ORGANIZATIONAL APOLOGY AND DEFENSE: EFFECTS OF GUILT AND MANAGERIAL STATUS

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ABSTRACT

Prior research has shown that in the aftermath of an organizational product or service failure, accommodative communication approaches, such as apologies, are not just expected by the general public, but are also more beneficial to the organization in many ways, compared to defensive communication approaches. However, much of this research has assumed that communication decisions of this nature are shaped by factors that are purely rational or strategic. In this paper, the role that guilt—a moral emotion—plays in influencing accommodative versus defensive communication responses to organizational failure is examined. The data from two experimental studies show that individuals experiencing guilt are more inclined to apologize to external stakeholders. Contrary to expectations, a second study finds that guilt seems to increase the inclinations to engage in defensive communication following an organizational failure. This defensive tendency emerges only among managers, however, as opposed to non-managers.

Key Words: Guilt, moral emotion, managerial status, apology, defense

INTRODUCTION

Research in public relations and crisis communication (e.g., Coombs, 2004; Hearit, 2006) has shown that following a significant failure, various antecedents, including the likelihood of lawsuits, the organization's reputation, and its history of positive performance, influence how organizations communicate with external stakeholders, such as customers and the general public. With the exception of a few studies (e.g., Ketola, 2006), however, much of this research has assumed that communication decisions of this nature are ultimately made on the basis of rational cognitive processes (e.g., Boyd and Stahley, 2008). In response to crises, decision-makers are seen as individuals who act strategically, framing messages for external audiences and consciously taking constraints or parameters into consideration (e.g., Huang and Su, 2009). Accordingly, organizational representatives are viewed as making communication decisions "in the best interest" of the organization and, as employees whose personal outcomes depend on organizational success, are acting out of their own personal self-interest (e.g., Kline *et al*., 2009).

What research in this area has not examined thus far, however, is the influence of *moral emotions*: affective states triggered in response to situations in which the interests or welfare either of society at large or, at the very least, of persons other than a focal decision-maker, become salient (Haidt, 2003). By their very nature, organizational failures can often evoke negative moral emotions, not only among affected external stakeholders, such as customers who may experience the moral emotions of disgust or righteous anger (e.g., Kim and Cameron, 2011), but also among organizational members and decision-makers themselves, who may experience moral emotions, such as guilt or shame, over the failure (e.g., Ferguson *et al*., 2007). Taking a broader perspective, what shapes organizational communication following failure potentially reflects moral considerations that emerge during an organization's attempts at face-saving and

reputational recovery (e.g., Haidt and Joseph, 2007). Decisions, such as whether to publicly apologize or defend the organization, can prompt organizational representatives to consider the well-being of individuals other than their own. Thus, these communication decisions have, at their core, a moral dimension (Hearit, 2006; Marcus and Goodman, 1991). As such, these types of decisions are unlikely to be made purely on the basis of strategic considerations, or merely out of managerial "self-interest" (cf. Folger and Salvador, 2008).

This paper aims to extend research on organizational communication in response to failure by integrating the antecedent role of moral emotions. Specifically, the focus is on the influence of one such emotion that appears to be quite relevant in shaping decisions following a transgression or failure: *guilt*. The paper is structured as follows. In the succeeding section, a framework for characterizing organizational communication following failure is discussed. Next, an overview of theory and research on the behavioral correlates of guilt is presented. These two streams of research are then linked in the development of four hypotheses, which relate an individual's experience of guilt to his or her inclination to use particular communication approaches following an organizational failure. The results of two studies designed to test these hypotheses are reported. Finally, the contributions of this research to the extant literature, the implications for managerial practice, and the directions for future research are discussed.

