



Relationship among dispositional forgiveness of others, interpersonal adjustment and psychological well-being: Implication for interpersonal theory of depression

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ABSTRACT

Interpersonal conflicts are unavoidable. Dispositional forgiveness of others may help people deal with the negative consequences that arise from conflicts and facilitate meaningful social relationships and psychological well-being. The present study examined the view that forgiveness of others effects psychological well-being through interpersonal adjustment. One hundred and thirty nine volunteers (80 females) provided measures of dispositional forgiveness, interpersonal adjustment and psychological well-being. Forgiveness of others was associated with interpersonal adjustment ($r = .28, p < .001$) and psychological well-being ($r = .17, p = .04$). Structural equation modeling revealed that interpersonal adjustment acts as a mediator between the disposition of forgiveness of others and psychological well-being. Dispositional forgiveness of others improves interpersonal adjustment and psychological well-being and may protect against negative interpersonal experiences and perceptions relating to depression.

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1. Introduction

Interpersonal conflicts are unavoidable negative events. The handling of these conflicts leads to different outcomes. Improper handling may lead to more interpersonal stress whereas proper handling may assist in the maintenance of meaningful social relationships and the enhancement of psychological well-being. McCullough and Worthington (1999) outlined the psychological reactions of victims of interpersonal conflicts: (1) negative perception of the actions of transgressors, (2) avoidance of transgressors, (3) development of hostile cognitions, and (4) possible ruminations on the transgressions by those with a low level of forgiveness. Repeated experiences of interpersonal conflicts might engender dispositional anger, hostility, and social avoidance which could affect the ability to form close and supportive relationships (McCullough, 2000).

The tendency to forgive others was related to reduction in anger, (Freedman & Enright, 1996; Thompson et al., 2005), and ruminations on the transgression (Ysseldyk, Matheson, & Anisman, 2007). It was also related to enhancement of social support (Lawler-Row & Piferi, 2006) and psychological well-being (Brown, 2003; Karuse & Ellison, 2003). In contrast, the tendency not to forgive was associated with poor social support, lower coping ability (Maltby, Day, & Barber, 2004), and higher depression and anxiety (Maltby, Macaskill, & Day, 2001). However, the mechanism behind this process remains uncertain.

Forgiveness of others involves a change in motivation towards the transgressor, which includes a positive view of the transgressor, and the absence of hesitation in approaching the transgressor. This enhances interpersonal adjustment and social support (McCullough, 2000; Roberts, 1995). Furthermore, in a study of close partners' transgressions, Bono, McCullough, and Root (2008) reported that the feeling of closeness towards partners was the mediator between the act of forgiveness and psychological well-being. The results suggested that forming positive relationships with partners is important for forgiveness to contribute to psychological well-being (Karremans, Van Lange, Ouwerkerk, & Kluwer, 2003). Better relationship with friends was also found to produce the same benefit of forgiveness. Lawler-Row and Piferi (2006) found that improvement of general social support as measured by the Social Provisions Scale (Cutrona & Russell, 1987) was the mediator between forgiveness, personal, and psychological well-being in adults aged above 55.

Despite these positive findings, Worthington, Van Oyen Witvliet, Pietrini, and Miller (2007) suggested that caution should be taken in generalizing their results, especially to a younger population. Furthermore, benefits of forgiveness on psychological well-being are observed in the area of improvement of intimate relationships. Their effects on general social relationships are less certain. Against this backdrop, the current study aims to study the model proposed by Lawler-Row and Piferi (2006) by focusing on the improvement in relationships between friends in a younger population. It is hypothesized that interpersonal adjustment in this domain is the mediator between the disposition to forgive others and psychological well-being.

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2. Methods

2.1. Participants

One hundred and thirty nine volunteers (59 males, 80 females) were recruited from the community. The age of the participants ranged from 19–50 (age 19–25 $n = 37$, age 26–35 $n = 65$, age 36–45 $n = 15$, and age 46–50 $n = 22$). The marital status of the participants was: 91 single, 46 married, and 2 divorced.

2.2. Questionnaire

2.2.1. Psychological well-being

Psychological well-being is defined as a composite of depression, positive affects, optimism, and self-efficacy.

The Beck Depression Inventory (BDI; Shek, 1990) is a 21-item self-report inventory used to assess the severity of depressive symptoms.

The Positive Affects Subscale of the Positive and Negative Affect Schedule (PANAS; Watson, Clark, & Tellegen, 1988) is a 10-item self-report questionnaire used to evaluate positive affects.

