

Retributive justice, restorative justice, and forgiveness: An experimental psychophysiology analysis [☆]

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Abstract

This experiment assessed the emotional self-reports and physiology of justice outcomes and forgiveness responses to a common crime, using a three Justice (retributive, restorative, no justice) \times 2 Forgiveness (forgiveness, none) repeated-measures design. Participants (27 males, 29 females) imagined their residence was burglarized, followed by six counterbalanced justice–forgiveness outcomes. Imagery of justice—especially restorative—and forgiveness each reduced unforgiving motivations and negative emotion (anger, fear), and increased prosocial and positive emotion (empathy, gratitude). Imagery of granting forgiveness (versus not) was associated with less heart rate reactivity and better recovery; less negative emotion expression at the brow (*corrugator* EMG); and less aroused expression at the eye (lower *orbicularis oculi* EMG when justice was absent). When forgiveness was *not* imagined, justice–physiology effects emerged: signs of cardiovascular stress (rate pressure products) were lower for retributive versus no justice; and sympathetic nervous system responding (skin conductance) was calmer for restorative versus retributive justice.

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Introduction

Interpersonal offenses foster perceptions of injustice. What difference might it make for victims if they see offenders brought to justice through punishment or restorative justice? What effects might occur if victims do or do not forgive their offenders? The interface of justice and forgiveness has emerged as an important topic for psychological study (e.g., Armour & Umbreit, 2005; Exline, Worthing-

ton, Hill, & McCullough, 2003; Hill, Exline, & Cohen, 2005), with Karremans and Van Lange (2005) initiating experimental research in this area. The current work targets these issues using an experimental psychophysiological approach that assesses the victim's subjective and physiological responses for various imagined justice outcomes both with and without imagining one's forgiveness of the offender.

Injustice and unforgiveness

When an offense occurs, victims typically feel a discrepancy between the way things currently are and how they ought to be. In the wake of such a serious and intentional offense as a burglary, a victim might desire *retributive justice*,

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which focuses on punishing the offender (for reviews, see Darley, 2002; Darley & Pittman, 2003; Tyler, Boeckmann, Smith, & Huo, 1997; Vidmar, 2002). Another option is *restorative justice* in which the offender is held accountable and the victim may receive compensation or conciliatory behaviors such as expressions of remorse by the offender (for reviews, see Armour & Umbreit, 2005; Bazemore, 1998; Braithwaite, 1989; Cohen, 2001; Umbreit, 2001; Zehr, 1995). In the absence of such justice outcomes, victims are likely to experience what Worthington (2006) termed an *injustice gap*—a discrepancy between the desired level of justice and the actual level of justice. The size of the gap can change with time, widening in the case of additional perceived injustices (e.g., if the offender is acquitted due to a technicality), and narrowing as acts of justice occur (e.g., with an offender's conviction and appropriate sentencing, or with a satisfying Victim Offender Mediation experience).

An injustice gap is not merely a cognitive judgment about the disparity between the current situation and the desired outcome; it is also charged with negative emotions (Worthington & Scherer, 2004). Anger and other negative emotions that attend a perceived injustice may coalesce over time in emotional *unforgiveness* (Worthington & Wade, 1999) proportional to the size of the injustice gap (Worthington & Scherer, 2004). Emotional unforgiveness is not the polar opposite of forgiveness, as the terms might suggest. Rather, people can reduce the resentment, anger, and fear of unforgiveness (and narrow the injustice gap) in many ways other than forgiveness. For example, they might pursue justice, excuse or minimize the offense, or simply accept the events and move on (Wade & Worthington, 2002).

Forgiveness defined

Forgiveness differs from condoning, excusing, tolerating, minimizing (Enright & Fitzgibbons, 2000), or forbearing (McCullough, Fincham, & Tsang, 2003), which are alternative ways to reduce unforgiveness. Forgiveness is also different from reconciling (cf. Freedman, 1998; Worthington & Drinkard, 2000), which involves restoring trust. Rather, forgiveness partially or totally eclipses unforgiving motivations (e.g., revenge and/or avoidance) and emotions (e.g., fear, sadness, and/or anger) by fostering positive thoughts (e.g., focusing on the offender's humanity rather than defining him or her in terms of the offense) and emotions (e.g., compassion, empathy, mercy) toward the offender. We work with a multidimensional definition of forgiveness, noting its cognitive (Enright & Fitzgibbons, 2000), emotional (Witvliet, Ludwig, & Vander Laan, 2001; Worthington, 2006), motivational (McCullough et al., 2003), and social features (Finkel, Rusbult, Kumashiro, & Hannon, 2002). We view the verbal-cognitive, physiological, and behavioral changes that occur with forgiveness as constitutive elements of emotional forgiveness (Worthington & Wade, 1999), resonating with Lang's (1995) bioinformational theory of emotion.

Justice and forgiveness: Proposed implications for emotion, stress, and health

Recent reviews have assessed relationships among unforgiveness, forgiveness, and health (Harris & Thoresen, 2005; Worthington & Scherer, 2004). In setting a research agenda, Worthington and Scherer (2004) offered four testable propositions that the current experiment addresses. First, unforgiveness is stressful. Second, a variety of coping mechanisms can reduce unforgiveness. For example, one could take the problem-focused approach of seeking to establish justice. If this were effective, it would narrow the theoretical injustice gap and thereby reduce the stress of unforgiveness. Third, emotion-focused coping via granting forgiveness can reduce the stress of unforgiveness. Fourth, because stress is linked to health, forgiveness is likely also related to health. Worthington and Scherer (2004) view forgiveness as an emotion-focused coping strategy that is associated with calmer physiological reactivity and recovery patterns than unforgiveness (Lawler et al., 2003; Witvliet et al., 2001).

In their agenda for justice and forgiveness research, Exline et al. (2003) note that the US legal system has focused primarily on retributive justice. In retributive contexts, little interaction occurs between offenders and victims, and minimal attention is paid to the needs of victims. The restorative justice movement, by contrast, has increased attention to the rights and dignity of victims as well as offenders (Armour & Umbreit, 2005; Bazemore, 1998; Braithwaite, 1989; Cohen, 2001; Umbreit, 2001; Zehr, 1995). As detailed by Umbreit (2001), restorative justice approaches can involve supervised meetings between offenders and victims. In this context, offenders can hear the victim's story, offer accounts (e.g., explanations, apologies), and determine appropriate restitution. Importantly, restorative justice does *not* explicitly promote forgiveness. If forgiveness emerges, it is because victims initiate it.

While common sense suggests that justice—whether retributive or restorative—brings a sense of closure to victims (i.e., narrowing the injustice gap), this has not been studied experimentally. How might we study the effects of the absence of justice, retributive, and restorative justice, especially if we are interested in intersections with forgiveness? Victim-offender mediation meetings are difficult to investigate *in vivo*. First, the meetings are often protected by law. Second, stringent standards for consent are needed because prisoners are vulnerable to coercion. Third, within the community that advocates victim-offender meetings, victim advocates often desire to protect their clients from pressures to forgive (see Armour & Umbreit, 2005). Fourth, even if such meetings were available to research, the intrusiveness of videotaping, administering questionnaires, and/or monitoring physiological responses could prevent an accurate understanding of the naturalistic processes experienced by participants.

Another means of investigating justice and forgiveness is needed. The U.S. Department of Justice Federal Bureau of

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