ORGANIZATIONAL COMMUNICATION APPROACHES

In attempting to restore their reputation and relationship with external stakeholders, organizations employ communication approaches that can be broadly characterized either as *accommodative* or *defensive* (Coombs, 1998; Marcus and Goodman, 1991). Accommodative responses, which include full apologies and corrective action, are characterized by the organization taking full or substantial responsibility for the failure, and a sincere willingness to

repair the damage done. With respect to accommodative organizational approaches, and to apologies in particular, external stakeholders tend to respond quite positively. After all, what these stakeholders often expect and desire most is a sincere apology—a straightforward admission that the organization made a mistake (e.g., Mack *et al*., 2000; Smith *et al*., 1999). Indeed, empirical evidence indicates that apologizing and attempting to correct the damage from a company's failure can result in better company financial performance and a level of customer satisfaction greater than that prior to the failure (de Matos *et al*., 2007; Lee *et al*., 2004).

In contrast, defensive communication approaches, such as justification, excuses, and denial, focus on shielding the organization from criticism by minimizing the perceived extent of the damage or dissociating the organization from the failure. Not surprisingly, these defensive approaches tend to negatively impact customer perceptions of the organization and inadvertently create a worse public image (e.g., Boshoff and Leong, 1998). The following section explains why the experience of guilt among organizational communication decision-makers has the potential to influence the extent to which accommodative or defensive approaches are adopted.

GUILT

Guilt is an unpleasant affective state an individual experiences when others may have objections or potentially disapproving perceptions about his or her actions, inaction, or intentions (Baumeister *et al*., 1994). Typically, guilt results from having committed a transgression or a moral lapse that one regrets (Tangney *et al*., 2007; for exceptions, such as survivor guilt, see Brockner *et al*., 1986). As such, the experience of guilt comes with an uncomfortable focus on one's harmful behavior and the negative effects of such behavior on others (Tangney *et al*., 1996). To alleviate or cope with the emotional distress associated with guilt, individuals are thought to seek relief by engaging in prosocial behaviors: actions that are positive and directed

towards at least one individual other than the actor (Baumeister *et al*., 1994; Eisenberg, 1991). From both laboratory simulations and field studies, empirical evidence is indeed consistent with the proposition that guilt triggers prosocial behaviors, representing a desire to correct a transgression and set things right (Sheikh and Janoff-Bulman, 2010; cf. Tangney *et al*., 2007).

Guilt and Apology

Apologizing is one such prosocial behavior, as it entails positive actions and words that are other-directed (e.g., expressing empathy, personally acknowledging the damage or hurt experienced by another individual; Schlenker and Darby, 1981). Thus, given that guilt triggers a desire to correct a transgression and to engage in prosocial behaviors, it is reasonable to expect that individuals who are experiencing guilt will be more inclined to apologize following a failure or harmful behavior, relative to those who are not experiencing guilt.

Although previous research has examined a variety antecedents to apologetic behavior (e.g., severity of the offense, sex of the transgressor; cf. Hodgins and Liebeskind, 2003), there has been surprisingly limited empirical evidence examining the effect of guilt on apologizing. Notably, studies linking guilt to apologies have largely been correlational, involving self-reported guilt in the context of racial or ethnic relations. For example, among independent samples of Bosnian Serbs (Brown and Cehajic, 2008) and non-indigenous Chileans (Brown *et al*., 2008), the more individuals reported feeling guilty for the inhumane treatment of Bosnian Muslims and indigenous Chileans, respectively, the more they were willing to apologize to victims of historical transgressions, even though they themselves did not participate in these human rights violations. Similarly, in two studies conducted by McGarity *et al*. (2005), there were strong positive correlations, among white Australians, between self-reported levels of guilt experienced about the treatment of Aboriginal peoples and support for an official government

apology to the Aborigines. In these studies, the willingness to apologize for acts of violence appears to result from a self-reported *vicarious* or *collective* sense of guilt.

To our knowledge, the only study that explicitly links guilt as a discrete emotion with apology was conducted by Baumeister *et al*. (1995). In their experiment, each participant was asked to recall and write about two experiences in which they angered someone they knew personally: one in which they felt bad and guilty afterwards, and another in which they did not. Coding for the explicit mention of an apology in each of the stories, Baumeister *et al*. (1995) found that in the stories where the participants felt guilty, there was a greater frequency of retrospective reporting of apologizing to the offended party, compared to the "no guilt" stories.

