responses to Soliciting Apologies

We next analyzed the affective responses of victims' post-solicitation as coded from their qualitative responses (see Table 3). The majority of participants felt positive emotions after soliciting an apology, specifically pride, confidence, and relief. For example, one participant wrote, "I felt daring when I was doing it, and it was empowering in a way as well." The third most common feeling was feeling upset/frustrated. The remaining participants reported feeling neutral or indifferent afterwards.

5.2.3 | Contextual Details of Apology Solicitations

Lastly, we analyzed the contextual details participants gave regarding the solicitation events. In regard to from whom and how apologies were solicited, 73.00% of the 26 solicitors asked a colleague to apologize to them, 19.00% a manager/supervisor, 4.00% a subordinate and 4.00% an administrator. The majority of the participants asked the person for an apology in person (96.00%) as opposed to via text (4.00%). Additionally, a Chi-Square test indicated that the distribution of reasons for soliciting an apology was not uniform, $\chi^2(5, N = 26) = 13.23, p = 0.021$, with disrespect and rudeness being the main reason that transgressors solicited an apology (see Table 4). Examples within that category included incidents of inappropriate tone being used, insults, as well as interruptions. The next most

TABLE 1 | Pilot study: Motives underlying solicitation.

Incident	Illustrative extract	Solicitation of apology
Protection/Power Restoration	"My job performance was on the line and it was because of her and her lies."	9 (34.62%)
Correct the transgressor's behavior	"Because this was a case of attitude and behavior that needed to be changed for the future. I knew we would have to collaborate together in the future and I wanted to set the standard that this type of behavior wasn't appropriate."	7 (26.92%)
Feeling hurt	"I asked for an apology because I was hurt by what was said to me in the meeting. I felt that the person made a comment that was out of line and disrespectful. Because of this, I felt that I deserved an apology."	6 (23%)
Have the transgressor take responsibility	"Mostly because the coworker wasn't taking responsibility at first. It was a somewhat costly error they made that was clearly their fault"	4 (15.38%)
Totals		26 (100%)

TABLE 2 | Pilot Study: Reasons for why individuals never solicited an apology.

Victim reason for not soliciting apology	Participants endorsing this reason
Not necessary	24 (32.43%)
Perceived lack of sincerity	22 (29.73%)
Not confrontational	17 (22.97%)
Image conscious	5 (6.76%)
No hope	4 (5.41%)
Neutral/Indifferent	2 (2.70%)
Totals	74 (100%)

TABLE 3 | Pilot Study: Emotions felt by victim's post solicitation.

Emotion	Participants endorsing this emotion
Angry/Frustrated	4 (15.38%)
Indifferent/Neutral	4 (15.38%)
Proud/Confident	7 (26.92%)
Relieved	10 (38.46%)
Upset/Bad	1 (3.85%)
Totals	26 (100%)

TABLE 4 | Pilot Study: Incidents transgressors were asked to apologize for.

Reason transgressor was asked to apologize	Participants endorsing this reason
Deceit	2 (7.69%)
Disrespect and rudeness	11 (42.31%)
Task performed incorrectly	4 (15.38%)
Misunderstanding/Disagreement	4 (15.38%)
Property damage	3 (11.54%)
Respecting time-off hours	2 (7.69%)
Totals	26 (100%)

frequently mentioned incidents that fostered participants to ask for an apology included when a job had not been done properly, and when there was a misunderstanding or disagreement, oftentimes about whether a task had been completed properly or not. Other reasons included property damage, time-off hours not being respected, and deceit, such as stolen ideas.

5.3 | Discussion

By having participants indicate at the beginning of the survey whether they had ever asked anyone at work to apologize to them, we were able to gain more insight into the prevalence of this behavior. The results suggested that around 1 in 4 people

have solicited an apology—more than twice as many people than what participants had indicated they thought would be the percent of people in their organization that had solicited an apology. Inductively coded results from the qualitative data gave more insight into how participants felt after they had solicited an apology. In general, participants experienced more positive emotions such as confidence and relief—indicating that the solicitation of apologies can be an empowering or cathartic experience for the victim.

Next, we ran a similar design, but from the perspective of the transgressor, to gain insight into how transgressors feel after they have been asked to apologize.

6 | Study 1

This study followed a similar design as the pilot study but asked participants to recall a time when they had been asked to apologize (as opposed to asking someone to apologize). The aim of this was two-fold: again, establishing the prevalence of the phenomenon (this time from transgressors' perspectives), as well as exploring how individuals felt and acted when they were asked to apologize.

6.1 | Methods

6.1.1 | Participants

In total, 100 full-time employees residing in the US participated in this study via Prolific (43 females, $M_{age} = 40.29$, $SD = 10.37$). They had an average tenure of 19.47 years, with 75.00% having no less than 10 years of working experience. In the sample, 37.00% worked in professional, educational, scientific, and technical services, 24.00% in manufacturing, construction and warehousing, 19.00% in other service industries, 11.00% in cultural industries, 8.00% in finance and insurance, 1.00% in management of companies and enterprises. In total, 69.00% of our sample identified as White/Caucasian, 12.00% as Asian, 11.00% as Hispanic/Latino, 5.00% as Black, 2.00% as Native American, and 1.00% as multiracial.

6.1.2 | Procedure

At the beginning of the study, participants were asked if they had ever been asked by someone to apologize. If they indicated that they had never been asked to apologize to anyone, then they were asked to describe how they would feel if someone at work would ask them to apologize. After the demographic questions the study then ended for them. If they responded that they had been asked to apologize to someone at work, then they were prompted to recall this interaction. The instructions read as follows:

You will now be asked to recall a time where you were asked by someone to apologize to them. Take a moment to remember this specific incident - who was this person, what was the incident for which you had to apologize, how did they ask you to apologize, was it an explicit or implicit ask, how did you feel and did you apologize? Please keep these details in mind as you answer the questions below.

After reading the instructions, participants were asked to describe in detail the incident, how they had been asked to apologize, why they were asked to apologize, how they felt after

they had been asked and how the relationship was with this individual after the interaction. Participants were also asked to indicate whether they responded to the ask with an apology or not. In addition, participants were asked to rate how explicit the request was on a slider scale (0-100). The instructions to that question were: *Rate the extent to which the person explicitly asked you to apologize (i.e., used direct, verbal or written communication to ask for an apology).*

Following the descriptions of the incident, we also included certain measures of interest. These measures included felt power, anger, interaction avoidance, felt transgression and closeness. This was followed by demographic questions.

6.1.3 | Measures

6.1.3.1 | Power

Participants were asked to assess the degree to which they felt powerful in the relationship with the solicitor of the apology. This scale was developed by Anderson et al. (2012). In total there were 8 items, examples include: “After this interaction, I thought I have a great deal of power,” “After this interaction, I felt I can get him/her to do what I want,” and “After this interaction, I felt my wishes do not carry much weight.” Participants assessed their agreement on a 7-point scale, from 1 = *strongly disagree* to 7 = *strongly agree* ($\alpha = 0.88$).

