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Failure to forgive self and others: a replication and extension of the relationship between forgiveness, personality, social desirability and general health

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Abstract

The aim of the present study was to examine the relationship between forgiveness of self, forgiveness of others, and personality and general health measures. Three hundred and twenty-four undergraduate students (100 males, 224 females) completed measures of forgiveness of oneself, forgiveness of others, the Abbreviated form of the Revised Eysenck Personality Questionnaire, and the General Health Questionnaire-28. Failure to forgive oneself is accompanied by personality and general health scores that reflect individual psychopathology, with men and women scoring higher in neuroticism, depression and anxiety. A failure to forgive others is accompanied by personality and general health scores that reflect social introversion among men (low extraversion scores) and social-pathology among women (social dysfunction, psychotism). Further, a failure to forgive others is accompanied by higher depression scores among men and women. The findings suggest that the concept of forgiveness can be related to individual and social psychopathology. © 2001 Elsevier Science Ltd. All rights reserved.

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1. Introduction

Pargament (1997) argues that the ability to forgive comes from varied ascendants, and represents active attempts to rationalize these ascendants. Pargament argues that the process of forgiving usually involves an occasion when either the individual has been mistreated, or has done something wrong themselves. Forgiveness then represents attempts, by the individual, to cope with the

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painful memory of the event. As such, forgiveness is seen as a deliberate attempt to overcome unhappy feelings and thoughts in order to facilitate individual happiness, which usually requires the individual's perception of the wrong-doer (be it themselves or another person) to change, from adopting a negative view to adopting a more sympathetic view (Pargament, 1997). Forgiveness is thought to be an important factor in facilitating psychological well-being for the individual in clinical settings (Hebl & Enright, 1993; McCullough & Worthington, 1995). Another feature in the clinical literature is the relationship between forgiveness and religiosity, particularly within religious coping (Pargament & Rye, 1998; Pargament, 1997), and forgiveness and empathy, whereby individuals with higher levels of empathy should find it easier to work towards forgiveness (McCullough & Worthington, 1995; McCullough, Worthington & Rachal, 1997). However, at present, the empirical investigation of forgiveness using psychometrically developed measures among non-clinical samples is limited (Mauger et al., 1992).

To develop an empirical view of forgiveness, Mauger et al. (1992) developed a two-dimensional measure of forgiveness (forgiveness of self and forgiveness of others) among 237 outpatient-counseling clients from Christian counseling centres. Both scales demonstrate adequate internal (self, $\alpha=0.82$; others, $\alpha=0.79$) and test re-test reliability (self, $r=0.67$; others, $r=0.94$). Mauger et al. (1992) also report the relationship between both of the forgiveness scales, the Minnesota Multiphasic Personality Inventory, and peer-rating of respondents. The authors report that failure to forgive oneself, or others, results in greater psychopathology. A failure to forgive oneself is significantly positively correlated with depression, anxiety, distrust, self-esteem, and social introversion, while failure to forgive others is significantly positively correlated to schizophrenia traits, social desirability, self-alienation, and persecutory ideas. Mauger et al. also report that the failure to forgive oneself and others are both significantly negatively correlated with social desirability. Summarising these findings, Mauger et al., suggest that failure to forgive oneself is 'intro-punitive' as failure to forgive oneself is significantly related to aspects of psychological well-being, such as higher depression and higher anxiety. Similarly, the authors argue that failure to forgive others is 'extra-punitive', and that this is demonstrated by higher scores on the failure to forgive others being accompanied by higher scores on measures of social alienation and social introversion.

At present, there is no other study that uses Mauger et al.'s forgiveness scales. However, the suggestion that failure to forgive oneself is intro-punitive and failure to forgive others is extra-punitive presents a theoretical basis by which to examine the generalizability of Mauger et al.'s (1992) findings. Using this theoretical basis it is possible to predict the expected relationships between forgiveness of oneself and others, and measures personality and psychological well-being. That is, failure to forgive oneself will be accompanied by attitudes and behaviours that reflect intro-punitive behaviour, and failure to forgive others will be accompanied by attitudes and behaviours that reflect extra-punitive behaviour. In addition, it can be argued that Mauger et al.'s findings can be extended in two ways. The first way is to empirically examine the usefulness of the two forgiveness scales among a non-clinical sample. The second way is to examine the relationship between self-forgiveness, forgiveness of others and other measures of personality and psychological well-being, aside from the Minnesota Multiphasic Personality Inventory. There are two commonly used measures that could be used to examine the assertions made by Mauger et al. (1992). Both the Eysenck Personality Questionnaire (Eysenck & Eysenck, 1975; Francis, Brown, & Philipchalk, 1992) and the General Health Questionnaire (Goldberg & Williams 1991) contain measures that reflect intro-punitiveness psychopathology (neuroticism [Eysenck Personality

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