It is noteworthy that, at least to our knowledge, in none of the previous studies has there been direct evidence establishing a *causal* link between feelings of guilt and the inclination to apologize. In organizational contexts, guilt potentially influences a spokesperson's inclination to apologize on behalf of an organization. Organizational failures potentially evoke guilt among organizational members, including spokespersons and decision-makers. To the extent that such individuals experience guilt, even just vicariously (i.e., they feel guilt even though they themselves were not directly responsible for the failure), their communication to the public is more likely to include prosocial and accommodative elements, apologies in particular. Thus:

> ***H1***: Individuals experiencing feelings of guilt are more inclined to apologize for an organizational failure than individuals who are not experiencing guilt.

Guilt and Defense

Given the assumption that accommodative communication approaches, such as apologies, are the polar opposite of defensive approaches (Coombs, 1998; Marcus and Goodman, 1991), and the assertion that guilt increases the inclination to apologize, it seems reasonable to

expect that the experience of guilt will have a *negative* effect on an organizational representative's inclination to defend the organization following failure. However, there is an additional reason to expect why guilt would presumably influence an individual to be less inclined to engage in defensive communication responses in an organizational failure context.

Amodio *et al*. (2007) proposed what they labeled as a "dynamic model" of guilt, which, ironically, posits that an initial, immediate consequence of guilt is a reduction in one's approach motivation. Drawing on empirical evidence from other studies (e.g., Monteith *et al*., 2002) as well as their own, Amodio *et al*. (2007) argued that aside from promoting prosocial behavior, guilt also serves the complementary proximal function of inhibiting offensive behavior, interrupting ongoing transgressive action, and prompting individuals to be more vigilant of their own actions and environmental cues that are relevant sources of feedback. So, aside from increasing the desire to engage in prosocial, reparative behaviors, guilt also induces individuals to avoid doing or saying things that could constitute a transgression, or make a transgression worse. To the extent that these reparative and prosocial behaviors are ethical and socially responsible, this theorized effect of guilt on behavior is consistent with hypotheses suggesting that guilt promotes and encourages future behavior that is moral and compliant with social norms and rules (Tangney and Dearing, 2002).

In the aftermath of an organizational failure, defensive communication approaches, such as those that outrightly dissociate the organization from the failure, constitute behaviors that are likely to be seen as aggravating or making the situation worse (Hodgins *et al*., 1996). Individuals experiencing guilt are therefore more likely to avoid engaging in communicating defensively after an organizational failure than those who are not experiencing guilt. Therefore:

H2: Individuals experiencing feelings of guilt are less inclined to defend an organization in response to organizational failure than individuals who are not experiencing guilt.

The Moderating Influence of Managerial Status

In examining the effect of guilt on the inclination to apologize or communicate defensively after an organizational failure, one potential boundary condition is the managerial status of the decision-maker, i.e., whether the individual is a manager or not. Folger and Cropanzano (2010) suggested that higher status individuals, such as managers, as opposed to lower status individuals (i.e., non-managers), are more likely to experience guilt, as the result of a greater potential to feel that they generally enjoy an unfair advantage. That said, independent of the likelihood of experiencing guilt, managerial status alters the perspective of the individual, such that the effect of emotions, in general, on intentions or behaviors is moderated by the individual's managerial status. Working in a managerial rank demands that emotions and their behavioral consequences be strategically monitored, particularly when the emotion could be misconstrued as a sign of weakness (Hine, 2004). In addition, compared to non-managers, managers are under greater pressure and have to be more accountable when dealing with the complex environment of the organization through accumulation and systematization of information (Hales, 1986). Thus, in the course of their work, managers, more than non-managers, tend to rationalize emotions, allowing them to strategically modify the intensity of emotions they may be experiencing, and to cope with the ambiguous and often stressful nature of their work (e.g., Vince, 2006).

