



Forgivingness and subjective well-being in adulthood: The moderating role of future time perspective [☆]

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ABSTRACT

This cross-sectional study tested the hypothesis that future time perspective moderates the association between forgivingness and subjective well-being. Results from a sample of adults ($N = 962$, 19–84 years) indicate that time perspective and forgivingness were strongly associated with positive affect, life satisfaction and optimism. In support of the hypothesis, forgivingness was more strongly associated with positive well-being for those who perceived their future time as limited as compared to those with an open-ended time perspective. The moderating effect of future time perspective holds over and above the effect of chronological age. Moderating effects were not found for negative affect and pessimism. The results underscore the importance of perceived time horizons for the interplay between forgivingness and well-being.

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1. Introduction

Theoretical and empirical work suggests that forgiveness is associated with subjective well-being (McCullough, 2000; Toussaint & Webb, 2005). Cross-sectional studies have evidenced positive associations between the dispositional tendency to forgive others and various indicators of subjective well-being. For example, forgiving individuals report more positive affect, greater life satisfaction, optimism, happiness, environmental mastery, and self-acceptance (Hill & Allemand, 2010, 2011a; Krause & Ellison, 2003; Maltby, Day, & Barber, 2005; Sastre, Vinsonneau, Neto, Girard, & Mullet, 2003). By contrast, forgiving individuals tend to be less prone to negative affect, anxiety and depressive symptoms (Berry, Worthington, O'Connor, Parrott, & Wade, 2005; Brown, 2003; Thompson et al., 2005). Moreover, longitudinal research has demonstrated that changes in forgiveness are positively related to changes in subjective well-being and adjustment, and negatively to changes in negative affect and physical symptoms (Bono, McCullough, & Root, 2008; Orth, Berking, Walker, Meier, & Znoj, 2008). Finally, findings from experimental and intervention studies support the forgivingness and well-being relation as well (Karremans, Van Lange, Ouwerkerk, & Kluwer, 2003; Worthington, Witvliet, Pietrini, & Miller, 2007). As research continues to find a

significant positive association between forgiveness and subjective well-being, it raises questions about conditions that might change this relationship. Accordingly, one direction for research is to understand potential moderators of this association. The present study thus sought to investigate future time perspective as a potential moderator for the associations between dispositional forgivingness and various indicators of subjective well-being.

1.1. Forgivingness

Forgiveness can either be considered as a contextualized psychological process of change with respect to a given transgressor and a given transgression (McCullough, Fincham, & Tsang, 2003) or as a disposition (Allemand & Steiner, 2012; Hill & Allemand, 2011b). Dispositional forgiveness—also called forgivingness—refers to individual differences in the tendency to forgive others regardless of the given transgressor and the given transgression. Forgivingness is thus a trait-like characteristic that is related to other dispositional variables. For example, forgiving individuals tend to experience less dispositional anger, rumination, and revenge seeking, and the tendency to forgive serves to promote social relations with others (e.g., Berry et al., 2005; Brown, 2003). Moreover, forgiving individuals tend to score lower on neuroticism but higher on agreeableness (Steiner, Allemand, & McCullough, *in press*). Although conceptualized as a dispositional tendency, forgivingness is narrower and more context-specific than the broader and more inclusive global Big Five traits. Forgivingness is particularly relevant in social settings that call for it and is usually displayed in specifiable situations such as following negative interpersonal

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interactions. In many cases, interpersonal problems and conflicts result in negative emotions, cognitions, and behaviors that have to be dealt with. The primary function of forgivingness thus appears to be down-regulating and reducing these negative affective states and stressful reactions (Brown, 2003; Worthington & Scherer, 2004). Indeed, research has shown that forgiving individuals tend to show high levels of dispositional abilities to down-regulate negative affective states and to disengage from ruminative thoughts as compared to less forgiving individuals (Allemand, Job, Christen, & Keller, 2008).