6.1.3.2 | Anger

Participants rated how angry they felt after they were asked to apologize following the three-item measure of Yip and Schweitzer (2019). The three items were: angry, annoyed, and irritated, and were rated from 1 = *not at all* to 5 = *extremely* ($\alpha = 0.96$).

6.1.3.3 | Interaction Avoidance

The degree to which participants avoided the person who had solicited an apology from them was assessed using Nifadkar et al. (2012) adaptation from the Personal Report of Communication (PRCA; McCroskey 1982) that measures state avoidance. In total this was assessed on 7 items. Sample items include: “I don’t speak with them unless absolutely necessary,” “I avoid initiating contact with them,” and “I prefer having minimum informal interactions with them.” This was assessed on a 7-point scale, from 1 = *strongly disagree* to 7 = *strongly agree* ($\alpha = 0.98$).

6.1.3.4 | Felt Transgression

Following the felt transgression measure from Li et al. (2023) participants rated to what degree they “felt fully responsible for causing the incident”, “felt it was their fault for causing this incident”, “caused harm in this incident”. This was rated from 1 = *strongly disagree* to 7 = *strongly agree* ($\alpha = 0.84$). This measure was included as it has been linked to decreased levels of restoration efforts (Li et al. 2023) and as such the possibility of wanting to apologize.

6.1.3.5 | Relational Closeness

As increased relational closeness has been linked to increased reconciliation efforts (Riek 2010) we assessed this variable using the Inclusion of Other in the Self (IOS) Scale developed by Aron and Fraley (1999). Participants selected which of one of seven Venn-diagrams that overlapped to different degrees most described their relationship with the victim, such that 1 indicated not close at all, and 7 indicated a very close relationship.

6.2 | Results

6.2.1 | Prevalence and Summary Statistics

In total, 30.00% of participants recalled being asked to apologize at work. Out of these 30.00%, the majority recalled the request coming from a colleague (63.00%). This was followed by 23.00% being asked to apologize from a supervisor (23.00%) and then by subordinates (7.00%) and customers/clients (7.00%). This was in line with the results from the pilot study. The solicitation of apologies was in general more explicit ($M = 77.00$; $SD = 27.70$) compared to the scale midpoint of 50.00, $t(29) = 7.28$, $p < 0.001$. Additionally, out of the participants that were asked to apologize, 27.00% did not end up apologizing.

Table 5 includes the summary statistics, correlations, and reliabilities across all variables for the 30 participants that recalled being asked to apologize at work. On average, participants tended more towards feeling powerless, with an average rating of 3.41 ($SD = 1.31$). A one-sample t -test comparing this mean to the scale midpoint of 4.00 revealed a significant difference, $t(29) = -2.89$, $p = 0.007$. The feeling of power was significantly and negatively correlated with avoidance, such that feeling less powerful was associated with increased avoidance. Anger ($M = 2.77$; $SD = 1.42$) was also significantly correlated with avoidance intentions. Several other factors had a significant negative correlation with avoidance behavior, namely: felt transgression and felt closeness.

TABLE 5 | Study 1: Correlations and descriptive statistics.

Variable	Mean	SD	1	2	3	4	5
1. Power	3.41	1.31	(0.88)				
2. Anger	2.77	1.42	-0.16	(0.96)			
3. Avoidance	3.87	2.39	-0.42*	0.61**	(0.98)		
4. Felt transgression	4.02	1.82	0.26	-0.30	-0.59**	(0.84)	
5. Closeness	3.03	1.83	0.28	-0.33	-0.64**	0.49**	/

Note: $n = 30$. Coefficient alphas reported on diagonal in parentheses.

* $p < 0.05$; ** $p < 0.01$.

6.2.2 | Analysis of Post-Solicitation Responses

The majority of participants experienced negative feelings after being asked to apologize (77%). Within those negative emotions, individuals felt anger, annoyed, upset, and ashamed as shown in Table 6.

Table 7 contains illustrative extracts from the data regarding why participants thought the individual had solicited an apology from them. Notable is the number of mentions of participants' associating the solicitation with a power move or a way for the victim to establish control (23.3%). For example, participants mentioned: "I think that my coworker demanded an apology because they seek to tear down others to build themselves up and play others for their own feelings" and "They try to have control over everyone, even though she is on the same level as us, and not a manager or director. She regularly tries to be the one in charge, and I know she demanded it because she wanted to feel superior than me."

Participants were also asked to describe how their relationship with the victim was impacted after the victim had solicited the apology. In total, 66.00% of individuals described having a very negative relationship after having been asked to apologize, actively avoiding the other person, or staying superficial and

TABLE 6 | Study 1: Emotions felt by transgressor's post solicitation.

Emotion	Participants endorsing this emotion
Angry/Annoyed	10 (33.33%)
Relieved/Better	6 (20.00%)
Upset/Bad	5 (16.67%)
Indifferent	3 (10.00%)
Ashamed	3 (10.00%)
Remorseful/Guilt	3 (10.00%)
Totals	30 (100%)

TABLE 7 | Study 1: Transgressors perceived motivation underlying solicitation.

Reason	Illustrative extract	Participants endorsing this reason
Control/Power	"They try to have control over everyone, even though she is on the same level as us, and not a manager or director. She regularly tries to be the one in charge, and I know she demanded it because she wanted to feel superior to me."	7 (23.30%)
Correct the transgressors behavior	"I think she asked for an apology because she didn't like people going through her stuff when she wasn't there."	9 (30.00%)
Have the transgressor take responsibility	"I had not recognized how my actions had affected others"	3 (10.00%)
Upset victim	"My bosses emotions got the best of her [...] she started crying like a child"	3 (10.00%)
Image restoration/Protection	"There were several other people present. I do not think that they would have asked had it just been me and them."	6 (23.33%)
Maintain peace	"My supervisor didn't want to create a hostile work environment [...] he wants everybody to be happy"	2 (6.7%)
Totals		30 (100%)

cordial. Examples include: "I just avoided them like the plague. I refused to work with them and just chose a different department to go to. The person was actually upset that I wanted to stop hanging out with them and kept trying to bother me"; "We try to avoid each other as much as possible. They are rare occasions where we have to talk but it is very short. I remain professional around her as much as I can when I'm in her presence and it has been this way since the incident".