With respect to apologizing, this implies that although, on average, individuals who are experiencing guilt are more inclined to apologize for an organizational failure than those who do not feel guilty, this difference will be attenuated among managers. Managers characteristically

perceive admitting fault in public as a sign of weakness that undermines their authority (Jackall, 1988). In addition, among organizational members, it is the managers, as opposed to the non-managers, who are more likely to receive constant reminders from lawyers and compliance personnel about how public apologies can make the organization vulnerable to litigation (Neckers, 2002). Thus, compared to non-managers, managers are more likely to rationalize the guilt they experience, and exert more effort to consciously regulate the inclination to apologize when they are experiencing guilt. Consequently:

H3: The positive effect of guilt on intent to apologize for an organizational failure will be less among managers than it will be for non-managers.

With respect to defending the organization following an organizational failure, an analogous attenuating effect of managerial status can be expected. Recall that on average, individuals who are experiencing guilt are expected to be less inclined to defend their organization following an organizational failure than those who do not feel guilty. By the very nature of their work, however, managers are more likely to seek to legitimize their organizations' goals and strategies, and to defend the organization's legitimacy when it is challenged, compared to non-managers (cf. Ashforth and Gibbs, 1990). Thus, compared to non-managers, managers are more likely to rationalize guilt when they experience it, perhaps even discount it, when presented with an opportunity to defend their organization in the aftermath of a product failure.

H4: The negative effect of guilt on intent to defend the organization after failure will be less among managers than it will be for non-managers.

OVERVIEW OF THE STUDIES

In this paper, two studies are presented. Study 1 was designed as a pilot study to verify the efficacy of the narrative-recall approach in inducing guilt, as well as an exploratory

investigation into the main effect of guilt on an individual's decision to apologize for an organizational failure. That study tests only Hypothesis 1. Study 2 was intended to constructively replicate this effect and to test the other three hypotheses. As Hypotheses 3 and 4 necessitated a comparison between subsets of employed people, the sample was deliberately limited to those who were substantially, gainfully employed. As such, only those who were working at least half of a typical 40-hour workweek (i.e., 20 hours) were included in Study 2.

Following extant experimental research on inducing guilt, the narrative-recall approach was used. Participants were asked to recall and provide a written account of a personal experience meant to induce a specific emotion (in this case, guilt), or to put them in a neutral emotional state. Adopting the essence of the protocols used by Weiner *et al*. (1982), participants were asked specifically to recall the emotions they felt through that experience. After the emotion induction, participants were asked to read a vignette that depicted a product failure that caused injuries to a number of customers, and to respond to measures of intent to engage in organizational apology and defense. Because previous research indicates, albeit equivocally, that women tend to apologize more than men (e.g., Bean and Johnstone, 1994), sex was examined as a potential covariate in our analyses.

STUDY 1

Sample and Procedure

One hundred three undergraduate business students from a public university in the southeastern United States participated in the first study. The average participant was 24.2 years old (SD = 5.2) and over one-third of the sample (34.9%) was female. Notably, a vast majority (77.7%) of the participants reported working at least part-time, with the average work experience being 5.9 years (SD = 5.7).

Participants were randomly assigned to one of two conditions: *guilt* versus *control*. In the *guilt* condition, participants were asked to recall and write in detail about an incident in which they felt "very guilty." In the *control* condition, participants were simply asked to recall and write in detail about their typical day. Following this writing task, all participants were asked to complete a manipulation check measure. Subsequently, they were asked to read a vignette describing the malfunction of a fictional medical assistance device called the Lift-Chair (see Appendix). Participants were then asked to imagine themselves in the role of MedTech's CEO, who was scheduled to conduct a press briefing. Subsequently, they were asked to indicate their intention to emphasize statements of apology in their message. Finally, participants were asked to respond to questions regarding demographics, including sex and employment status (e.g., working vs. not working, years of work experience).

Dependent measure

The participants' apology response was measured as the average of a two-item scale designed particularly for this study. Participants were asked to indicate the extent to which they intended to emphasize these two statements as part of their press briefing, using a seven-point response format (1 = "to a small extent," 7 = "to a large extent"): "We are sorry if anyone sustained an injury associated with the use of the Lift-Chair" and "We sincerely apologize for the injuries associated with the use of the Lift-Chair." These two items were significantly correlated ($r = 0.29$, $p < 0.01$) and were thus combined into a single measure.

