

Situational Determinants of Forgiveness

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Abstract: This study examined situational determinants of forgiveness in which disposition to forgive and situational factors were examined as predictors of forgiveness in a specific situation. One hundred and twenty eight undergraduate students (76 males and 52 females) aged between 18 and 28 years (Mean = 22.03, SD = 6.1) took part in the study. Factors that predicted unique variance in forgiveness of a specific offence were the offended party disposition to forgive, the value they placed on the relationship with the transgressor, positive offender actions and expecting the transgressor to repeat the offence. The findings support the idea that interpersonal forgiveness involves the interplay of factors that are both internal and external to individuals.

Key words: Forgiveness, transgressor, relationship, disposition, determinants

INTRODUCTION

In recent years, forgiveness has received increasing attention as its role in maintaining interpersonal relationships and contributing to well-being has been recognised (Exline and Baumeister, 2000; McCullough *et al.*, 2000). The context of forgiveness is an interpersonal hurt or transgression perpetrated by another. When a person forgives their thoughts, feelings and behaviors toward the offender become less negative and more positive (McCullough *et al.*, 2000). Forgiveness can further be seen as a prosocial act, whereby motivations to avoid and/or seek revenge against the transgressor are replaced with a motivation to maintain a positive relationship (McCullough *et al.*, 2000).

Any construct that may have a beneficial impact on the quality of human relationships is worth studying. With the high divorce rate, as well as the loss of confidence in what used to be stable institutions of our society, Wuthnow (2001). It is worth investigating whether developing one's disposition of forgiveness may help repair some of these fractured relationships. Many books about this emphasize that to forgive is a process of pardoning persons that have wronged oneself and making amends to those that one has wronged, depending upon whether a given individual is on the giving or receiving end of forgiveness. With all the beneficial of forgiveness to physical and mental health, perhaps, its greatest potential benefit is interpersonal the way it can make relationships healthier (Harvey and Brenner, 1997).

Some researchers have said that forgiveness may increase one sense of connectedness and belonging to a community. Social support may increase as a result of others perceiving that the forgiver is sacrificing

something and being of service to others in some way, as a result of engaging in forgiveness (Thoresen *et al.*, 2000). It is possible to see forgiveness as a kind of motivational and relational transition (Rusbult *et al.*, 1991) in which, when people forgive, they inhibit those destructive responses that would further injure the relationship and instead use constructive responses that help restore the broken relationship to where it was before the offense occurred. Forgiveness is probably, an integral part of the concept of social interest, because social interest encompasses interest in others and in the community and implies empathy, sympathy, understanding, cooperation and concern for the common good of all Crandall (1981). It seems likely that forgiveness would be part of this diverse and altruistic package of concepts. Social interest involves transcending the limits of the self and achieving the ability to identify and empathize with others. It means being able to see another's point of view and to care about doing this and work at it.

Forgiveness is known to enhance the quality of interpersonal and romantic relationships (Berry and Worthington, 2001; McCullough *et al.*, 2003; Fincham and Beach, 2002) as well as physical and psychological well-being (McCullough and Hoyt, 2002). Although, research on forgiveness has proliferated in the past decade, no consensus exist on what constitutes forgiveness. For example, some researchers emphasized that reconciliation is an important aspect of forgiveness (Hargrave and Sells, 1997); while others argued that forgiveness dose not necessarily involve reconciliation with the offending party (Enright and Human Development Study Group, 1996). Despite the lack of a consensus, it is commonly held that interpersonal forgiveness involves a decrease in negative responses (e.g., retaliation) and an increase in positive

responses (e.g., conciliation) towards the transgressor (Kachadourian *et al.*, 2004; McCullough *et al.*, 1997) and both types of response are evoked and expressed in terms of behavior, affect and cognition.

Increasing evidence suggests that transgression related contextual factors predict a person's situational forgiveness, i.e., forgiveness following a specific transgression. These can be grouped as factors related to the characteristics of the transgression, the transgressor and the relationship.

Regarding transgression characteristics, a transgression viewed as severe and hurtful may be more difficult to forgive because severe transgression have more enduring consequences (Boon and Sulsky, 1997). Research supports this view, with more severe transgressions reported as harder to forgive (Brown and Phillips, 2005). Transgressor-related factors include positive transgressor actions such as apologies, remorseful statements and attempts to rectify damage caused (McCullough *et al.*, 1998; Ristovski and Wertheim, 2005). Perception that the transgressor's actions were not intentionally malicious has also been linked to more forgiveness (Boon and Sulsky, 1997). A further factor might be whether an injured party sees forgiving as risky due to an expectation that the transgressor will repeat the offence. Finally, characteristics of the relationship with the offender include the level of pre-offence closeness and commitment and the value the offended party places on their relationship post-offence. Each is likely to predict forgiveness since greater investment in a relationship may increase motivation to retain it (McCullough *et al.*, 1998). Studies have shown that willingness to forgive is increased in relationships in which individuals feel satisfied, close and committed (McCullough *et al.*, 1998; Rusbult *et al.*, 2005).