6.2.3 | Analysis of Imagined Solicitation Responses

Additionally, exploring the qualitative responses from participants who had never been asked to apologize before, revealed that participants thought they would generally feel negative emotions (80.00%). Specifically, the majority indicated that they would feel powerless and uncomfortable (18.00%), followed by feeling embarrassed (17.00%) or angry/annoyed (11.00%). Noteworthy again is the mention of power imbalances being created (e.g., "I would feel somewhat ashamed but also that this person wants to exercise power over someone depending on the situation"; "I'd probably feel like they thought they could control me"; "I would feel very small. Like I was worthless"). In line with this, participants compared how they would feel to a parent-child relationship (e.g., "I would feel really small and as if I was a little kid again. I'd feel that it's patronizing"; "I would feel like I was being treated like a child and would refuse.").

6.3 | Discussion

Study 1 replicated and built on the results gained from the previous study in several ways: first, we demonstrated that indeed the prevalence appears to be around 26%–30% experiencing solicitations of apologies at their workplace. Second, we found that while victims generally feel more positive after soliciting an apology, transgressors feel more negative after the solicitation, often times feeling angry, frustrated and even

powerless. This held even when individuals only imagined what it would be like if an apology was solicited from them. Third, factors were identified that correlated with the extent to which participants avoided individuals who had solicited an apology from them. These factors include the degree to which the transgressor felt powerless after the solicitation, the degree to which the individual felt they had actually transgressed as well as how close the victim was to the transgressor.

Extending the findings from the pilot study and from Study 1 and building on the existing theory, we next ran an experimental vignette-based study to explore our predicted relationship between being asked to apologize, felt powerlessness, anger, and avoidance. This vignette-based design enables controlling the circumstances of the transgression and the apology solicitation.

7 | Study 2

In Study 2 we assess our full proposed model, namely the impact that being asked to apologize has on the avoidance behavior of the transgressor via felt powerlessness and anger. We use a vignette experiment to increase internal validity, as Study 1 was based on autobiographical recall and thus, while higher in external validity, subject to uncontrolled variation in context. The vignette allows us to hold the context constant across participants, while manipulating the presence or absence of the apology solicitation—ensuring a more controlled environment to test the full proposed model.

7.1 | Methods

We conducted an a priori power analysis utilizing G*Power (Faul et al. 2009) to ascertain the appropriate sample size for our primary between-subjects analyses, where we tested the effect of apology solicitation (vs. control) on key outcomes while controlling for felt transgression (ANCOVA). Assuming a medium-sized effect ($f = 0.25$) and aiming to attain 80% statistical power at a significance level of $\alpha = 0.05$, it was indicated that a sample size of 98 participants would be sufficient. We therefore aimed to recruit 100 participants.

7.1.1 | Participants

In total, 100 full-time employees based in the UK participated in this study via Prolific (59 females, $M_{age} = 39.38$, $SD = 10.79$). Average tenure for the participants was 18.83 years ($SD = 10.00$). In the sample, 35% worked in professional, educational, scientific, and technical services, 34% in other service industries, 14% in manufacturing, construction and warehousing, 8% in cultural industries, 7% in finance and insurance, 2% in management of companies and enterprises. In total, 90% of our sample identified as White/Caucasian, 6% as Asian, 3% as Black, and 1% as multiracial.

7.1.2 | Procedure

The incident adapted for this study was inspired by the results from the pilot study and Study 1 in which participants detailed events that had led to the solicitation of an apology.

Additionally, based on the pilot study and Study 1, the solicitation of the apology in this incident was explicit and in person.

Participants were asked to imagine themselves in a scenario in which they recently competed in a proposal competition against their coworker, James, to lead a project. The participant was allowed to discuss ideas with James but they both had to present their final ideas separately. At the end of the competition, the proposal of the participant won, but the participant heard from a coworker that James suspected aspects of his plan had been included in the participants' winning proposal. The next day the participant runs into James in the hallway. In the control condition, participants read that James said "I'm glad I ran into you. I have to talk to you", while in the solicitation condition James said, "I'm glad I ran into you. You owe me an apology". This scenario was designed to reflect a context in which responsibility for the alleged transgression is ambiguous, a condition under which apology solicitations are theorized to be particularly autonomy threatening.

After imagining themselves in the scenario, participants responded to the measures, followed by demographic questions, and manipulation and comprehension check questions.

7.1.3 | Measures

7.1.3.1 | Manipulation Check

This item assessed the degree to which participants agreed that James requested an apology from them. Agreement with this statement was measured on a scale from 1 = *strongly disagree* to 7 = *strongly agree*.

7.1.3.2 | Comprehension Check

To ensure data quality we included one attention check item, asking participants whether their proposal won the competition. This was a binary yes or no question.

7.1.3.3 | Interaction Avoidance

Participants rated to what extent they would avoid James using the same items as in Study 1, from 1 = *strongly disagree* to 7 = *strongly agree* ($\alpha = 0.96$).

7.1.3.4 | Powerlessness

Recent findings have challenged the notion that low power is always the opposite of high power and have suggested that the feeling of lacking power may be more common than feeling powerful (Schaerer et al. 2018). After finding support in Study 1 for the prediction that solicitations of apologies would decrease the felt power of transgressors, we decided to get a more accurate sense of our proposed model by measuring the transgressors' sense of low power as opposed to the transgressors' felt power. This was done following Schaerer et al. (2021), by reverse coding the Sense of Power scale (Anderson et al. 2012) used in Study 1. Example items included: "After this interaction, I thought I do not have a great deal of power over James" and "After this interaction, I thought I would not easily get my way with James". Participants rated to what extent they agreed with these items from 1 = *strongly disagree* to 7 = *strongly agree* ($\alpha = 0.91$).

7.1.3.5 | Anger

Using the same items as in Study 1, participants rated how angry they would feel after James asked them to apologize, from 1 = *not at all* to 5 = *extremely* ($\alpha = 0.94$).

7.1.3.6 | Controls

As Study 1 suggested that felt transgression was a contextual factor that could influence the degree to which the transgressor would want to avoid the victim who had solicited the apology, we decided to control for felt transgression. Felt transgression was measured using the same scale as in Study 1. However, the language for this scale was adapted such that the incident that participants were rating was James thinking that parts of his proposal were included in his proposal (e.g., “I feel fully responsible for causing James to think I incorporated his ideas into my proposal”). This was rated from 1 = *strongly disagree* to 5 = *strongly agree* ($\alpha = 0.60$).

7.2 | Results

7.2.1 | Manipulation Check

An independent-samples *t*-test was used to assess whether the manipulation of the different conditions was successful. Participants agreed significantly more that James had asked for an apology in the solicitation condition ($M = 5.73$, $SD = 1.88$) as opposed to in the controlled condition ($M = 2.20$, $SD = 1.18$), $t(98) = -11.31$, $p < 0.001$, $d = 2.24$.

7.2.2 | Comprehension Check

In total three out of 100 participants failed the comprehension check. Excluding these three participants did not change the reported results, as such the reported results below include the full sample.

