



Seeking forgiveness: Factor structure, and relationships with personality and forgivingness

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ABSTRACT

Study 1 explored the factor structure of the disposition to seek forgiveness. Three factors were found that duplicated factors that had been shown to structure forgiveness: inability in seeking forgiveness; sensitivity to circumstances; and unconditional seeking of forgiveness. Study 2 was concerned with seeking forgiveness and granting forgiveness. Each factor in the seeking forgiveness model was positively and strongly associated with the corresponding factor in the granting forgiveness model. Inability into seek forgiveness was negatively associated with agreeableness, openness, and positively associated with paranoid tendencies. Unconditional seeking of forgiveness was positively associated with agreeableness.

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1. Introduction

Forgiveness has been studied from a variety of perspectives but a quick look at the index of the recent handbook edited by [Worthington \(2005\)](#) shows that the literature on the symmetrical concept of seeking forgiveness is scarce. The literature on accounting for offenses, accumulated within social psychology, has shown, however, that seeking forgiveness may not be an uncommon reaction. [Gonzales, Manning, and Haugen \(1992\)](#) instructed their participants to imagine themselves having offended a partner in a close relationship and provide written accounts after receiving a reproach. Concessionary strategies (e.g., explicit acknowledgment of responsibility and guilt) were shown to be much more prevalent than excuses, justifications or denial strategies.

Only two empirical studies have specifically examined the tendency to seek forgiveness. [Sandage, Worthington, Hight, and Berry \(2000\)](#) examined the relationship between willingness to seek forgiveness in real situations, and religiosity, age, developmental level of reasoning about forgiveness, narcissism and self-monitoring in a sample of college students. They found that seeking forgiveness was (a) not related to age or religiosity, (b) positively related to developmental levels of reasoning about forgiveness, and (c) negatively related to narcissism and self-monitoring. [Basset, Bassett, Lloyd, and Johnson \(2006\)](#) examined the factor structure of willingness to seek forgiveness in real situations. Three factors were found: hardness of heart (e.g., 'Honestly, I think I have lost respect

for the other person'); seeking forgiveness (e.g., 'I offered a straightforward and simple apology'); and speaking the truth (e.g., 'I have tried to speak the truth to the other person in a caring fashion').

The present set of studies explored people's disposition to seek forgiveness using a questionnaire that was devised from the forgivingness scale ([Mullet et al., 2003](#)). The forgivingness scale had been created for assessing forgiveness in a variety of cultural contexts and was based on common conceptualizations of forgiveness ([Worthington & Wade, 1999](#)). In the Western world, a feeling of resentment seems logical when one is the victim of an offense. The intensity and duration of resentment would usually depend on the circumstances of the offense, the offender's attitude and, of course, the victim's personality. The ending of the resentment state could take many forms, which are probably directly related to the victim's and offender's personalities and the environment. Different forms of resentment naturally end with granting forgiveness, seeking revenge, or other types of closure, such as formal complaint or oblivion.

The forgivingness scale comprises three sub-scales that correspond to the passing from resentment to forgiveness. The lasting resentment sub-scale contains items that express the victim's tendency to hold negative emotions, negative cognitions, and to exhibit avoidance behaviors towards the offender even when faced with positive circumstances or responses (e.g., an apology from the offender). Lasting resentment coincides with the concept of unforgiveness suggested by [Worthington and Wade \(1999\)](#) and is highly reminiscent of the concept of avoidance of the offender used by [McCullough and Hoyt \(2002\)](#).

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The sensitivity to circumstances sub-scale contains items that reflect the victim's ability to analyze the pro and cons of harmful situations, and to build on the many circumstances of these situations for deciding whether to forgive or not forgive the offender. Sensitivity to circumstances has been shown to be at least partly a reflection of one's experience of forgiveness in the family. It can be considered as representing the "earthly" aspect of forgiveness, one that has no relationship to religious involvement (Akl & Mullet, 2007).

Finally, the willingness to forgive sub-scale contains items that reflect the victim's tendency to harbor positive attitudes towards the offender even in the absence of positive circumstances (e.g., absence of an apology from the offender). Willingness to forgive is highly reminiscent of the concept of presence/absence of positive thoughts suggested by Rye et al. (2001). Willingness to forgive has been shown to be essentially a reflection of one's conceptualization of ideal forgiveness (or God's forgiveness). It can be viewed as the product of a type of personal, spiritual growth that may be relatively independent of external influences. The three-factor structure of the forgivingness scale has been shown to be cross-culturally robust (Suwartono, Prawasti, & Mullet, 2007).