1.2. The influence of future time perspective

The concept of future time perspective describes how much time individuals believe they have left in life and whether they perceive that time as open-ended or limited in duration. The theory of socioemotional selectivity suggests that the subjective perception of time remaining in life has important implications for the selection of goals, activities, and preferences (Carstensen, Isaacowitz, & Charles, 1999). More specifically, the theory asserts that with the perception of limited time priorities change. When future time is perceived as open-ended or expansive, as is typical in young adulthood, individuals are strongly motivated to optimize the future by pursuing information and knowledge-related social goals. They attempt to expand their horizons, gain knowledge, and are more interested in seeking new social relationships. When individuals view their future as limited, as is typical in later life, positive emotional experience assumes primacy and the focus shifts from the optimization of future possibilities to the maximization of meaningful activities in the present. Individuals with perceived limited time are thus more motivated to pursue emotion-focused goals. They attempt to maintain emotional and social well-being and to keep close relationships while distancing from peripheral social partners (Lang & Carstensen, 2002). They also tend to engage in behaviors that maximize positive emotional rewards and achieve short-term emotional benefits by means of regulating affective states in the present (Carstensen, Mikels, & Mather, 2006; Charles & Carstensen, 2010). These shifts of priorities are thought to reflect not the objective chronological age *per se* but rather the subjective perception of remaining time in life. Because chronological age is inherently related to future time perspective (i.e., older individuals tend to perceive the time remaining in life as limited), systematic associations between age and perceived time remaining in life appear. For example, Lang and Carstensen (2002) reported a substantial negative association ($r = -0.70$) between increasing age and open-ended time perspective. But more important, findings from experimental and correlational studies demonstrated the incremental effect of perceived future time perspective over and above the effect of chronological age (Carstensen et al., 1999, 2006).

Age is not the only factor that is related to future time perspective. Other factors, such as serious illnesses, natural disasters, terrorist attacks, wars, geographic relocations, or temporary time constraints such as college graduation and retirement can also influence the perception of time horizons. Specifically, when younger individuals imagine conditions in which time is limited or they experience real-life time constraints they tend to optimize emotional outcomes and to pursue emotional satisfaction similar to older individuals who perceive their time horizon as shrinking (e.g., Carstensen & Fredrickson, 1998; Fung & Carstensen, 2006; Fung, Carstensen, & Lutz, 1999).

Numerous studies have provided empirical evidence for the notion that the perception of future time has important implications for emotion, cognition, motivation, and social relationships (for reviews, see Carstensen, Fung, & Charles, 2003; Charles & Carstensen, 2010; Scheibe & Carstensen, 2010). For example, recent findings

suggest that individuals who perceive their future time as open-ended tend to score higher on positive affect and meaning in life but lower on negative affect (Hicks, Trent, Davis, & King, *in press*). More important, studies have consistently demonstrated the moderating role of future time perspective (Carstensen et al., 1999; Charles & Carstensen, 2010). Hicks et al. (*in press*) found that positive affect becomes increasingly associated with meaning in life as the perception of future time becomes limited. Finally, results indicate that prioritizing emotionally meaningful goals is associated with greater social well-being and less social strain when future time is perceived as limited, whereas no such association seems to be present when individuals perceive their future time as open-ended (Lang & Carstensen, 2002). Research has also begun to investigate the role of future time perspective with respect to forgiveness. For example, Allemand (2008) found that individuals are more willing to forgive violations of social expectations when they perceive their own remaining time or the remaining time with their social partner as limited. Similarly, Cheng and Yim (2008) demonstrated that individuals are more forgiving under a limited time condition as compared to a time-expanded or neutral condition.

Forgiveness may play an important role for individuals' well-being, in particular when they view their time horizon as limited. Avoidant behaviors following conflicts can evoke negative consequences if individuals harbor feelings of anger and resentment they never express. By forgiving, individuals may regulate their negative feelings and thoughts and let go the conflict, sustaining favorable relationships without getting resentful (cf. Fingerman & Charles, 2010). Hence, forgiving others might reflect a particularly useful strategy to maintain emotional and social well-being, as is typical for individuals who perceive their future time as limited.

1.3. The present study

The main goal of the present cross-sectional study was to test whether future time perspective moderates the association between forgivingness and subjective well-being. To do so, we included three indicators of positive well-being (positive affect, life satisfaction, and optimism) and two indicators of negative well-being (negative affect and pessimism). First, we expected positive associations between perceived open-ended future time and indicators of positive subjective well-being and negative associations with indicators of negative well-being (Hicks et al., *in press*). Second, based on theoretical and empirical work on future time perspective (Carstensen et al., 1999; Charles & Carstensen, 2010) we tested the following moderation hypothesis. With the perception that time is limited, forgivingness should become increasingly associated with subjective well-being. If individuals are more engaged in maintaining the emotional and social well-being when time is perceived as limited, then it makes sense that the tendency to forgive others would relate more strongly to well-being. Specifically, we predicted that forgivingness and positive affect, life satisfaction, and optimism would be more strongly related when time is perceived as limited as compared to perceived open-ended future time.

It should be noted that this moderation effect might not occur with respect to negative affect and pessimism. As we argued above, a primary function of forgivingness appears to be down-regulating and reducing negative affective states and stressful reactions to interpersonal conflicts (e.g., Allemand et al., 2008; Worthington & Scherer, 2004). Accordingly, we predicted that the level of future time perspective would not influence the relations between forgivingness and low negative affect and low pessimism. Put differently, a central benefit of forgivingness is that it allows individuals to "attenuate the negative," and thus this effect might be less susceptible to possible moderators.

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