7.2.3 | Interaction Avoidance, Power and Anger

We conducted ANCOVAs to examine the effect of apology solicitation (vs control) on interaction avoidance, power, and anger, while controlling for felt transgression. Supporting H1, Participants in the solicitation condition reported significantly more interaction avoidance ($M = 4.34$, $SD = 1.53$) than those in the control condition ($M = 3.36$, $SD = 1.51$), $F(1, 97) = 9.87$, $p = .002$, $\eta_p^2 = .092$. Felt transgression did not significantly predict avoidance, $F(1, 97) = 0.60$, $p = 0.441$.

The condition also significantly affected felt powerlessness, $F(1, 97) = 6.57$, $p = 0.012$, $\eta_p^2 = 0.063$, such that participants in the solicitation condition felt more powerless ($M = 4.27$, $SD = 0.98$) than participants in the control condition ($M = 3.71$, $SD = 1.14$). Felt transgression was not a significant covariate, $F(1, 97) = 0.21$, $p = 0.646$.

Lastly, participants in the solicitation condition felt more anger ($M = 3.21$, $SD = 1.01$) than participants in the control condition ($M = 2.16$, $SD = 0.98$), $F(1, 97) = 26.94$, $p < 0.001$, $\eta_p^2 = .217$. Felt transgression again was not a significant covariate, $F(1, 97) = 2.48$, $p = 0.119$.

7.2.4 | Serial Mediation

We conducted a serial mediation analysis to test our full proposed model (i.e., apology solicitation → felt powerlessness → felt anger → avoidance). We employed Model 6 from the PROCESS Macro by Hayes (2013) to conduct a serial mediation analysis and computed a 95% bootstrap confidence interval with 5,000 iterations. In this analysis, solicitation of apology was the independent variable, with felt powerlessness as the first mediator variable and felt anger as the second mediator. Notably, the indirect effect of the serial mediation through felt powerlessness and anger was found to be statistically significant, indirect effect = 0.14, $SE = 0.07$, 95% CI [0.02, 0.29]. These findings support H2. This serial mediation remained statistically significant when controlling for felt transgression ($b = 0.13$, $se = 0.07$, 95% CI [0.02, 0.29]). See Figure 1 for the full model including all pathway coefficients and standard errors.

7.3 | Discussion

Using a scenario design, this experiment provided support for our proposed effect of apology solicitation increasing transgressors' interaction avoidance. Additionally, building on findings from Study 1, this study demonstrated the role that felt powerlessness plays as a mediator. These findings hold when controlling for felt transgression. Study 2 provides support for our proposed model in a context where responsibility for the alleged transgression is ambiguous. In this setting, being explicitly asked to apologize heightened feelings of powerlessness and anger, ultimately increasing avoidance.

Next, we ran a behavioral study to see whether our proposed model holds when exploring real-time interactions.

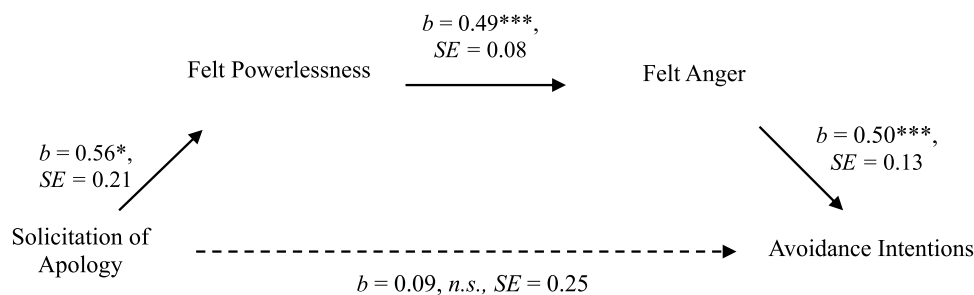


FIGURE 1 | Process Model 6 with pathway coefficients for Study 2 – using felt powerlessness and felt anger as serial mediators. Solicitation was manipulated and coded as 1 for solicitation and 0 for control condition. *** $p < 0.001$, ** $p < 0.01$, * $p < 0.05$.

8 | Study 3

Study 3 aimed to explore whether transgressors' avoidance intentions also extend to real-time behavioral actions.

8.1 | Methods

8.1.1 | Participants

In total, 169 full-time employees in the UK were recruited for this study using Prolific (95 females, $M_{age} = 39.79$). Average tenure for the participants was 19.26 years. This study focused on exploring the real-time reactions to being told to apologize after transgressing. Based on the findings from the prior study, we anticipated effect sizes in the medium range. An a priori power analysis in GPower (Faul et al. 2009) indicated that 128 participants would be required to detect a medium effect size ($d = 0.50$) with 80% power using an independent-samples t -test. To allow for potential exclusions related to the interactive chat procedure, we recruited 169 participants.

The sample size for this study was designed to have the ability to detect a two-tailed independent-samples t -test effect size (Cohen's d) as small as 0.43 with 80% power, specifically focusing on the main effect of apology solicitations on interaction avoidance.

8.1.2 | Procedure

In this study we used an interaction decision-making game in which participants got to interact with another participant. First, using Chatplat, an interactive chat platform, participants were randomly paired with another participant from the study. Participants were given the instructions that they would be playing a game with this partner but first should get to know each other better. They had 3 min to use the chat. This was done to ensure that participants believed that the participant they were paired with to play the game was a real person as opposed to a bot. Matching of participants was done based on the time that participants joined. Due to this limitation, there were 29 participants where there was no two-way conversation with their partner as while they were matched there was not enough time left. However, these occurrences were evenly distributed across conditions.

This decision-making game was adapted from Adams et al. (2015). For this game, participants were told that each pair of participants would receive 5 ticket entries total into a lottery. The instructions read that one member would be assigned the role of the allocator who would be splitting the tickets while the other the role of the recipient. Additionally, participants were told that the recipient would be able to send a message to the allocator after receiving the allocation. They were also told that by the end of the research project, one lottery ticket would be pulled, and that the winner would receive an additional 50 cents in addition to study payment. Participants had been told that they would be playing two games and that the instructions for the second game would be given after the first had been completed.

All participants were assigned to the role of the allocator. To manipulate transgression, and based on Adams et al. (2015), participants were told that the system had decided that they

were only allowed to send one ticket to their partner (out of 5 tickets). Thus, participants were forced to transgress by violating norms of fairness, specifically equal distribution norms, by allocating fewer than half of the tickets to their partner (Bolton et al. 1998; Fehr and Fischbacher 2004). Participants had to type the number of tickets, one, into the box and click send. To increase the believability of the sending of the decisions, time delays were inserted while the decision was being 'sent' to the recipient.