Our view is that the conceptual analysis proposed by Worthington and Wade (1999) with regards to the granting of forgiveness might also hold, *mutatis mutandis*, with regards to the seeking of forgiveness. In the Western world, when one is the cause of an offense, a feeling of remorse (involving shame and guilt in various proportions) seems logical. The intensity and duration of remorse would usually depend on the circumstances of the offense, the victim's attitude and, of course, the offender's personality. The ending of the remorse state could take many forms, which are probably directly related to the offender's and victim's personalities and the environment. Different forms of remorse naturally end with seeking forgiveness or other types of closure, such as complete denial or oblivion.

As a result, there should be a factor corresponding to the lasting resentment factor which expresses a lasting incapacity (reluctance) at seeking forgiveness even in favorable circumstances (e.g., the harmed individual was well-known or the consequences are severe). In addition, this factor should be close to the hardness of heart factor already demonstrated in Basset's et al. work. There should also be a factor corresponding to the sensitivity to circumstances factor which expresses a capacity to take into account the circumstances of the offense in determining whether to seek forgiveness or not. This factor should encompass the seeking the truth factor. Finally, there should be a factor corresponding to the willingness to forgive factor which expresses a basic readiness at apologizing and at seeking forgiveness even in situations in which the harm is minor and inconsequential or in which one is at risk of being put in a position of inferiority vis-a-vis the offended. In addition, this factor should be close to the seeking forgiveness factor.

The present set of studies also relate seeking to granting forgiveness. In daily life, and particularly in marital life, the experience of granting and seeking forgiveness are common ones, which can follow each other in rapid succession. "Transgressions are generally mutually inflicted and require mutual seeking, granting, and receiving forgiveness" (Sandage et al., 2000, p. 22). As a result, moderate to strong links between the disposition to grant and seek forgiveness are to be expected: (a) the more a person experiences enduring resentment when someone has harmed them, the more they would be reluctant at seeking forgiveness when they have harmed someone; (b) the more a person is sensitive to circumstances for granting forgiveness, the more this person should be sensitive to circumstances for seeking forgiveness; and (c) the more a person is (unconditionally) willing to grant forgiveness when someone has harmed them, the more they should be ready to seek forgiveness when they have harmed someone.

Finally, the present set of studies also examined the relationships between the disposition to seek forgiveness, and a set of personality variables that have been shown to be related to forgiveness (Mullet, Neto, & Rivière, 2005). This set includes the following personality variables: anger; anxiety; cynicism; paranoid tendencies; temporal orientation; guilt tendencies; auto punitive tendencies; religiosity; and the Big Five. The anger trait was expected to be positively associated with basic reluctance at seeking forgiveness because people who become very angry when they are offended may expect the same angry reaction from anyone they have offended. The anxiety trait was also expected to be positively associated with basic reluctance at seeking forgiveness because people who are usually anxious should be, more than others, afraid of their victims' potential reaction.

Cynicism is an extreme form of skepticism. A cynical person is a person who systematically questions the veracity of others' declarations and impugns motives lying behind others' actions. Cynicism and a basic reluctance to seek forgiveness should be positively associated because cynics should anticipate, more than others, distrustful reactions from the offended person. There should be a strong positive association between paranoid tendencies and a basic reluctance at seeking forgiveness because paranoid people should feel less remorseful than others and, as in the case of cynical people, they should expect essentially distrustful reactions from the offended person.

Temporal orientation refers to people's preferred time perspective: past, present or future. It is expected that (a) future-oriented participants should be more prone than others to seek forgiveness because they should be more concerned about future relationships with the offended person, and (b) past-oriented participants should feel less able to seek forgiveness than others because they would tend to believe that "what has been done has been done". In other words, they tend to get "stuck" in the past. Guilt is expected to be positively associated with unconditionally seeking forgiveness because people who are guilty prone should experience, more than others, a feeling of remorse for what has been done (Basset et al., 2006). Finally, auto punitive tendencies are expected to be positively associated with an inability to seek forgiveness because participants usually reluctant at seeking forgiveness may, in fact, demonstrate auto punitive tendencies for the hurt they have caused others. Religiosity is not expected to be associated with any of the seeking forgiveness dimensions.

Finally, two of the Big Five factors, agreeableness and neuroticism, were expected to be associated with an inability in seeking forgiveness. Agreeable people, more than others, should tend to unconditionally seek forgiveness. Neurotics should tend to experience, more than others, reluctance in seeking forgiveness.

2. Study 1

Study 1 was exploratory in character. It was aimed at uncovering the structure of the disposition to seek forgiveness in a community sample composed of people of both gender and from varied age groups (from 20 to 79). It was also aimed at relating this structure to an initial set of personality variables (i.e., anger, anxiety, cynicism, paranoid tendencies and religiosity).

2.1. Method

2.1.1. Participants

The total number of participants was 288 (170 females and 118 males). They were all French, of European origin, and came from the area of Toulouse in France. Their mean age was 35.2 (SD = 14.1). One hundred thirty-five participants had completed primary education or secondary education, and the other 153

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