



Motivations for promotion and prevention and the role of trust and commitment in interpersonal forgiveness

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ABSTRACT

Granting forgiveness demands self-regulation. Distinct modes of self-regulation might therefore produce distinct routes to forgiveness. Self-regulation focused on advancement (or *promotion*) could motivate forgiveness through the perceived benefits to be attained by repairing a relationship, i.e., one's *trust* that a partner will provide such benefits rather than further betrayal. In contrast, self-regulation focused on security (or *prevention*) could motivate forgiveness through the perceived costs of further relationship deterioration, i.e., one's *commitment* to maintain a relationship upon which one depends and protect against the loss of this relationship. These hypotheses were supported across two studies that: (a) measured and manipulated promotion-focused versus prevention-focused self-regulation, (b) included real and imagined offenses in casual and close relationships, and (c) assessed forgiveness immediately following an offense and after a two-week delay. Trust in a relationship partner more strongly predicted forgiveness among promotion-focused individuals, whereas commitment to this partner more strongly predicted forgiveness among prevention-focused individuals.

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“The weak can never forgive. Forgiveness is the attribute of the strong.” Mahatma Gandhi

“To err is human, to forgive, divine.” Alexander Pope

Introduction

Betrayal can be enormously painful. When feeling wronged by another, people's thoughts brim with hostility, vengeance, and reprisal. Thus, as Gandhi suggested, overcoming vengeful impulses and forgiving those who have betrayed us often demands great strength of will—perhaps even, as Pope proposes, “divine” strength.

Accordingly, psychological approaches to forgiveness place a strong emphasis on the role of willpower and self-regulation (see Exline, Worthington, Hill, & McCullough, 2003). Even for minor offenses, the basic process of forgiveness is typically defined as a “motivational transformation” in which desires for retaliation are suppressed and replaced with desires for reconciliation (Fincham, Hall, & Beach, 2005; McCullough, Worthington, & Rachal, 1997; see McCullough, 2008; Worthington, 2005). Furthermore, research on the antecedents and predictors of forgiveness generally reveals that circumstances that help or hinder these motivational transformations (e.g., personality traits such as agreeableness versus negative emotionality; social circumstances such as strong feelings

of empathy, closeness, and commitment versus an absence of genuine remorse) also help or hinder forgiveness (Exline & Baumeister, 2000; Finkel, Rusbult, Kumashiro, & Hannon, 2002; McCullough & Hoyt, 2002; McCullough et al., 1997; McCullough et al., 1998). Finally, both brief experimental manipulations and long-term interventions that directly target people's capacity for self-regulation have demonstrated that increasing this capacity (i.e., teaching and encouraging specific strategies for self-regulation) enhances forgiveness whereas decreasing this capacity (i.e., limiting opportunities for self-regulation by forcing quick responses to betrayals) inhibits it (Finkel & Campbell, 2001; Wade, Worthington, & Meyer, 2005).

In light of the central role self-regulation plays in forgiveness, variations in the motives that guide self-regulation could produce important variations in when and why forgiveness is granted (see Fincham et al., 2005; Huang & Enright, 2000; Worthington, Berry, Parrott, & Il, 2001). The present research explores this possibility by examining how broad differences in people's self-regulatory priorities for attaining growth (i.e., *promotion*) versus maintaining security (i.e., *prevention*) affect their willingness to forgive their acquaintances, friends, and romantic partners. In addition, the present research also examines how such motivational differences alter what particular facets of people's relationships are most crucial for determining forgiveness. Specifically, we test the extent to which motivations for promotion may increase the influence on forgiveness of people's trust in the potential for attaining further benefits within a relationship, whereas motivations for prevention

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may increase the influence on forgiveness of people's commitment to maintaining their current investment in relationship. By investigating distinct motivational processes that can contribute to forgiveness, the current studies aim to provide additional insight concerning when and how it occurs.

Motivations for promotion and prevention

Two social motives that have long been distinguished in their influence on relationship processes, and which could therefore alter how forgiveness unfolds between relationship partners, are motives for advancement (i.e., nourishment, growth, and development), and for security (i.e., shelter, safety, and protection; see Bowlby, 1969; Maslow, 1955; Rogers, 1961). More recently, Higgins (1997) has proposed that, beyond originating from different social motives, concerns with advancement (i.e., *promotion*) and security (i.e., *prevention*) foster different modes of self-regulation (see also Molden, Lee, & Higgins, 2008). That is, when focused on promotion, people represent, experience, and pursue their goals in a profoundly different way than they do when focused on prevention.

Promotion-focused goal pursuit centers around concerns with *attainment*; it is represented as striving to achieve hopes, rewards, or *ideals* that ensure advancement. Fulfilling these ideals is therefore experienced as achieving positive outcomes (i.e., feelings of gain), whereas failing to fulfill them is experienced as a missed opportunity for positive outcomes (i.e., feelings of non-gain; Higgins, 1987; Higgins, 1997). In addition, the particular strategies used to pursue ideals primarily involve eagerly seeking gains and advancement, even at the risk of committing errors and accepting losses (Higgins & Molden, 2003; Molden & Higgins, 2005; Molden et al., 2008).