Results

A manipulation check subsequent to the writing task revealed that as intended, participants in the guilt condition indicated a higher average level of state guilt than those in the control condition, $t(65) = 4.14$, $p < 0.001$. The intent to emphasize the apology statements did

not differ by sex, $t(99) = -0.51$, $p > 0.05$, nor between non-working and working participants, $t(99) = 0.36$, $p > 0.05$. As predicted, participants in the guilt condition indicated a greater inclination, on average, to emphasize the statements of apology in their message compared to participants in the control condition, M(*guilt*) = 5.58 vs. M(*control*) = 4.91, d = 0.41, $t(101) = 2.11$, $p < 0.05$. Thus, Hypothesis 1 was supported.

This study provided evidence for the hypothesized main effect of an individual's experience of guilt on his or her inclination to apologize for an organizational failure, as reflected by the participant's intent to emphasize statements of apology in the press briefing. That said, one limitation of this study is that the results of the data analysis may suffer from a lack of external validity because the participants, who were undergraduate students, might not have really appreciated what it means to make a decision at the highest level of an organization. In the next study, this threat to external validity was addressed by limiting the sample of participants to those who were actually working at least part-time at the time of data collection and by asking them to take the perspective of company spokesperson, instead of CEO.

STUDY 2

Sample and Procedure

One hundred fifty-five working undergraduate business students from a public university in the southeastern United States constituted the sample in this second study. The average participant was 25.9 years old (SD = 8.6), working 32.2 hours per week (SD = 8.9); close to half of the sample (49.0%) was female. 26.5% of participants reported working in a managerial role.

As with the previous study, participants were randomly assigned to either the *guilt* condition or the *control* condition. Following their writing task, they were asked to read a vignette about the malfunction of the Lift-Chair, similar to what participants read in Study 1.

However, the following statement was added as the antepenultimate sentence, to provide a context for defensive responses: “There were also indications from your production department that some components of the Lift-Chair that were manufactured by WC Products, one of your long-time suppliers, may have been substandard and may have caused the product failure.”

Participants were then asked to imagine themselves in the role of company spokesperson, scheduled to conduct a press briefing and to indicate their intention to emphasize statements of apology or defense in their message. Finally, participants were asked to respond to questions regarding demographics, including sex, employment status, and managerial status (i.e., manager vs. non-manager). Notably, there was no significant difference between individuals who were excluded from (i.e., those who were working less than 20 hours per week) and those who were included in the final sample, in terms of the mean levels of the dependent measures: intent to emphasize statements of apology, $t(164) = 1.12$, $p > 0.05$, or defense, $t(164) = 0.39$, $p > 0.05$.

Dependent Measures

Apology. The participants’ apology response was measured as the average of the same two-item scale used in Study 1, indicating the extent to which they intended to emphasize two statements of apology at their press conference, using a seven-point response format (1 = “to a small extent,” 7 = “to a large extent”). The two items were significantly correlated ($r = 0.45$, $p < 0.01$) and were thus combined into a single index.

Defense. The participants’ defensive response was measured as the average of a two-item scale, indicating their intent to attribute their failure to the company supplier, WC Products, and to dissociate their company, MedTech, from that supplier. A seven-point response format ranging from 1 (*to a small extent*) to 7 (*to a large extent*) was used. The two statements, “What our suppliers do is beyond our control as a company,” and “WC Products, which supplies some

of our components, is a company independent of MedTech," were significantly correlated ($r = 0.55$, $p < 0.001$), and were thus combined into an index.

Results

As expected, a manipulation check subsequent to the writing task revealed that participants in the guilt condition indicated a higher average level of state guilt than those in the control condition, $t(144) = 2.06$, $p < 0.05$. Moreover, results of a principal components factor analysis indicated that the two items used to measure apology constituted a factor independent of that consisting of the two items used to measure defense, with none of the cross-loadings exceeding 0.12.