After having transgressed, participants were then rerouted to ChatPlat to talk to their partner. However, as opposed to being paired with the previous participant they had been paired with, unbeknownst to the participant, they were paired with the researcher who joined as a confederate, playing the role of the previous participant. Participants were then randomly assigned to either the solicitation condition or the control condition. Participants in the solicitation condition received the message "I got one ticket; You owe me an apology" while participants in the control condition received the neutral message "I got one ticket". Participants were in the chat for 1 min in total and did not receive any other message.

After the chat ended, participants were reminded that they were supposed to play a second game and they were asked whether they wanted to keep the same partner. Then they were told that before they would play a second game, they would have to respond to a series of questions about this first interaction. After they responded to all measures, it was disclosed to the participants that they would not be playing a second game and were debriefed that while the first time they chatted with a real participant, the second time after the game they received a pre-filled message that was not from the participant they were originally paired with. The study concluded with demographic questions.

As the transgression was imposed by the task, participants lacked full agency over the norm violation. This design allowed us to test our predictions in a context where apology demands follow constrained or externally imposed wrongdoing.

8.1.3 | Measures

8.1.3.1 | Behavioral Avoidance

After the solicitation participants were asked whether they wanted to play the following new game with the same partner. Same partner was coded as 0, while different partner was coded as 1.

8.1.3.2 | Interaction Avoidance

For the interaction avoidance scale participants were asked to imagine that they knew the partner outside of the study and that they had to interact with them because they lived nearby. The measurement items were the same as the interaction avoidance items from Study 1 and 2. Participants were asked to what degree they agreed with the avoidance items from 1 = *strongly disagree* to 7 = *strongly agree* ($\alpha = 0.89$).

8.1.3.3 | Powerlessness

As in Study 2, participants rated to what degree they felt powerless regarding their relationship with the partner they were

paired with. Participants rated to what extent they agreed with powerlessness items from 1 = *strongly disagree* to 7 = *strongly agree* ($\alpha = 0.93$).¹

Anger using the same items as in Study 1 and 2, participants rated how angry they felt after the interaction with their partner. They rated the three items from 1 = *not at all* to 5 = *extremely* ($\alpha = 0.94$).

8.1.3.4 | Controls

As in this study the transgression was imposed by the scenario, we included a measure of guilt rather than felt transgression to assess any variations in participants' internalized sense of blame. Following the guilt measure used by Li et al. (2023) participants rated 3 different items in which they were asked to what extent they felt guilty, self-blame and regret. This was rated from 1 = *strongly disagree* to 7 = *strongly agree* ($\alpha = 0.80$).

8.2 | Results

8.2.1 | Avoidance Measures

We assessed the difference between the control and solicitation condition for the two avoidance measures that were used. Using an independent-samples *t*-test, the results suggested a significant difference for the interaction avoidance measure. Namely, participants in the solicitation condition significantly agreed more with the interaction avoidance measures ($M = 4.03$, $SD = 1.56$) than participants in the control condition ($M = 3.34$, $SD = 1.42$), $t(167) = -3.01$, $p = 0.003$, $d = 0.46$. Additionally, using binary logistic regression, we analyzed the behavioral avoidance measure—namely whether there was a difference in the participant wanting to repeat the second game with the same participant. We found that our manipulation of apology solicitation significantly predicted behavioral avoidance, such that participants were 2.92 times more likely to choose a different partner after having been solicited to apologize ($B = 1.07$, $SE = 0.35$, Wald $\chi^2(1) = 9.48$, $p = 0.002$, OR = 2.92, 95% CI [1.48, 5.76]).

Thus, we find support for H1 using a behavioral avoidance measure as well as the avoidance intentions measure used previously.

8.2.2 | Powerlessness

An independent-samples *t*-test was conducted to evaluate the difference between the two conditions for felt powerlessness. Supporting H1, participants in the solicitation condition indicated higher powerlessness ($M = 4.28$, $SD = 1.13$) than participants in the control condition ($M = 3.61$, $SD = 1.26$), $t(167) = -3.65$, $p < 0.001$, $d = 0.56$.

8.2.3 | Anger

Additionally, using an independent-samples *t*-test we also analyzed the impact of condition on felt anger. Participants in the solicitation condition indicated higher anger ($M = 1.95$, $SD = 0.97$) than participants in the control condition ($M = 1.24$, $SD = 0.51$), $t(167) = -6.01$, $p < 0.001$, $d = 0.93$.

8.2.4 | Serial Mediation

As in the previous study we tested the full proposed model using serial mediation analysis. Using PROCESS Macro by Hayes (2013) Model 6, we computed the 95% bootstrap confidence interval with 5000 interactions. Here we ran two different versions of the serial mediation.

First, as in the previous study, we used solicitation of apology as the independent variable, felt powerlessness as the first mediator, anger as the second mediator and avoidance intentions as the dependent variable. Replicating the previous findings, the indirect effect of the serial mediation through felt powerlessness and anger was found to be statistically significant when controlling for felt guilt, (indirect effect = 0.06, $SE = 0.04$, 95% CI [0.008, 0.14]) (see Figure 2 for pathway coefficients). This remained significant even when not controlling for guilt (indirect effect = 0.05, $SE = 0.03$, 95% CI [0.007, 0.13]).

Next, the same model was tested, however, switching out the avoidance intentions dependent variable with the behavioral measure of avoidance. Controlling for guilt, the indirect effect of solicitation of apology on avoidance behavior via powerlessness and anger was significant (indirect effect = 0.05, $SE = 0.04$, 95% CI [0.002, 0.15]). For a comprehensive view of the full predicted model, while controlling for guilt, with pathway coefficients, please see Figure 2. When not controlling for guilt, we find that the results are marginally significant, indirect effect = 0.05, $SE = 0.04$, 95% CI [-0.003, 0.14].

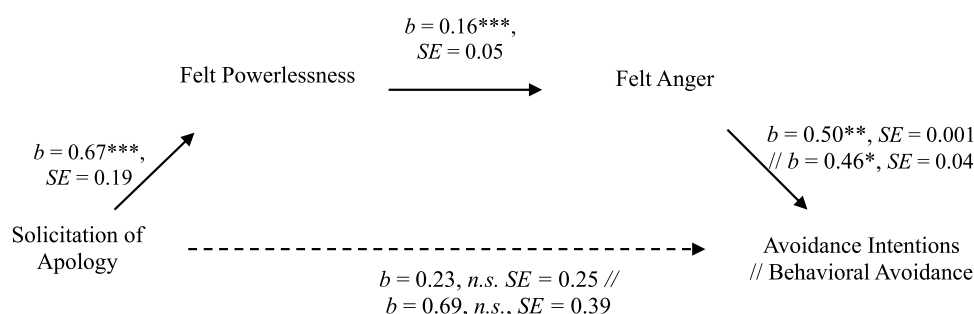


FIGURE 2 | Process Model 6 with pathway coefficients for Study 3—using felt powerlessness and anger as serial mediators and avoidance intentions (and behavioral avoidance) as DV, controlling for felt guilt. Solicitation was manipulated and coded as 1 for solicitation and 0 for control condition. Additionally, behavioral avoidance was measured in addition to avoidance intentions (both depicted). Behavioral avoidance was coded such that 1 was wanting to avoid the assigned partner, while 0 was staying with the same partner. *** $p < 0.001$, ** $p < 0.01$, * $p < 0.05$.