In contrast, prevention-focused goal pursuit centers around *maintenance*; it is represented as striving to uphold responsibilities, obligations, or *oughts* that are necessary to ensure security. Fulfilling these oughts is therefore experienced as protecting against negative outcomes (i.e., feelings of non-loss), whereas failing to fulfill them is experienced as incurring negative outcomes (i.e., feelings of loss; Higgins, 1987; Higgins, 1997). In addition, the particular strategies used to pursue oughts primarily involve vigilantly ensuring security and the absence of losses, even at the risk of forgoing alternative courses of action that could lead to gains (Higgins & Molden, 2003; Molden & Higgins, 2005; Molden et al., 2008).

Many studies – in which motivations for promotion or prevention have both been measured as chronic individual differences and temporarily evoked through experimental manipulations – have repeatedly demonstrated a heightened concern with attainment and gains by those with a promotion focus and a heightened concern with maintenance and security from losses by those with a prevention focus (for recent reviews see Molden & Miele, 2008; Molden et al., 2008). Promotion-focused individuals have been found to: (a) favor working toward attaining new achievements over maintaining (or re-attaining) current achievements, (b) place greater value on goals viewed in terms of attainment or outcomes perceived as gains, (c) show increased persistence and performance on tasks where success brings actual or symbolic rewards, and (d) display greater sensitivity to and recall for events that result in either gains or non-gains. In contrast, prevention-focused individuals have been found to: (a) favor working toward maintaining (or re-attaining) current achievements over attaining new achievements, (b) place greater value on goals viewed in terms of maintenance or on outcomes perceived as protecting against losses, (c) show increased persistence and performance on tasks where success protects against actual or symbolic penalties, and

(d) display greater sensitivity to and recall for events that result in either non-losses or losses (Amodio, Shah, Sigelman, Brazy, & Harmon-Jones, 2004; Brodscholl, Kober, & Higgins, 2007; Förster, Higgins, & Idson, 1998; Higgins, Idson, Freitas, Spiegel, & Molden, 2003; Higgins, Roney, Crowe, & Hymes, 1994; Higgins & Tykocinski, 1992; Lee & Aaker, 2004; Liberman, Idson, Camacho, & Higgins, 1999; Shah, Higgins, & Friedman, 1998). In addition, those with a promotion focus have demonstrated preferences for *risky* approaches to decision making: they select gambles, choose products, and form impressions that maximize the potential for attaining gains, even at the possible cost of incurring significant losses. Those with a prevention focus have instead demonstrated preferences for *conservative* approaches to decision making, selecting gambles, products, and impressions that best promise to maintain security from losses, even at the possible cost of forgoing significant gains (Crowe & Higgins, 1997; Higgins et al., 2001; Liberman, Molden, Idson, & Higgins, 2001; Molden & Higgins, 2004; Molden & Higgins, 2008).

How, then, might the different motivations inherent in a promotion or prevention focus affect people's forgiveness decisions? Forgiving a relationship partner provides an opportunity for attaining future gains within a relationship and for the relationship itself to advance; it also helps to restore the security one derives within a relationship and protects the relationship itself from serious deterioration (cf. Fincham et al., 2005; McCullough, 2008). Thus, forgiveness allows both interpersonal gains and protection from interpersonal losses and, on average, might not be expected to differ between promotion-focused and prevention-focused individuals (but see Brebels, De Cremer, & Sedikides, 2008). However, the wealth of research described above suggests that, to use the terminology of interdependence theory (Kelley & Thibaut, 1978; Kelley et al., 2003), promotion and prevention motivations may alter the *affordance* (i.e., the logical relevance) of certain types of feelings toward a relationship partner when contemplating forgiveness. That is, promotion-focused individuals may find greater relevance in their feelings concerning the opportunities for continued advancement and for attaining further gains in the relationship that forgiveness would bring. In contrast, prevention-focused individuals may find greater relevance in their feelings concerning the value of securing the investments they have already made to the relationship and the protection from loss that forgiveness would bring. People's motivations for promotion or prevention could thus have an important influence on the interpersonal processes through which forgiveness is reached.

Interpersonal dynamics of forgiveness

Forgiveness between individuals within an established relationship depends as much on interpersonal processes as it does on the attributes of either the victim or perpetrator (Kelley et al., 2003; Rusbult, Hannon, Stocker, & Finkel, 2005). Of the many aspects of relationships that could contribute to forgiveness dynamics, two qualities that have been widely researched are the *trust* that relationship partners place in one another, and their *commitment* to maintaining the relationship (e.g., Finkel et al., 2002; McCullough et al., 1998; Rempel, Ross, & Holmes, 2001; see also Wieselquist, Rusbult, Agnew, & Foster, 1999).

Both trust in and commitment to one's relationship partner enhance forgiveness. For example, following an offense by a relationship partner, those who trust their partner typically form more benevolent interpretations of the offense (Rempel et al., 2001) and retain more positive evaluations of the offender (Holmes & Rempel, 1989). These judgments create an environment in which amends are more likely to be sought and forgiveness more likely to be granted (Fincham, Paleari, & Regalia, 2002; Hannon, 2001).

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