The first aim was to examine how well disposition to forgive predicts an individual's willingness to forgive following a specific transgression? The second aim was to examine the role of disposition to forgive in the context of a broader model predicting forgiveness following a specific transgression; this model integrated disposition to forgive and situational factors related to the transgression (offence severity, positive offender action, perceived non-malicious intent of offender, expecting the transgressor to reoffend, valuing the relationship and pre-offence closeness/commitment to the offender). It was hypothesized that would predict unique variance in forgiveness of a specific transgression over and above situational factors.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

One hundred and twenty eight undergraduate students (76 males, 52 females) aged between 18 and 28 years (Mean = 22.03, SD = 6.1) took part in the study.

Measures: Participant thought of an actual recent hurtful action by another, which they described and then completed the Transgression-Related Interpersonal Motivations Inventory (TRIM-18-R) (McCullough and Hoyt, 2002), which assesses motivations to forgive the transgressor on 3 dimensions: avoidance, revenge and benevolence towards the transgressor. Internal consistency, test-retest reliability and construct validity have been demonstrated for avoidance and revenge (McCullough *et al.*, 1998, 2001), with a new scale, benevolence, showing internal consistency and predictive ability, but high *r* with avoidance (McCullough and Hoyt, 2002).

Two questions Tsang *et al.* (2006) with previously reported construct validity assessed pre-offence closeness and commitment (e.g., indicate how close you were to the person who hurt you before the offence). Participants also rated offence severity on a scale from 1 = not at all serious to 10 = extremely serious.

Forty three items, which measured transgression-related contextual factors were rated from strongly disagree (1) to strongly agree (5), reflecting: positive offender actions (e.g., the person who hurt me apologised), perceived offender intent (I realized that what they did was not personal), expectation of likelihood of transgressor re-offending (I believed the person would never do it again, reversed item) and value placed on the relationship with the offender (I realized I valued the relationship with the person). Items were derived from respondent descriptions in a forgiveness interview study (Wertheim, 2003). An additional sample of 216 participants (mean age = 31.0, SD = 13.7), range 18-29, completed these situational factors items regarding a specific transgression to obtain a sample of 344 for exploring internal structure of these items.

Procedure: Following university ethics approval, students were asked to participate in a study of factors that determine forgiveness. Participants received a packet containing instructions and an anonymous questionnaire and were informed that consent was taken as given on completing the questionnaire.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

A principal component analysis with varimax rotation was conducted on the 43 new situational items yielding 5 factors with eigenvalues over 1.0; however, scree plot indicated only four should be interpreted and some items loaded >0.40 on two factors, or <0.40 on the first 4 factors. On removing those items, a principal component analysis on 31 items yielded four clear non-overlapping factors labeled positive offender action (18 items), eigenvalue = 17.1, percentage variance = 43.9%; valued relationship

(5 items), eigenvalue = 4.95, 12.4%; nonmalevolent intent (5 items), eigenvalue = 1.43, 3.7%. Subscales were created from the sum of item scores. Cronbach's alphas for subscales were satisfactory (Table 1).

Descriptive analysis: Normality and linearity assumptions were met. Independent groups t-tests indicated no differences ($t < 1.25$, $p > 0.20$) on dispositional forgiveness or TRIM scores on the basis of gender (Table 1).

Correlational data: Pre-offence closeness and commitment correlated $r = 0.69$ and were combined into a closeness/commitment measure. Pre-offence closeness/commitment was correlated $r = 0.39$, $p < 0.01$ with (post-offence) valued relationship but not forgiveness measures. The three TRIM subscales were highly intercorrelated, suggesting that benevolence and avoidance ($r = -0.80$) were multi-collinear and revenge and avoidance ($r = 0.58$) were related but distinct; therefore, only avoidance and revenge were used in further analysis. Dispositional forgiveness correlated moderately with avoidance ($r = -0.39$, $p < 0.01$) and revenge ($r = -0.49$) motivations. It also correlated low to moderately with offence severity, unlikelihood of reoffending and valued relationship. Significant associations were observed between TRIM subscales and all situation-specific factors except pre-offence closeness.

Path model of forgiveness: Next, standard regression were conducted in two steps to produce a model of unique direct predictors and indirect effects for situational forgiveness. First situational factors were entered as predictors of avoidance to ascertain, which factors explained unique variance; second, dispositional forgiveness was added as a predictor. This series was then repeated predicting revenge.

A step one predicting avoidance, valued relationship, $p < 0.001$. Expecting offender to reoffend, $p < 0.003$ and positive offender actions, $p = 0.04$ contributed significantly (but not nonmalevolent intent, $p = 0.60$, pre-offence closeness, or offence severity), $F(4,123) = 31.09$, $R^2 = 0.50$, $p < 0.001$. In predicting revenge from situational variables, valued relationship, $p < 0.001$ and expecting offender to re-offend, $p = 0.03$ contributed significantly (but not positive offender response, $p = 0.05$, or nonmalevolent intent), $F(4,123) = 17.46$, $R^2 = 0.37$, $p < 0.001$.

