

# Rich and famous have a lot to learn when it comes to saying sorry, study finds

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Doing it the wrong way: I'm sorry, but it's not my fault. Singer Chris Brown apologized after trashing his dressing room after a Good Morning America interview went wrong, then blamed the show's producers for provoking him.

Rutgers sociologist Karen Cerulo has a suggestion for you if you're rich and famous and say or do something that offends millions of people: Say you're sorry. Say it to your victims. Begin and end the apology with those you've wronged and don't try to explain or excuse what you did.

In a paper recently published in *Social Psychology Quarterly*, Cerulo, a professor of sociology in the School of Arts and Sciences, and Janet

Ruane of Montclair State University report on their study of 183 public apologies made by celebrities between October 2000, and October 2012. They relied on [public opinion polls](#) to determine how successful each [apology](#) was.

"It wasn't surprising when we found out what works," Cerulo says. "What surprised us was how few people used what works. They (the apologizing celebrities) have people who advise them, but they ignore that advice because people of their status just can't admit that they're wrong."

As poster children for ineffective public apologies, Cerulo cites basketball player LeBron James and singer Chris Brown.

Brown, who pled guilty to assaulting his girlfriend, Rihanna, appeared on Good Morning America, where he tried to explain himself. When the interviewer asked a question Brown had previously said he would not answer, he trashed his dressing room. He later apologized publically, but then said, "I felt like they (the staff of GMA) told us this (that they would not ask the question the interviewer asked) so they could get us on the show so they can exploit me." To say you're sorry, but it's not your fault is ineffective, Cerulo says.



Doing it the right way: I was wrong and I'm really, really sorry. Marion Jones, the Olympic sprinter who lied to the authorities about using steroids, then admitted both the steroid use and the lie. Credit: Thomas Faive-Duboz

James became a star with the Cleveland Cavaliers but then took a huge increase in pay to jump to the Miami Heat. Apologizing to the people of Cleveland, he then said that he couldn't pass up the opportunity to play for more money in Miami. "I apologize for the way it happened," James said. "But I knew this opportunity was once in a lifetime." Polls and comments posted on websites indicated that the people of Cleveland were not mollified.

Cerulo and Ruane conclude that "public apologies are, first and foremost, media events." That being the case, they write, successful public apologies must adhere to the cultural norms of mass communication and resonate with audience expectations. It's not just what one says that counts; it's how one says it.

President Bill Clinton's public apology for engaging in illicit sex and lying about it hit all the marks that Cerulo and Ruane consider essential: He admitted what he had done and made no excuses for it; he shouldered the blame; and he made the apology about the victims – the American people, his wife and daughter. (Clinton's apology, which happened in 1998, wasn't part of Cerulo's study.)

Marion Jones's 2007 apology for using steroids to help win track and field competitions, including medals in the 2000 Olympic Games, was part of the study. "It is with a great amount of shame that I stand before you and tell you that I have betrayed your trust," Jones began. After apologizing to teammates, fans, family and [friends](#), Jones said, "I hope you can find it in your heart to forgive me."

Since Cerulo's article came out, actor Gary Oldman was quoted by Playboy defending homophobic and anti-semitic rants by other actors. He then apologized, but not very successfully. Read more about that, and Cerulo's research on apologies, in [this New Republic piece](#).

**More information:** Karen A. Cerulo and Janet M. Ruane. "Apologies of the Rich and Famous: Cultural, Cognitive, and Social Explanations of Why We Care and Why We Forgive." *Social Psychology Quarterly* June 2014 77: 123-149, [DOI: 10.1177/0190272514530412](https://doi.org/10.1177/0190272514530412)

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