8.3 | Discussion

Using a dictator game design, this experiment provided additional support for our proposed effect of apology solicitation increasing transgressors interaction avoidance by also exploring the results for real-time behavioral reactions. This study extends our findings to a behavioral context in which transgressors had limited control over the initial wrongdoing. Together with Study 2, these findings suggest that apology solicitations may be particularly detrimental in situations where agency and responsibility are constrained or contested.

9 | Study 4

Across our previous studies, we found consistent support for the idea that apology solicitation increases transgressors' avoidance, via increased feelings of powerlessness and anger. However, in those studies, transgressors' perceived responsibility for the incident was either ambiguous by design or measured and statistically controlled (e.g., felt transgression or guilt). In the present study, we sought to strengthen our claims by experimentally manipulating transgression responsibility. Specifically, we tested whether transgression responsibility represents a boundary condition for the proposed serial mediation process.

9.1 | Methods

9.1.1 | Participants

In total, 400 US participants were recruited for this study using Prolific (176 females, 224 males, $M_{age} = 42.17$, $SD = 11.20$). Participants were full-time employees with an average tenure of 22.45 years ($SD = 11.00$). In this study participants were presented with another vignette and asked to imagine themselves in the workplace scenario. Based on the findings from Study 2 which utilized the same procedure, we anticipated effects of apology solicitation in the small-to-medium range.

A sample size of 400 participants (approximately 100 per condition) was chosen to provide at least 80% power to detect main effects and interaction effects in a 2×2 between-subjects design, while also ensuring adequate power to estimate indirect effects in moderated serial mediation analyses. The sample size is consistent with recommendations for detecting interaction effects in factorial designs and indirect effects in conditional process models using bootstrapping (Cohen 1988; Fritz and MacKinnon 2007; Hayes 2013). The study was pre-registered (<https://aspredicted.org/f8cc2m.pdf>).

9.1.2 | Procedure

In this study we used a 2 (apology solicitation: solicited vs. not solicited) \times 2 (transgression responsibility: high vs. low) between-subjects vignette design.

Participants imagined themselves walking through a busy office hallway on the way to a meeting. While briefly looking at their phone to check a message about the meeting time an incident occurs in which the participant and a coworker collide, and the coworker's coffee is spilled.

Transgression responsibility was manipulated by changing whether or not the participant was responsible for causing the

collision. In the high responsibility condition participants read: "While looking at your phone, you accidentally bump into a coworker. They stumble and drop their coffee, and some of it spills on their clothes. You realize that you caused the collision." In the low responsibility condition the participants read: "While looking at your phone, a coworker accidentally bumps into you. They stumble and drop their coffee, and some of it spills on their clothes. You realize that the coworker caused the collision." The participant then read that the coworker says "That was careless of you" (in the high responsibility condition) or "That was careless of me" (in the low responsibility condition).

This was followed by the apology solicitation manipulation. In the solicited condition the coworker continues to say "Now my coffee is all over me. You owe me an apology." In the no solicitation condition, the coworker instead only says "Now my coffee is all over me."

After reading the vignette, participants completed an attention check which was followed by the main dependent measures, manipulation checks, and demographic questions.

9.1.3 | Measures

9.1.3.1 | Manipulation Check–Solicitation

Perceived solicitation was a single item measure in which participants were asked to what extent they agreed with the statement "In this scenario, the coworker requested an apology from me". This was rated on a scale from 1 = *strongly disagree* to 7 = *strongly agree*.

9.1.3.2 | Manipulation Check - Transgression Responsibility Manipulation

The effectiveness of the transgression responsibility manipulation was measured using the felt transgression measure used in previous studies. The items were adapted for the scenario ("I feel fully responsible for bumping into them", "I feel it is my fault that I bumped into them", "They have been hurt by me bumping into them") and rated from 1 = *strongly disagree* to 5 = *strongly agree* ($\alpha = 0.91$).

9.1.3.3 | Interaction Avoidance

Using the same scale as in Studies 1 to 3, participants rated to what extent they would avoid the coworker, from 1 = *strongly disagree* to 7 = *strongly agree* ($\alpha = 0.93$).

9.1.3.4 | Powerlessness

Participants rated to what extent they felt powerless after this incident using the same measure as in Studies 2 and 3 on a scale from 1 = *strongly disagree* to 7 = *strongly agree* ($\alpha = 0.97$).

9.1.3.5 | Anger

Using the same three items as in the previous three studies, participants rated how angry they would feel after the coworker asked them to apologize on a scale from 1 = *not at all* to 5 = *extremely* ($\alpha = 0.93$).

9.2 | Results

9.2.1 | Manipulation Checks–Transgression Responsibility and Solicitation

We conducted a 2 (apology solicitation: solicited vs. no solicitation) \times 2 (transgression responsibility: high vs. low) ANOVA on each manipulation check. Results suggested that both experimental manipulations worked as intended.

For the transgression responsibility manipulation, we observed the following: participants in the high transgression responsibility condition reported greater felt transgression responsibility ($M = 4.11$, $SD = 0.91$) than the participants who were randomly assigned to the low transgression responsibility condition ($M = 2.03$, $SD = 1.06$). While there was a strong main effect of transgression responsibility, $F(1, 396) = 442.29$, $p < 0.001$, $\eta_p^2 = 0.53$, there was no main effect of solicitation, $F(1, 396) = 0.13$, $p = 0.715$, $\eta_p^2 < 0.001$. The interaction between felt transgression responsibility and solicitation was not significant, $F(1, 396) = 1.41$, $p = 0.236$, $\eta_p^2 = 0.00$.

We ran a similar analysis for the solicitation manipulation measure. Here, we observed that participants in the solicited condition reported higher perceived apology solicitation ($M = 6.36$, $SD = 1.09$) than participants in the no solicitation condition ($M = 2.10$, $SD = 1.63$). As intended, there was a strong main effect of solicitation, $F(1, 396) = 963.34$, $p < 0.001$, $\eta_p^2 = 0.71$, and a small main effect of transgression responsibility on perceived solicitation, $F(1, 396) = 7.25$, $p = 0.007$, $\eta_p^2 = 0.02$. Importantly, there was no significant interaction between the two manipulations (transgression responsibility and solicitation), $F(1, 396) = 0.02$, $p = 0.892$, $\eta_p^2 < 0.001$.