A multivariate analysis of variance (MANOVA) was conducted to examine the effect of condition on the two dependent measures. The intent to emphasize the apology statements did not differ between females and males, $t(153) = 0.17$, $p > 0.05$. However, because males in the sample were more inclined to emphasize the defensive statements compared to the females, $t(153) = 2.20$, $p < 0.05$, sex was incorporated as a fixed factor (covariate) in the models.

The MANOVA results indicate that controlling for the marginally significant effect of participant sex (Wilks' $\Lambda = 0.96$, $F(2,149) = 2.89$, $p = 0.06$), there was a statistically significant effect of condition (Wilks' $\Lambda = 0.94$, $F(2,149) = 5.05$, $p < 0.01$) and a marginally significant interaction effect of condition and managerial status (Wilks' $\Lambda = 0.97$, $F(2,149) = 2.40$, $p = 0.09$) on the bivariate dependent measures of apology response and defensive response. As a follow up, separate analyses of variance (ANOVAs) were conducted for apology and for defense.

The ANOVA results supported Hypothesis 1. As expected, individuals assigned to the guilt condition indicated a greater degree of intent to apologize ($M = 6.02$, $SD = 1.08$) than did those assigned to the control condition ($M = 5.49$, $SD = 1.38$; $F(1,150) = 7.34$, $p < 0.01$, d =

0.43). However, the results did not support Hypothesis 2. Individuals assigned to the guilt condition did not indicate less of an inclination to be defensive about their product (M = 3.28, SD = 1.61) than those in the control condition (M = 3.07, SD = 1.41, $F(1,150) = 3.15$, $p > 0.05$).

Likewise, the ANOVA results did not support Hypothesis 3. The interaction effect between condition and managerial status was not statistically significant, in terms of predicting intention to apologize ($F(1,150) = 1.04$, $p > 0.05$). On the other hand, there was a significant interaction between condition and managerial status in terms of defensive response, ($F(1,150) = 3.94$, $p < 0.05$). That said, the pattern of the interaction was not consistent with Hypothesis 4. Specifically, among managerial participants, guilt had a simple effect on intention to be defensive ($F(1,39) = 4.16$, $p < 0.05$), such that participants assigned to the guilt condition indicated a significantly higher level of intention to emphasize the defensive statements (M = 3.71, SD = 1.56) than did those who were assigned to the control condition (M = 2.77, SD = 1.36). Among non-managerial participants, there was no such simple effect ($F(1,112) = 0.02$, $p > 0.05$). Notably, there was no main effect of managerial status on apology ($F(1,150) = 0.87$, $p > 0.05$) or defense ($F(1,150) = 0.04$, $p > 0.05$). Figure 1 illustrates the nature of the interaction.

Insert Figure 1 about here

GENERAL DISCUSSION

Prior research has shown that in the aftermath of an organizational failure, different types of public accounts have differential effects on public attitudes. Prior research has been less informative, however, about *why* these types of accounts come to be. The overarching objective of this paper was to address this gap, by examining the role of guilt, a moral emotion, in explaining these types of public accounts, specifically apology and defense. Results from these

two studies suggest that when individuals feel guilty, they are more inclined to apologize for an organizational failure than when they are not feeling guilty. What is remarkable is that the effect of guilt on apology was non-trivial and was remarkably consistent (Cohen's d of 0.41 and 0.43, from Study 1 and Study 2, respectively), despite the fact that the guilt induction was based on past, personal experiences of guilt that, presumably, had nothing to do with the failures depicted in the vignettes. Taken together, these observed effects constitute evidence that the experience of guilt causes an increased inclination to apologize for organizational failure. Notably, as an emotional state, guilt appears to increase the likelihood of apologizing regardless of the apology context. This conjecture may very well be the subject of future empirical study.

That said, neither the hypothesized main effect of guilt on defense nor the hypothesized attenuating effect of managerial status (on both dependent measures) was supported by the data. Instead, it appears that it is precisely among managers, rather than non-managers, that guilt increases the inclination to defend the organization following a failure. The absence of a main effect of managerial status discounts the explanation that the observed interaction effect is largely accounted for by the presumed tendency of managers to be more defensive about their organization's failure, compared to non-managers. Rather, it is possible that managerial status constitutes a boundary condition that activates a counterintuitive influence of guilt on an individual's decision to communicate in defense of an organization. Given the very specific manner in which defensive response was operationalized in Study 2 (i.e., attributing the failure to another entity), the conclusion that guilt tends to make managers more inclined to be defensive, compared to non-managers, is a tentative one that warrants further empirical scrutiny.

