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Offender variables: Unique predictors of Benevolence, Avoidance, and Revenge?

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ABSTRACT

Past research on interpersonal forgiveness has emphasized traits of the betrayed partner (e.g., forgivingness, empathy, narcissism) or relationship factors (e.g., relational closeness) in predicting forgiveness, but has rarely considered characteristics of offenders. The current project examined the unique contribution of offenders' personality over and above established predictors of forgiveness (e.g., relational closeness to offender, betrayal severity, forgivingness, narcissism) as assessed by outcomes on the Transgression-Related Interpersonal Motivations (TRIM) inventory. It was expected that offender traits (such as empathy, Honesty-Humility, Agreeableness, and Conscientiousness) would account for additional, unique variance in predicting forgiveness. Results for TRIM-Benevolence, Avoidance, and Revenge supported the study's hypotheses, indicating that victim perceptions of offender personality also are important in predicting forgiveness.

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1. Introduction

Advances in forgiveness research in past years have established that forgiveness is associated with positive physical health outcomes (e.g., Waltman et al., 2009; Witvliet, Ludwig, & Vander Laan, 2001), as well as better relational and individual mental health outcomes (Fincham, Beach, & Davila, 2004; Lin, Mack, Enright, Krahn, & Baskin, 2004; Reed & Enright, 2006). Furthermore, not only does forgiveness help parties to reconcile following an offense, but more broadly, it could promote societal cooperation (Enright, 2001). Given the potential positive role of forgiveness in individual and societal health, it is important for the field to understand better the circumstances under which forgiveness is more likely to occur.

What constitutes forgiveness differs from author to author; however, here, forgiveness is defined as an interpersonal restorative process whose outcome is represented by distinct patterns of change in three transgression-related interpersonal motivations, or TRIMs, which are Benevolence, Avoidance, and Revenge. A forgiveness outcome is characterized by victims' increased warmth (Benevolence) and decreased Avoidance and Revenge toward offenders (McCullough et al., 1998). In existing literature, Benevolence, Avoidance, and Revenge are considered separate dimensions of forgiveness and unforgiveness that exhibit differing predictive patterns (e.g., Koutsos, Wertheim, & Kornblum, 2008; Tsang & Stanford, 2007).

1.1. Past literature on precursors of forgiveness

Research has identified numerous events or characteristics known to predict forgiveness. These characteristics include aspects of the betrayal, such as its severity, behaviors of the offender (e.g., presence of apology; McCullough et al., 1998), and various characteristics of the relationship (e.g., relationship closeness; Tsang, McCullough, & Fincham, 2006). Also, forgiveness of specific betrayals is associated with the personality characteristics of betrayed partners, such as forgivingness, the degree to which a person forgives or holds grudges, dispositionally (Berry, Worthington, Parrott, O'Connor, & Wade, 2001). Forgiveness is also associated with higher Agreeableness, as well as low Neuroticism and narcissistic entitlement (Exline, Baumeister, Bushman, Campbell, & Finkel, 2004; McCullough & Hoyt, 2002). Not surprisingly, most studies of forgiveness have primarily focused on the role of the betrayed partner, perhaps because injured individuals are typically the ones thought to determine forgiveness.

1.2. Offender variables

Little research has examined the factors associated with the *betraying* partner. Offender variables in forgiveness, too, might influence the likelihood of forgiveness. Based on the previous findings, there might be cases where a betrayed person is characterologically or situationally likely to forgive, yet forgiveness does not occur because of certain characteristics of an offender (Exline, Worthington, Hill, & McCullough, 2003). More work is necessary to assess factors of the offending partner that contribute to forgiveness processes.

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A number of offender behaviors are associated with greater forgiveness. Presence of apology is perhaps the most notable of these (Rowe & Halling, 1998; Snyder & Lopez, 2002). Good apologies often go beyond a mere “I’m sorry.” Empirical literature suggests that they are a collection of pro-social acts with a similar interpersonal restorative goal. They tend to avoid excusing oneself from wrongdoing and might involve an expression of full personal responsibility (Hodgins & Liebeskind, 2003), state that the offender’s conduct was not normative and will not happen again (forbearance), and sometimes incorporate an offer of reparation (Lazare, 2004; Scher & Darley, 1997). Forgiveness might be partially but not fully explained by offender behaviors like an apology (Koutsos et al., 2008).

Perceptions of the offender’s personality matter as well, though research on “offender variables” (Tsang & Stanford, 2007) is somewhat scarce. Tsang and Stanford found that interpersonally dominant male perpetrators of intimate partner violence who lacked severe psychopathologies were more often forgiven by their partners. Other studies suggest workplace offenses are more forgivable when offenders are likeable (defined as cooperative, honest, and sincere; Bradfield & Aquino, 1999). However, studies have not yet shown whether offender personality variables predict forgiveness outcomes over and above victims’ traits or relationally-embedded predictors such as offense severity, closeness, and apologies. Thus, systematic study of non-clinical personality traits is warranted.

