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The role of forgiveness and anger in unfair events

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ABSTRACT

In this paper, we examine the roles of forgiveness (i.e., forgiving personality) and anger on victims' responses to unfair events. Results of our study show that the effect of perceived unfairness severity on one's behavioral responses is mediated by his/her anger. In addition, forgiveness moderates the relationship between perceived unfairness severity and victim's revenge behavior, such that individuals who are high in forgiveness engage in less revenge in response to unfair events. The results however show that anger does not mediate between the perceived unfairness severity-by-forgiveness interaction effect on victims' revenge behavior.

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1. Introduction

Fairness perception has been recognized as an important theme in psychology as it has widespread implications on individuals' attitudes, emotions and behaviors (Colquitt, Conlon, Wesson, Porter, & Ng, 2001). For example, research has shown that perceptions of unfairness (or low fairness perceptions) reduce individuals' prosocial behavior and commitment; also, such perceptions give rise to negative emotions, revenge, avoidance, and anti-social behaviors (Cohen-Charash & Spector, 2001). Since extant literature on fairness also use the term 'justice' (e.g., organizational justice), the terms 'fairness' and 'justice' will be used interchangeably in this paper.

In general, researchers have discussed three main kinds of organizational justice: distributive justice, procedural justice, and interactional justice (Colquitt, Greenberg, & Zapata-Phelan, 2005). Distributive justice refers to how fair we perceive our outcomes to be. Procedural justice refers to how fair we perceive the procedures (that determine our outcomes) to be. Interactional justice refers to how fairly we are treated. Interactional justice is further broken down into interpersonal and informational justice – respectively, we are more likely to perceive interpersonal justice if we are treated with dignity and respect, and we are more likely to perceive informational justice if we are furnished with adequate and truthful explanation for the decisions or outcomes that we

receive (Colquitt et al., 2005). Yet, researchers have recently noted the high correlation amongst the various fairness sub-dimensions (Cropanzano & Ambrose, 2001), and have proposed that it may be useful to adopt a monistic perspective of fairness (i.e., an overall fairness judgment).

In examining victims' responses to unfair events, the victims' perceived severity of the unfair event is typically a critical factor to consider. In general, research has shown that the greater the severity of an offense, the stronger the blame attributions, and thus the stronger the victim's responses (Bradfield & Aquino, 1999). Hence, one aim of our paper is to examine victims' responses to the perceived severity of an unfair event (also referred to as 'perceived unfairness severity' or 'PUS' for brevity sake).

In explaining the (un)fairness-behavior relationship, researchers posit that emotions may be a mechanism that underlies this relationship. Of the basic discrete emotions, anger is especially pertinent to the study of unfairness perception (Frijda, Kuipers, & Schure, 1989). To elaborate, when individuals experience anger, they typically deem that they have been treated less than they desire or that they think they are entitled to, and they blame an external party for the perceived transgression (Weiss, Suckow, & Cropanzano, 1999). Applied here, perceived unfairness may lead a victim to experience anger, hostility, and resentment due to the perception of receiving less than what he/she deserves or is entitled to (Clayton, 1992).

Across many studies, research shows that angry individuals are inclined to fight and retaliate against the source of perceived transgression (Barclay, Skarlicki, & Pugh, 2005). As retaliation/fight is a spontaneous action tendency of anger (Lazarus, 1991), the angry

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victim may engage in revenge in response to perceived unfairness (Barclay et al., 2005). In sum, perceived unfairness may lead one to experience anger, which will in turn result in negative behavior or outcomes (Clayton, 1992).

Yet, it may not always be wise or possible to retaliate against the perceived offender even though an individual may be angry. In this case, while still experiencing anger, the victim may restrain his/her natural tendency of retaliating against the offender and avoid the offender instead (Kuppens, Van Mechelen, & Meulders, 2004). Furthermore, as “anger is an emotion of separation in which the target of the anger is put at a distance” (Zachar, 2006: 68), the angry victim may not desire to reconcile with his/her offender.

In sum, anger may mediate the relationship between perceived unfairness and negative victim behavior (Barclay et al., 2005). Given the detrimental interpersonal interactions that may arise, a critical issue is to investigate what are some factors that will mitigate the detrimental effects of perceived unfairness on individuals' behavior. One such factor may be the forgiving personality trait (i.e., forgiveness).