Nevertheless, the reported results challenge the assumption that decisions regarding communications with the public following an organizational failure are purely rational. Overall,

the studies presented have addressed a key question that prior studies have not asked: what are the *non-rational* causes of the kinds of responses that appear in communications to the public following an organizational failure? Thus, these studies extend the current research on managerial decision-making within the realm of organizational communication by demonstrating that a moral emotion, such as guilt, is an antecedent that can shape decisions regarding communication approaches following a product or service failure. To be sure, "rational" concerns regarding the legal and financial dimensions of a failure are still likely to influence the content of the messages that companies will craft. However, the findings reported here suggest that non-trivial variation in the content of these messages, particularly in the extent to which an organizational representative chooses to apologize to affected stakeholders, may be attributed to an additional antecedent (and possibly an entire class of antecedents): the representative's affective state. This is certainly consistent with extant neuropsychological research suggesting that an individual's emotions shape his or her judgments that involve a moral dimension (cf. Salvador and Folger, 2009). In this case, guilt constitutes a strong moral emotion that can change an individual's "natural" rational and strategic tendencies of decision-making in the realm of organizational communication approaches, in response to product or service failures.

In terms of the practice of management, the results of these studies have an important implication. In response to organizational failures or transgressions, accommodative organizational communication approaches, such as apologies, are not just expected by the general public, but are also beneficial in restoring organizational reputation. The results of these studies suggest that perhaps encouraging organizational decision-makers not to rationalize or discount their feelings of guilt following an organizational failure may be useful in helping them craft messages that are likely to evoke more positive responses from external stakeholders. More

broadly, the results of this research may also help managers more fully appreciate the potential influence of moral emotions on what may seem as purely strategic choices, especially in the context of an organizational failure. Over the long run, such an appreciation may enrich and facilitate the process of managerial decision-making involving communication choices aimed at repairing or fortifying relationships with stakeholders.

In drawing these theoretical and practical implications, these studies do have their limitations. First, both studies used a very specific hypothetical product-failure situation in response to which participants were asked to signify their communication intentions. Although the organizational failure depicted was plausible, future studies might want to constructively replicate these findings using other product or service failure scenarios. Second, the dependent measures were designed to tap into very specific, and thus quite limited, types of organizational responses. The extent to which the effects of guilt observed in this study would hold for other types of accommodative responses (cf. Coombs, 1998), such as statements explicitly admitting responsibility, or other types of defensive responses, such as those that discount or minimize the extent of the damage done, is an empirical question that warrants future research attention. Thirdly, aside from gender and work experience, the studies did not measure other demographic variables that may have also systematically explained variance in the dependent measures. Given the geographic location of the samples and the moral dimension of this type of organizational communication, participant religiosity or creed is one such variable that future studies might take into account as a relevant covariate that may further explain individuals' intent to apologize or to defend their organization. Fourthly, the participants in both studies were not necessarily employed in positions where apologizing on behalf of their organization was a central part of their role. This might be seen as a threat to the ecological validity of the findings.

However, although organizations may have particular employees formally tasked with communication with external stakeholders (including having to communicate an apology when called for), input regarding decisions involving external communications are solicited, even informally, from individuals from a variety of functional areas within organizations (e.g., Ruth-McSwain, 2011). Given the potential for any organizational member to be asked to make recommendations (or at least to share her thoughts) regarding external communications involving organizational apologies or defense, the participant samples are thus appropriate. Nonetheless, there is scope for conducting constructive replications of this study involving individuals in organizational positions that call for apologizing on behalf of the company on a regular basis. Lastly, the seemingly artificial induction of guilt prior to the decision-making task (i.e., randomly assigning individuals to recall a personal guilt-related experience) might also be seen as a threat to the generalizability of these findings. This methodology was used because it provided a valid basis to test the *causal* relationship between guilt and communication responses to failure, but may not translate well to the experience of guilt in the workplace, particularly as a consequence of some organizational failure. Although challenging to execute in the context of actual organizations, future field experiments might address this inherent limitation.