To address this aim, we hypothesized that traits known to facilitate forgiveness in victims might play a similar role for offenders. For example, empathic victims tend to be more forgiving (Fincham, Paleari, & Regalia, 2002), so empathic offenders also might be forgiven more often. Perhaps empathic offenders are more likely see others’ perspectives, which would make them more cognizant of betrayed partners’ feelings. This awareness might lead them to behave more warmly and pro-socially toward injured parties, consequently facilitating forgiveness.

Broader personality traits, such as Agreeableness, also might matter for offenders. The current study uses a six-factor model of non-clinical personality, the HEXACO: Honesty-Humility, Emotionality, Extraversion, Agreeableness, Conscientiousness, and Openness to Experience (for a review, see Lee & Ashton, 2004; scale descriptions are also available online at HEXACO.org). While conceptually similar to the Big Five, this model contains an added factor, Honesty-Humility, along with relatively minor “reorganizations” of Big five Agreeableness and Emotional Stability. Definitions for the remaining factors remain somewhat consistent between HEXACO and Big Five (Lee & Ashton, 2004).

Several broad traits are thought to be of consequence for offenders. Specifically, it was expected that personality traits that are directly related to interpersonal functioning would be more predictive of forgiveness than traits that are not as directly related to interpersonal interactions. For instance, as described above, likeable colleagues who get along with others were more often forgiven (Bradfield & Aquino, 1999), thus it is likely that Agreeable offenders would be easier for victims to forgive. Furthermore, low scorers in Honesty-Humility, an integrity-related trait, are much more likely to possess “Dark Triad” characteristics that are associated with manipulating and exploiting others: psychopathy, Machiavellianism, and narcissism (Ashton & Lee, 2008; Lee & Ashton, 2005). Low scores on Honesty-Humility should be a useful indicator of offenders’ low-integrity tendencies, such as exploitation, callousness, and manipulation, all qualities that might reduce victims’ forgiveness. Furthermore, an offender’s Conscientiousness should matter. It might be easier to trust that a highly Conscientious offender, who treats others with respect and works dutifully and carefully, will make things right again. Thus, we expected that high scores on Agreeableness, Honesty-Humility,

and Conscientiousness would predict greater Benevolence and less Avoidance and Revenge. No specific predictions were made regarding the remaining HEXACO traits, Emotionality, Extraversion, and Openness to Experience, because the directions of the potential associations of these characteristics with forgiveness were unclear.

2. Methods

2.1. Participants

A total of 214 undergraduates (149 female, 65 male) at a southeastern university were recruited in return for psychology course credit. Mean participant age was 18.62 years ($SD = 1.36$). The sample’s racial ethnic makeup was largely white (74.8%), but included some African-American (12.6%), Latino (5.1%), Asian (5.6%), and multi-racial (1.4%) respondents. There were no exclusionary criteria regarding race, sex, religion, or sexual orientation.

Students were asked to recall a past relationship (e.g., relative, romantic partner) in which they experienced a betrayal. Relationship infidelities were most often cited (52.2%), followed by lying and injurious conduct (spreading rumors, leaking secrets, speaking rudely; 35.9%), then abandonment or relationship discontinuation (8.1%), and theft (3.8%). Offenders were slightly older than participants ($M = 20.67$). Romantic partners (63.0%) were the modal offender relationship to victim, followed by friends (28.0%), family (7.1%), and acquaintances (1.9%).

2.2. Measures

2.2.1. Demographics

We collected data including participant age, gender, race, offender gender, and offender age. Participants identified the nature of their past betrayals, as well as the type of relationship in which the betrayal occurred. Additionally, participants indicated the severity of betrayal, 1 (mild betrayal) to 10 (severe betrayal).

2.2.2. Forgiveness

The Transgression-Related Interpersonal Motivations scale was used to assess forgiveness and unforgiveness (TRIM; McCullough et al., 1998). Benevolence, our forgiveness outcome, is the extent the victim feels warmth toward the offender or wishes him/her well, while Avoidance and Revenge represent unforgiveness. Avoidance and Revenge subscales demonstrate good convergent and discriminant validity (McCullough, Bellah, Kilpatrick, & Johnson, 2001; McCullough et al., 1998). Cronbach’s alpha was .88 for Avoidance and .87 for Revenge in the original sample. In the current sample, the Cronbach’s alphas for Benevolence, Avoidance, and Revenge were .89, .93, and .80, respectively.

2.2.3. Apology

Participants filled out checklist items assessing the presence and quality of apology they were offered. Sample items include “offender said ‘I’m sorry,’” “offender offered to make things right,” and “offender looked genuinely remorseful”). Items on the checklist were derived from the apology and concessions literature. For instance, the standard verbal statement “I’m sorry” has been used as an apology measure (Darby & Schlenker, 1982), as has the acknowledgement of the victim’s feelings (Lazare, 2004; Tavuchis, 1991). Additionally, expressions of remorse are thought to indicate regret over a wrongdoing and less likelihood of recidivism (Gold & Weiner, 2000; Scher & Darley, 1997). Also, offenders who take responsibility for their actions are evaluated more positively (Hodgins & Liebeskind, 2003; Scher & Darley, 1997). Apology behaviors appeared in a checklist format, and apology quality

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