In step two, dispositional forgive contributed 3% additional variance in predicting avoidance, $F(1,122) = 8.44$, $p = 0.004$ and 9% in revenge, $F(1,122) = 20.90$, $p < 0.001$. When dispositional forgiveness was entered,

valued relationship became the only significant situational predictor of revenge. Figure 1 shows the standardized regression coefficients of the combined models including significant variables when all situational variables and dispositional forgiveness entered simultaneously. All significant (and non-significant) findings were replicated, with the final equations significant: avoidance $F(9,118) = 16.11$, $p < 0.001$; revenge $F(9,118) = 11.62$, $p < 0.001$.

Dispositional forgiveness have unique variance to the prediction of both avoidance and revenge after situational variables were considered, several of which were found to predict situational forgiveness.

A moderate relationship between dispositional forgiveness and situational forgiveness was also found. Together the findings support conceptualizing that individual differences exist in relation to proneness to forgive and that forgiving in specific situations is related to a dispositional forgiveness.

A unique aspect of this study involved identifying important situational factors that predicted situational forgiveness and examining whether dispositional measures predicted over and above situational factors. Findings suggested that dispositional forgiveness predicted both avoidance and revenge motivations following a specific transgression, even after accounting for transgression-specific situational variables. This supports the conceptualization of a dispositional forgiveness as an individual difference variable that could predict forgiveness in specific situations.

In bi-variate analyses, a range of situation-specific factors predicted revenge and avoidance motivations, as well as benevolence, towards the offender. This included how much the injured party valued the relationship after the offence, which was the strongest predictor. However, while pre-transgression closeness/commitment to the offender predicted value placed on the relationship after the offence, it did not predict forgiving that offender after the offence, suggesting that post-offence a shift may occur in an injured party's view of the relationship and that the new relationship value becomes more important in deciding to forgive. A range of other predictive factors were more important than pre-offence closeness: positive post-transgression offender actions, perceiving the offender's actions as non-malicious, expecting the offender would not re-offend and lesser perceived offence severity, which all correlated with situational forgiveness. Combined into a multivariate model, less valuing of the relationship, fewer positive offender actions and expecting repeated offences combined to predict avoidance, while not valuing the relationship was the only unique situation-specific predictor of revenge.

Table 1: Descriptive statistics and correlations among forgiveness (dispositional and specific situation) and situational factors

Scale	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
Dispositional forgiveness	-	-0.39**	-0.48**	0.40**	-0.21*	-0.00	0.26**	0.16	0.16	0.31**
Avoidance		-	0.56**	-0.80**	0.28**	-0.09	-0.53**	-0.55**	-0.49**	-0.60**
Revenge			-	-0.60**	0.19*	-0.09	-0.35**	-0.23*	-0.27**	-0.57**
Benevolence				-	-0.26**	0.09	0.49**	0.52**	0.49**	0.71**
Offence severity					-	0.19*	-0.20*	-0.06	-0.38**	-0.18
Close commitment						-	-0.08	0.19*	-0.11	0.39**
Expected unlikely reoffend							-	0.50**	0.46**	0.39**
Positive offender actions								-	0.50**	0.51**
Perceived non-malicious intent									-	0.40**
Valued relationship										-
Mean	30.70	20.23	8.23	20.36	6.97	8.65	8.16	42.95	12.24	22.01
SD	5.79	8.17	3.78	5.90	2.21	2.93	2.98	18.73	4.65	5.18
Cronbach's alpha	0.80	0.92	0.86	0.88	-	0.82	0.74	0.95	0.80	0.84

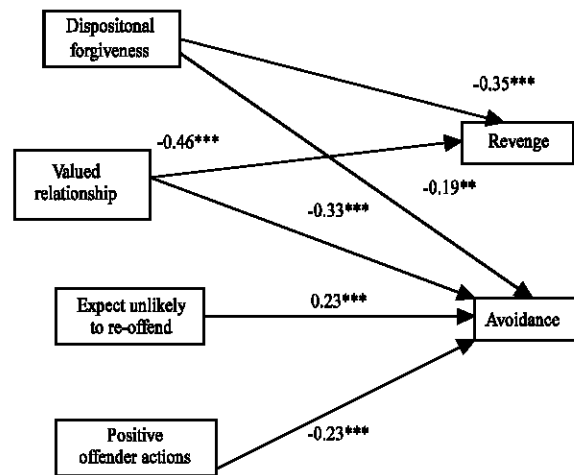


Fig. 1: Path model showing standardized regression coefficients of the direct and indirect effects predicting situational avoidance and revenge motivations * $p < 0.05$, ** $p < 0.001$

This findings of the importance of situational factors have potential implications for this idea that interpersonal forgiveness involves the interplay of factors that are both internal and external. Alternative models could be tested using structural equation modeling and examining the influence of dispositional forgiveness on situational variables.

Limitation of this study include self-report method. Experimental manipulations could explore the forgiveness process through use of unobtrusive measures, such as videotaping and coding responses to offence scenarios in lab settings.

CONCLUSION

People's willingness to forgive in a particular situation was associated with both a general dispositional forgiveness and situational factors related to the transgression.

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