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Attachment and trait forgivingness: The mediating role of angry rumination

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Abstract

Integrating theories of attachment and forgiveness, we predicted that secure attachment reduces angry rumination and promotes forgiveness. To examine this prediction, in Study 1 ($n = 213$), participants completed the Experience in Close Relationships Scale (ECR; Brennan, Clark, & Shaver, 1998) and the Trait Forgiveness Scale (TFS; Berry, Worthington, O'Connor, Parrott, & Wade, 2005). Individuals who were classified as securely attached displayed greater dispositional forgivingness than did insecurely attached individuals. In Study 2 ($n = 218$) we included the Dissipation-Rumination Scale (DRS; Caprara, 1986). Results from Study 2 replicated the association between attachment security and greater dispositional forgivingness and confirmed the mediating role of angry rumination in the attachment–forgiveness relation. © 2006 Published by Elsevier Ltd.

Keywords: Attachment; Forgiveness; Forgivingness; Rumination

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1. Introduction

Greek scholars used the word *aphiemi*, or forgiveness, to describe letting go or voluntarily setting aside an obligation or punishment. Contemporary scholars suggest that forgiveness encourages constructive behaviors and positive feelings toward the offender (Finkel, Rusbult, Kumashiro, & Hannon, 2002; Worthington, 2005). Regardless of how one defines forgiveness, it has been shown to have a variety of advantages including promoting trust and reconciliation in relationships, improved mental well-being and physical health, and reduced negative affect (Finkel et al., 2002; Toussaint & Webb, 2005; Worthington, 2005). However, despite the benefits associated with forgiveness some individuals have a more difficult time reaching forgiveness. For example, less forgiving people are higher in neuroticism and anxiety (e.g., McCullough, Bellah, Kilpatrick, & Johnson, 2001; Walker & Gorsuch, 2002), are more likely to ruminate (Berry, Worthington, O'Connor, Parrott, & Wade, 2005), and are more likely to display such relationship-damaging emotions as anger and hostility (Thompson et al., 2005).

In the current article, we extend the research on individual differences in propensity to forgive suggesting that dispositional forgiveness across time and situations (called *forgivingness*; Roberts, 1995) will be integrally related to one's general orientation toward relationships. Specifically, we report two studies that indicate that dispositional attachment style is related to *forgivingness* and demonstrate that the attachment–*forgivingness* link is mediated by angry rumination.

1.1. Attachment dynamics and forgiveness

Bowlby's (1969/1982) theory of attachment posits individuals' mental representations guide feelings of security. Bowlby (1980) wrote, "Every situation we meet in life is constructed in terms of representational models we have of the world about us and of ourselves. Information reaching us through our sense organs is selected and interpreted in terms of those models, its significance for us and for those we care for is evaluated in terms of them, and plans of action are conceived and executed with those models in mind" (p. 229). These mental representations are hypothesized to be related to individuals' beliefs, attitudes, and expectations about the self and others. Individuals with a positive working model of others see people as trustworthy and responsive. Those with a more negative working model of others expect people to be uncaring and rejecting. Individuals with a positive model of self are independent, feel worthy of love, and are confident in handling potential relationship threats, but those with a negative model of self-question their own value and worth. These two dimensions have been hypothesized to yield four attachment styles: *Secure* (positive model of self and others), *preoccupied* (negative model of self and positive model of others), *fearful* (negative model of self and others), and *dismissing* (positive model of self and negative model of others; Bartholomew & Horowitz, 1991).

There is controversy in the attachment literature regarding the conceptualization of attachment. Some researchers favor the working-models approach presented in the current paper and posited originally by Bowlby (e.g., Carnelley, Pietromonaco, & Jaffe, 1994; Griffin & Bartholomew, 1994), whereas others prefer the behavioral and emotional regulation perspective focused on the avoidant and anxiety dimensions (e.g., Fraley & Shaver, 1998; see Fraley & Shaver, 2000 for a review). In the current article, we use the prototypical categorical approach focusing on working models because the transformation process required to reach forgiveness involves psy-

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