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Depression reduces forgiveness selectively as a function of relationship closeness and transgression

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Abstract

We examined if depression predicts forgiveness beyond the effects of transgression and relationship closeness, and whether its effect on forgiveness is strongest in specific transgression–closeness situations. Hundred and nineteen university students were randomly assigned into one of two experimental conditions in which they were presented with hypothetical scenarios depicting a mild as well as a serious offense by either an acquaintance or a best friend. They also filled out a depression inventory. Results confirmed a depression \times transgression \times closeness interaction effect, in addition to a main effect of depression, on forgiveness. Whereas for nondepressed persons, closeness with the perpetrator enhances forgiveness given to a serious offense, it was not the case for depressed persons. Furthermore, depressed persons were less ready to forgive a mild offense by an acquaintance when compared with nondepressed ones. However, depressed and nondepressed persons were similarly forgiving when they were severely offended by an acquaintance, or when they were mildly offended by a best friend. These findings were explained in terms of how the cognitive biases of depressed people operate in different relationship contexts and under different emotional intensities following the offense.

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1. Introduction

Forgiveness is known to enhance the quality of interpersonal and romantic relationships (Berry & Worthington, 2001; McCullough, Fincham, & Tsang, 2003; Fincham & Beach, 2002) as well as physical and psychological well-being (McCullough & Witvliet, 2002). Although research on forgiveness has proliferated in the past decade, no consensus exists on what constitutes forgiveness (see review by Brown, 2003). For example, some researchers emphasized that reconciliation is an important aspect of forgiveness (e.g., Hargrave & Sells, 1997); while others argued that forgiveness does not necessarily involve reconciliation with the offending party (e.g., Enright & Human Development Study Group, 1996). Despite the lack of a consensus, it is commonly held that interpersonal forgiveness involves a decrease in negative responses (e.g., retaliation, estrangement) and an increase in positive responses (e.g., conciliation) towards the transgressor (Kachadourian, Fincham, & Davila, 2004; McCullough, Worthington, & Rachal, 1997), and both types of response are evoked and expressed in terms of behaviour, affect and cognition (Baumeister, Exline, & Sommer, 1999).

Research shows that the seriousness of transgression influences one's tendency to forgive (McCullough et al., 1997, 2003). Nonetheless, people are more willing to forgive in romantic relationships, which foster a sense of satisfaction, closeness and commitment (McCullough & Witvliet, 2002). Enright and Human Development Study Group (1996) articulated the distinction between deserving to be forgiven and being worthy of receiving forgiveness. People deserve to be forgiven, for instance, because their wrongdoing is too mild, harmless, or unintentional; on the other hand, unjust, offensive behavior makes one undeserving to be forgiven. Nonetheless, if the wrongdoer is esteemed or important to the victim, he or she would be deemed worthy of forgiving.

Besides closeness and transgression, research has consistently shown that unforgiving individuals are more depressed than those who are forgiving (Brown, 2003; Brown & Phillips, 2005; Maltby, Macaskill, & Day, 2001), although the causal direction is not clear. Failure to forgive might prolong certain negative emotions (e.g., anger) that eventually lead to depression. At the same time, it has been shown that people who tend to ruminate past unhappiness or victimized experiences are less likely to forgive others (Brown & Phillips, 2005; McCullough et al., 1998; Paleari, Regalia, & Fincham, 2005) as well as more likely to become depressed (Nolen-Hoeksema, 2000; Nolen-Hoeksema & Morrow, 1991). Along this line, research has shown that depressed persons can readily call to mind harm done by others (Brown, 2003), that they are more likely to interpret events in a negative and distorted fashion (Beck, 1967), and that they are more ready to base judgments of their social relationships on negative experiences (Cheng & Chiu, 2002). Because they tend to focus on their negative thoughts while overlooking effective means of conflict management (Lyubomirsky & Nolen-Hoeksema, 1995; Thompson & Heller, 1993), they would be less likely to forgive others.

Although the relationships between forgiveness and transgression, relationship closeness and depression are well known, to our knowledge, research has yet to investigate the simultaneous effects of these variables on forgiveness. Besides investigating their simultaneous effects in an experimental design, this study provides a way to ascertain if depression has an independent effect on forgiveness by selecting persons with existing depressive symptoms and investigating how they behave in hypothetical offensive situations. Moreover, as no study has been attempted on Chinese persons, this study will provide valuable information as to whether findings in the West are also true for Chinese populations.

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