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Dispositional and state forgiveness: The role of self-esteem, need for structure, and narcissism

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Abstract

The aim of the present study was to explore the relationship between personality correlates associated with ego-defensiveness and forgiveness in an attempt to understand why some individuals are more forgiving than others, both in general and in specific situations involving transgressions. Specifically, a positive association between forgiveness and self-esteem and negative associations between forgiveness and need for structure and narcissism were predicted. Participants completed the Self-Esteem scale, the Personal Need for Structure scale, the Narcissism scale, and the Tendency to Forgive scale. They then competed in a game with two other players, during which one player committed a transgression. State forgiveness was measured with the Transgression-Related Interpersonal Motivations scale. Hypotheses were generally supported, suggesting that certain traits associated with ego-defensiveness can inhibit the ability to be forgiving (dispositional forgiveness) and to actually forgive (state forgiveness).

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1. Introduction

Forgiveness can be described as both an interpersonal and an intrapersonal process, in that the decision to let go of a grudge and forgive a transgressor can be made based on a combination of factors involving both the transgressor and the victim. There may be situational factors that will affect whether victims of transgressions will forgive those who hurt them, such as whether an apology was offered (e.g., Darby & Schlenker, 1982; Exline & Baumeister, 2000). There also may be dispositional factors that might predispose someone to forgive, such as a tendency to be forgiving (e.g., Brown, 2003; Emmons, 2000) or not vengeful (e.g., Stuckless & Goranson, 1992). The aim of the present study was to link these related but separate literatures and gain a more complete picture of the forgiveness process by assessing personality correlates of both dispositional forgiveness (i.e., a general tendency to be forgiving) and state forgiveness (i.e., forgiveness following a specific transgression).

One way that interpersonal transgressions can be harmful is through the threats they pose to the self-worth of their victims. When one individual commits a transgression against another, it can make the victim feel devalued (Scobie & Scobie, 1998), uncertain (Eaton, Struthers, & Santelli, submitted for publication), and defensive (Maltby & Day, 2004). This, in turn, can result in actions that are not conducive to forgiving, such as avoiding the transgressor, holding a grudge, and seeking revenge. Because transgressions are threatening to the self, it is expected that individuals with less robust self-worth will be less forgiving in general because they have a continual need to protect their self-worth, and that they will also be less forgiving in specific situations involving interpersonal transgressions because they experience transgressions as being particularly threatening. This ego-defensiveness, or fragile self-worth, can manifest itself in a number of individual difference variables, three of which we predict will be particularly relevant to how individuals respond to transgressions: self-esteem, high need for structure, and narcissism.

The positive effects of self-esteem have been well-documented (for a recent review, see Pyszczynski, Greenberg, Solomon, Arndt, & Schimel, 2004). Although some researchers suggest that high-self-esteem, or certain types of high-self-esteem, may not be unconditionally beneficial (e.g., Baumeister, Smart, & Boden, 1996; Crocker & Park, 2004), past research suggests that there would be a positive relationship between self-esteem and forgiveness, in that those with high-self-esteem will be more forgiving than those with low self-esteem, both in general and following specific transgressions. It has been proposed that self-esteem acts as a buffer against self-threat, whereby those with a strong buffer would have less reason to engage in the defensive behaviors associated with not forgiving than those with a less resilient buffer (Pyszczynski et al., 2004). In other words, self-esteem protects the self from the threat associated with interpersonal transgressions.

Little research has been conducted on the relationship between self-esteem and forgiveness. Of the few personality researchers who have examined self-esteem and dispositional forgiveness, Brown and Phillips (2005) found a small and non-significant positive relationship between them, and Neto and Mullet (2004) found a similar relationship for males, but a significant negative relationship for females. Other forgiveness researchers have studied self-esteem as an outcome variable and have found that self-esteem can be increased through interventions to promote forgiveness (Freedman & Enright, 1996) and by being forgiven (Hodgins, Liebeskind, & Schwartz, 1996). None, however, have looked at self-esteem as a predictor of state forgiveness. Thus, although there is some evidence of a positive relationship between self-esteem and forgiveness, it is unclear whether it is a meaningful relationship and whether it holds for both dispositional

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