CONCLUSION

The goal of this paper was to examine the influence of moral emotions on organizational apologetic and defensive responses after an organizational failure. The findings provide a new viewpoint integrating the organizational communications and moral psychology literatures in the context of managerial decision-making. In pursuing this research, this paper has hopefully stimulated future management scholarship and practice to further examine ways by which companies might “do well by doing good.”

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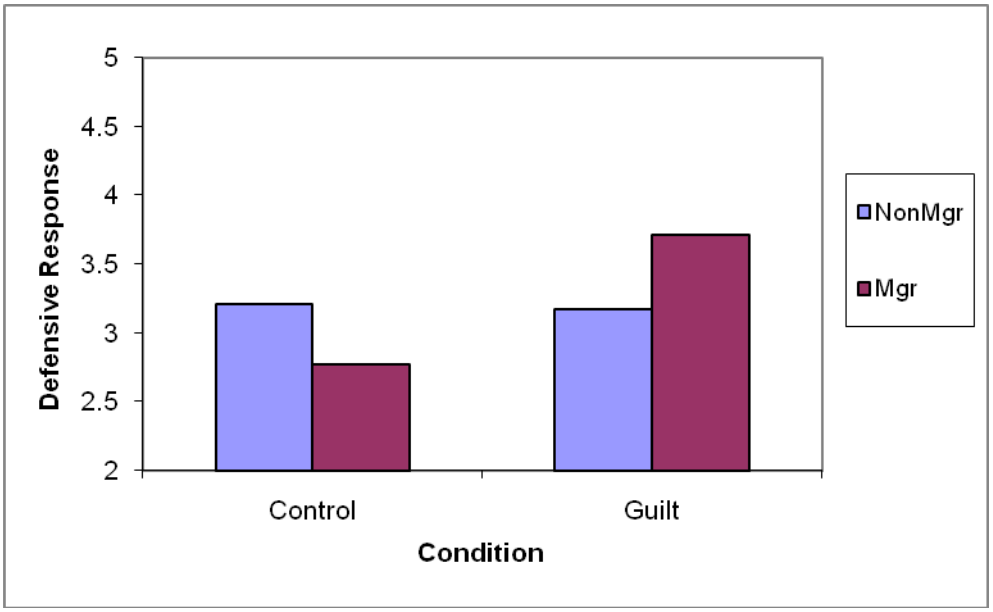
FIGURE 1
INTERACTION EFFECT OF CONDITION AND MANGERIAL STATUS ON DEFENSIVE RESPONSE



APPENDIX

MedTech Products is a large company (profits of $100-200 million per year) that has been manufacturing many types of medical equipment, including wheelchairs, car-lifts, and other devices used by the disabled, for over 50 years now. The Lift-Chair, a device that allows someone to be carried up stairs in a chair that moves up and down an angled track, is the latest product of MedTech. Instead of producing a new design, company engineers decided to adapt the design of the hydraulic lifts for cars already on the market. To date, there have been over 2,000 units of the Lift-Chair that have been sold in the market.

Unfortunately, there were several unique problems in designing a safe and effective Lift-Chair that were beyond the experience of the company engineers. Reports have been circulating in the popular press, quoting anonymous but allegedly reliable sources within MedTech, that product managers at the company thought hiring new engineers with the proper expertise was too expensive, and would take too long. Instead, these managers reportedly ordered their current engineers to just do their best, making sure they met the deadline for announcing the product. The possible inexperience of the engineers and the rush to meet the product announcement deadline apparently may have led to testing procedures that met the minimum federal standards, but were much less rigorous than those recommended by product safety experts. Recently, four individuals from three states have reported being injured in non-life threatening accidents involving the failure of one of the chains on the Lift-Chair.