9.2.2 | Interaction Avoidance, Power, and Anger

In order to test the mean-level effects of apology solicitation and transgression responsibility we conducted 2 (solicitation) \times 2 (transgression responsibility) ANOVAs to predict powerlessness, anger, and interaction avoidance.

For powerlessness, we observed significant main effects of both apology solicitation, $F(1, 396) = 14.58$, $p < 0.001$, $\eta_p^2 = 0.04$, and transgression responsibility, $F(1, 396) = 34.96$, $p < 0.001$, $\eta_p^2 = 0.08$, as well as a significant interaction between solicitation and transgression responsibility, $F(1, 396) = 17.76$, $p < 0.001$, $\eta_p^2 = 0.04$. Simple effects analyses suggested that when transgression responsibility was low, participants in the solicited condition reported higher powerlessness ($M = 4.02$, $SD = 1.44$) than participants in the no solicitation condition ($M = 2.84$, $SD = 1.37$), $F(1, 396) = 32.09$, $p < 0.001$, $\eta_p^2 = 0.08$. In contrast, when participants had transgressed, powerlessness levels were not significantly different whether an apology had been solicited ($M = 4.27$, $SD = 1.52$) or not ($M = 4.32$, $SD = 1.53$), $F(1, 396) = 0.08$, $p = 0.779$, $\eta_p^2 < 0.001$.

The same analysis was run for anger. Here we also found main effects of apology solicitation, $F(1, 396) = 26.15$, $p < 0.001$, $\eta_p^2 = 0.06$, and transgression responsibility, $F(1, 396) = 7.14$, $p = 0.008$, $\eta_p^2 = 0.02$. The results also suggest a significant interaction between the two manipulations (solicitation \times transgression responsibility), $F(1, 396) = 18.13$, $p < 0.001$, $\eta_p^2 = 0.04$. When transgression responsibility was low, participants who were solicited with an apology reported significantly higher

anger ($M = 2.89$, $SD = 1.16$) than participants who were not solicited ($M = 1.90$, $SD = 0.92$), $F(1, 396) = 43.69$, $p < 0.001$, $\eta_p^2 = 0.10$. However, when transgression responsibility was high the anger levels did not significantly differ between the solicited ($M = 2.16$, $SD = 1.06$) and the no-solicitation condition ($M = 2.07$, $SD = 1.08$), $F(1, 396) = 0.37$, $p = 0.545$, $\eta_p^2 = 0.00$.

Lastly, for our dependent variable, interaction avoidance, we also observed significant main effects of the apology solicitation manipulation $F(1, 396) = 62.98$, $p < 0.001$, $\eta_p^2 = 0.14$, as well as of the transgression responsibility manipulation, $F(1, 396) = 7.54$, $p = 0.006$, $\eta_p^2 = 0.02$. The interaction between the two manipulations also significantly predicted interaction avoidance, $F(1, 396) = 22.68$, $p < 0.001$, $\eta_p^2 = 0.05$. Specifically, we found that when participants had not transgressed, participants who were asked to apologize had significantly higher avoidance intentions ($M = 4.84$, $SD = 1.59$) than participants who were not asked to apologize ($M = 2.69$, $SD = 1.61$), $F(1, 396) = 80.22$, $p < 0.001$, $\eta_p^2 = 0.17$. When transgression responsibility was high, being solicited to apologize still significantly increased avoidance intentions ($M = 4.50$, $SD = 1.79$) compared to when not being solicited ($M = 3.96$, $SD = 1.75$), $F(1, 396) = 5.06$, $p = 0.025$, $\eta_p^2 = 0.01$.

9.2.3 | Moderated Serial Mediation

We additionally tested whether the serial mediation process was moderated by transgression responsibility. This was tested using PROCESS Model 83 by Hayes (2013) with 5000 bootstrap samples.

The serial indirect effect of solicitation on avoidance via powerlessness and anger was significant when responsibility was low (indirect effect = 0.13, Boot $SE = 0.04$, 95% Boot CI [0.04, 0.21]), but not when responsibility was high (indirect effect = -0.01, Boot $SE = 0.03$, 95% Boot CI [-0.06, 0.04]). The index of moderated mediation for the serial pathway was also significant (index = -0.14, Boot $SE = 0.05$, 95% Boot CI [-0.25, -0.06]). Transgression responsibility significantly moderated the effect of solicitation of apology on powerlessness, such that the solicitation \times transgression responsibility interaction was significant, $b = -1.23$, $SE = 0.29$, $t(396) = -4.21$, $p < 0.001$, 95% CI [-1.81, -0.66]. See Figure 3 for the standardized regression coefficients and the full pathway.

9.3 | Discussion

Using a vignette design, this study further supports our proposed mechanism that apology solicitation can increase transgressors' avoidance intentions. The current findings highlight an important boundary condition for our model. Specifically, our findings suggested that our model is moderated by whether participants believed they were responsible for the incident. When transgression responsibility was low, apology solicitation reliably increased powerlessness, which then translated into greater anger and avoidance. In contrast, when responsibility was high, solicitation no longer increased powerlessness, and the serial indirect effect through powerlessness and anger was no longer present. This suggests that apology solicitation is most likely to trigger a loss-of-agency response - and the downstream consequences for reconciliation - when responsibility is ambiguous or contested.

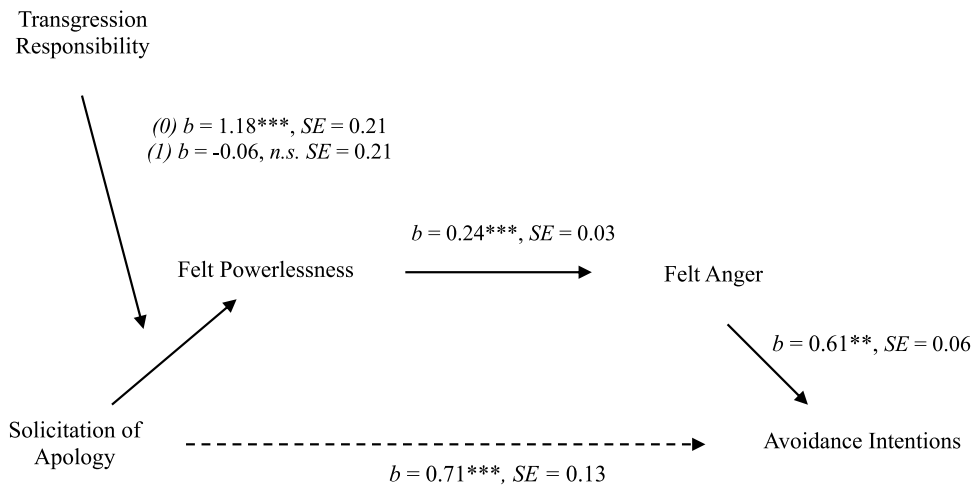


FIGURE 3 | Process Model 83 with pathway coefficients for Study 4—using felt powerlessness and anger as serial mediators, avoidance intentions as dependent variable and transgression responsibility as moderator. Transgression responsibility was coded, such that 0 was the low transgression responsibility manipulation and 1 was the high responsibility manipulation. Moderation is shown on the first-stage path only; the direct effect was not moderated. $^{***}p < 0.001$, $^{**}p < 0.01$, $^{*}p < 0.05$.