1.1. Forgivingness

From a personality trait perspective, *forgivingness* refers to one's disposition to forgive others (for their transgressions against oneself) across time and situations (Berry, Worthington, Parrott, O'Connor, & Wade, 2001). In general, *forgiveness* involves the (victim's) *cancellation of debt* that is caused by the transgression/offense (Finkel, Rusbult, Kumashiro, & Hannon, 2002). That is, when a victim forgives a transgressor, the victim lets go of the claim that he/she has against the transgressor who offended him/her. Extant research shows that forgiveness is related to a (i) reduction in motivation to take revenge against the offender, (ii) reduction in motivation to deliberately avoid the offender, (iii) increase in likelihood that one will have goodwill and be conciliatory towards the offender, and (iv) reduction in negative emotions against the offender (McCullough, Worthington, & Rachal, 1997; McCullough et al., 1998). Such outcomes may be especially important for victims and offenders with continuing relationships (Fincham, Beach, & Davila, 2004).

Because the notion of *forgiveness* is especially pertinent after an offense has occurred, we examine the role of forgivingness in attenuating the negative effects of perceived unfairness severity on victims' behaviors. Specifically, forgivingness may moderate the relationship between PUS and victims' negative behavior such that victims who are high (as compared to those who are low) on forgivingness are less likely to engage in negative behaviors in response to a transgression against them as they may have let go of their claim against the transgressor.

Indeed, a plausible way in which forgivingness can affect the relationship between PUS and detrimental victim behavior and emotions is through the psychological process of rumination. Typically, when one ruminates about a negative event, he/she will relive the negatively-valenced cognitions and emotions associated with the event (Ysseldyk, Matheson, & Anisman, 2007). In the case

where a victim has forgiven his/her transgressor, the victim is less likely to ruminate about the offense as the victim has psychologically and physically let go of the claim that he/she has against the transgressor and is thus less likely to re-experience the negatively-valenced emotions. Therefore, forgivingness may moderate the relationship between PUS and negative emotions. For example, forgivingness may moderate the relationship between PUS and anger such that victims who are high on forgivingness experience less anger in response to a transgression against them. Furthermore, it is plausible that as individuals high in forgivingness experience less anger, they are less likely to engage in negative behaviors towards their offenders. In other words, anger may mediate the relationship between the forgivingness-by-PUS interaction effect and detrimental victim behaviors. In sum, the following model is proposed: Fig. 1.

1.2. Hypotheses

Hypothesis 1: Perceived severity of an unfair event will be (a) positively related to revenge, (b) positively related to avoidance, and (c) negatively related to reconciliation.

Hypothesis 2: Anger will mediate the relationships between perceived unfairness severity and (a) revenge, (b) avoidance, and (c) reconciliation.

Hypothesis 3: Forgivingness will moderate the relationships between perceived unfairness severity and victim behaviors. Specifically, (a) forgivingness will attenuate the positive relationship between PUS and revenge (such that individuals who score high on forgivingness (as compared to their counterparts) are less likely to take revenge when they perceive unfairness); (b) forgivingness personality will attenuate the positive relationship between PUS and avoidance; and (c) forgivingness personality will attenuate the negative relationship between PUS and reconciliation.

Hypothesis 4(i): Forgivingness will attenuate the positive relationship between PUS and anger, such that individuals who score high on forgivingness will experience less anger in response to perceived unfairness severity.

Hypothesis 4(ii): Anger will mediate the relationships between the PUS-by-forgivingness interaction effect and (a) revenge, (b) avoidance, and (c) reconciliation.

2. Method

2.1. Sample

Surveys were administered to 238 first-year undergraduates in a Singapore university. Respondents earned course credit by participating in this study. The mean age of the respondents is 20.40 ($SD = 1.55$); 52.5% of the respondents are females.

2.2. Procedure

Respondents were instructed, “Please think of the most intense event where someone treated you unfairly. This event can occur

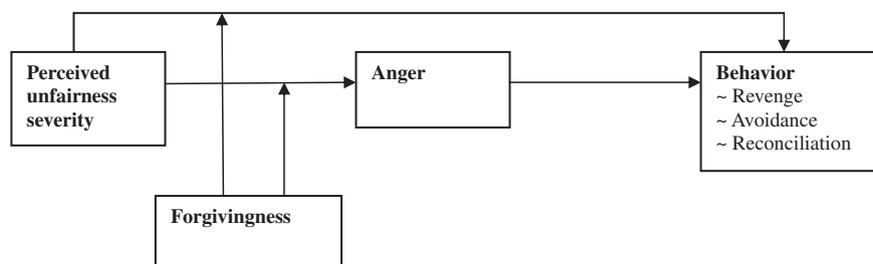


Fig. 1. Proposed mediated moderation model.

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