The Life Orientation Test (LOT; Scheier & Carver, 1985) is a 12-item self-report scale used to evaluate dispositional optimism.

The Perceived Self-efficacy Scale (PSS; Jerusalem & Schwarzer, 1992) is a 10-item self-report questionnaire used to access the belief that one can perform novel or difficult tasks, or cope with adversities in various domains of human functioning.

2.2.2. Interpersonal adjustment

Interpersonal adjustment is defined as the ability of a person to establish positive relationships with others and receive support from them (Summerfeldt, Kloosterman, Antony, & Parker, 2006).

The Multidimensional Scale of Perceived Social Support (MSPSS; Zimet, Dahlem, Zimet, & Farley, 1988) is a 12-item self-report questionnaire used to evaluate three sources of support: family, significant others, and friends. We used only the friend subscale for the measurement of interpersonal adjustment.

Table 1

Means (SD) of age, questionnaires for psychological well-being, Interpersonal Adjustment, and forgiveness of others and Cronbach's Alphas for the questionnaires.

Variables/indicators	Mean	SD	Cronbach's Alphas
Age	30.51	7.72	
Psychological well-being			
Optimism	39.49	5.98	.67
Perceived self-efficacy	24.50	4.97	.89
Depression	7.25	7.50	.90
Positive affect	29.18	5.88	.86
Interpersonal adjustment			
Perceived social support	65.26	11.38	.88
Leisure subscale of the social adjustment scale-revised	33.20	5.78	.74
Forgiveness of others	27.06	4.14	.76

Table 2

The Pearson's correlation results among the measures ($n = 139$).

	1	2	3	4	5	6
1. Forgiveness subscale of the heartland forgiveness scale						
2. Friend subscale of multidimensional scale of perceived social support	.23**					
3. Leisure subscale of the social adjustment scale-revised	.26**	.57**				
4. Perceived self-efficacy scale	-.03	.36**	.31**			
5. Positive affects subscale of the positive and negative affect schedule	.17*	.36**	.27**	.33**		
6. Life orientation test	.15	.39**	.43**	.42**	.45**	
7. Beck depression inventory	-.22**	-.47**	-.50**	-.34**	-.39**	-.45**

* Indicates $p < 0.05$.

** Indicates $p < 0.01$.

The Leisure Subscale of the Social Adjustment Scale-Revised (SAS-R; Cooper, Osborn, Gath, & Feggetter, 1982) is a 9-item self-report questionnaire used to assess the quantity and quality of social interactions outside the family, including the number of close friends and social interactions, and the degree of friction, social discomfort, hurt feelings, boredom, loneliness, and ease of confiding experienced.

2.2.3. Forgiveness

The Forgiveness Subscale of the Heartland Forgiveness Scale (HRS; Thompson et al., 2005) is a 6-item self-report questionnaire used to assess the tendency to forgive others.

2.3. Procedure

The study was submitted to and approved by the University Ethics Committee. Volunteers were requested to give informed consent upon arrival at the research laboratory. They were asked to fill out the questionnaires. Volunteers received no remuneration for their participation.

3. Statistical analysis

Structural equation modeling analysis using AMOS was conducted to examine the mediation role of interpersonal adjustment between forgiveness of others and psychological well-being. The standard criteria for model evaluation were based on the p -value of chi-square (χ^2) greater than .05, goodness of fit index (GFI) and the comparative fit index (CFI) greater than .95, and the root mean square error of approximation (RMSEA) less than .06 as suggested by Tabachnik and Fidell (1996), Joreskog and Sorbom (1984), and Browne and Cudek (1993), respectively.

Pearson's correlation was conducted to examine the interrelationship between forgiveness of others, interpersonal adjustment, and psychological well-being. The Z-scores for MSPSS were combined with the Z-scores for the Leisure Subscale of the SAS-R to create the interpersonal adjustment scores. Psychological well-being scores were calculated using the sum of the Z-scores of LOT, PSS, and Positive Affects of PANAS, minus the Z-scores of BDI.

4. Results

The means (SD) of age, positive affects, BDI, PSS, LOT, MSPSS, leisure subscale of SAS-R, and forgiveness of others are shown in Table 1. The Cronbach's Alphas of the questionnaires are also reported in Table 1. Pearson's correlation analysis showed that these questionnaire measures were associated with each other moderately significantly. Correlation coefficients ranged from .17 to .57 (see Table 2). Forgiveness of others was significantly associated with interpersonal adjustment ($r = .28, p < .001$) and psychological well-being ($r = .17, p = .04$). In addition, interpersonal adjustment

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