Overall, these findings refine our understanding of when the solicitation of an apology at the workplace can backfire. Rather than implying that asking for an apology is always harmful, the results suggest that solicitation is particularly costly in situations where the transgressor may not feel responsible.

10 | General Discussion

Through one pilot study, one micro-narrative study, two vignette-based studies, a behavioral study, and an experimental paradigm we examined the impact that soliciting an apology has on the transgressor's reconciliation behavior, namely the degree to which they would avoid the victim. Drawing upon negotiations frameworks and previous research on the experience of low power, we predicted that soliciting an apology would foster increased feelings of powerlessness in the transgressor, ultimately increasing the transgressor's anger and their likelihood of wanting to avoid the victim, particularly when responsibility is ambiguous, contested, or not fully acknowledged by the transgressor.

Our pilot study focused on the perspective of the victim in order to understand whether individuals solicit apologies at work, what elicits this behavior, and why victims would solicit an apology to begin with. Study 1 investigated the perspective of the transgressor to find further support for the prevalence of the phenomenon and to understand how transgressors feel when they are asked to apologize. Study 2 examined the full proposed model—namely the effect of soliciting an apology on the transgressor's avoidance behavior and the role of felt powerlessness and anger as mediators. Study 3 re-examined the full proposed model looking at real-time behavioral reactions to an apology being solicited. Study 4 tested whether transgression responsibility represents a boundary condition for the proposed serial mediation process.

10.1 | Theoretical Contributions

This research advances theory on conflict resolution, power dynamics, and post-transgression behavior in several keyways. First, while prior work has documented the interpersonal and

organizational benefits of apologies (Fehr et al. 2010), our findings complicate this narrative by showing that soliciting an apology, a common yet underexamined practice, can paradoxically hinder reconciliation. Rather than promoting interpersonal repair, apology demands can make transgressors feel powerless, angry, and ultimately more inclined to avoid the victim. In doing so, we identify a novel psychological mechanism, perceived loss of power, that explains how potentially well-intentioned attempts at repair can backfire.

Second, we contribute a negotiation-based framework for understanding post-transgression interactions. Drawing on the concept of BATNA (Best Alternative to a Negotiated Agreement) (Fisher et al. 1991; Kim and Fragale 2005), we theorize that apology demands deteriorate transgressors' perceived alternatives, transforming inaction into moral refusal and thereby reducing their power in the exchange. This builds on work showing that strong alternatives enhance perceived power and reduce pressure to concede (Pinkley 1995; Lee and Tiedens 2001), while poor alternatives lead individuals to feel constrained and react defensively (Thibaut and Gruder 1969; Berdahl and Martorana 2006). In this way, our account extends negotiation theory beyond economic or decision-based contexts and into the moral-emotional domain of conflict repair.

Third, we center the transgressor's perspective, an angle that remains underexplored in reconciliation research (Bies et al. 2016; Gollwitzer and Okimoto 2021; Leunissen et al. 2014). By examining both victim and transgressor reactions across multiple methods, including qualitative, scenario-based, and behavioral paradigms, we reveal a critical asymmetry: victims report emotional relief after soliciting apologies, while transgressors experience anger, diminished power, and social withdrawal. This dual-lens approach helps clarify why conflict resolution often falters despite seemingly constructive attempts at dialog.

10.2 | Limitations and Future Research Directions

We encourage future studies in the field of post-conflict reconciliation to explore alternative avenues for understanding the

consequences of soliciting apologies. While our results support our proposed mechanism, there are other potential pathways that could be explored. One promising avenue to investigate is rooted in the notion of the Needs-Based Model of Reconciliation (Shnabel and Nadler 2008) that transgressors are primarily driven by the need to repair their moral image post-conflict. Consequently, when victims solicit apologies from transgressors, it is conceivable that such actions may not align with the transgressors' objectives of moral restoration and may even exacerbate the tarnishing of their moral image. Future research should delve deeper into the intricate dynamics at play in these situations, examining not just the importance of felt power, but also the role of the transgressors' moral image. By exploring alternative paths and refining our understanding of the underlying psychological processes, we can contribute significantly to the development of more effective strategies for post-conflict reconciliation and conflict resolution.

Additionally, this research solely focuses on apology solicitations that are framed as demands as opposed to requests (e.g. "You owe me an apology" as opposed to "Could you apologize?"). Future studies should investigate whether more gentle requests for apologies would elicit the same negative responses. Based on our theoretical development, we expect that even polite requests will carry similar, albeit slightly weaker, consequences in workplace settings. Regardless of the tone, soliciting an apology constrains the transgressor's response options by making the request explicit and the lack of a response would still be considered as active refusal. As a result, transgressors may experience the same loss of agency and reduced negotiation power. However, considering the need for reconciliation at the workplace, it is important that future studies explore what framing and tone of such solicitations could reduce the negative effects explored here.

Although our mediation analyses are theoretically grounded and consistent across studies, we acknowledge the limitations of causal inference in mediation models (Fiedler et al. 2011). Future research could explore our proposed model longitudinally to better understand how long the effects of soliciting an apology on felt powerlessness, anger and avoidance behavior last. Directionally, however, based on recall evidence from Study 1, it appears that relationships were impacted negatively long-term post the solicitation of an apology, especially if the victim wasn't as close with the transgressor to begin with. Nonetheless, longer-term implications of the interactions studied, including for example relationship quality or team cohesion, could pose interesting future research avenues.

11 | Conclusion

This study investigates the consequences associated with victims' soliciting an apology from a transgressor. We explore the perspective of the victim to get initial insights on the behavior and utilize a transgressor-centric approach to study how the solicitation impacts the transgressor and as such the reconciliation process. We find that while victims overall feel more positive after they solicit an apology, transgressors on average respond negatively. Specifically, the solicitation leads the transgressor to want to avoid the victim more, driven by decreased feeling of power and the increased feeling of anger.

With these findings we hope to present initial insights on how the increased demand for apologies can have negative consequences.

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Endnotes

¹We also included an exploratory measure of *threat to power* (adapted from Thai et al. 2023) to assess transgressors' momentary sense of being undermined in the interaction (e.g., "My partner's response made me feel disrespected"). Although participants in the solicitation condition reported significantly greater threat to power than those in the control condition, this variable did not yield a significant serial mediation effect.

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