



Linguistic analysis of interpersonal forgiveness: Process trajectories

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ABSTRACT

Expressive writing benefits with clinical treatment protocols have been shown in a variety of mental health and medical settings, though the unfolding processes involved in interpersonal forgiveness is undetermined. Using linguistic analysis methodology, this study determined the trajectories of positive and negative emotions and time orientation associated with forgiveness. Over five weeks, 123 participants showed quadratic effects for positive emotional responses, linear decreases of negative emotional responses, and expected changes in time orientation. Additional analyses revealed forgiveness change differences based on contact status, including more positive and negative emotional content, and anger. Linguistic analysis in forgiveness research has significant potential to determine interpersonal forgiveness change processes.

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1. Introduction

Forgiving a transgressor for a perceived hurt incurred can be an arduous and painful cognitive and emotional experience, but evidence suggests multiple physical and psychological benefits to the forgiver for doing so (for reviews, see [Worthington, 2005](#)). Researchers have focused on a variety of psychological variables that contribute to the propensity for someone to forgive a transgressor (e.g., personality, increased empathy, low entitlement), and clinical outcome studies show evidence for the practical and clinical utility of forgiveness interventions (e.g., [Snyder, Baucom, & Gordon, 2008](#)), though clinical research is still in its infancy (see [Baskin & Enright, 2004](#); [Malcolm, Warwar, & Greenberg, 2005](#)). [Strelan and Covic \(2006\)](#) reported that though empirical evidence exists attesting to multiple benefits of forgiveness, we know very little about the specific processes that occur.

Research on predictors of forgiveness can be theoretically categorized into four main areas with personality traits and interpersonal processes as more causally distal and features of the offense and how the victim thinks and feels about the transgressor as more proximal ([McCullough et al., 1998](#)). In the current paper, we examine the temporal unfolding of the proximal determinants of forgiveness. Specifically, we focus on emotional and time orientation changes and the relation of the transgressor to the victim (contact versus no contact).

1.1. Theoretical perspectives in emotional and temporal change with forgiveness

No consensual definition of interpersonal forgiveness exists, though researchers generally agree on a key component, that being a reduction in the motivation to retaliate against a transgressor ([Worthington, 2005](#)). A variety of positive and negative emotions have been associated with forgiveness. For example, [McCullough, Worthington, and Rachal \(1997\)](#) found empathy toward the transgressor to be a primary factor of forgiveness, as it assists in the transformation of motivation needed to achieve forgiveness. Negative emotions that are inversely associated with forgiveness include hostility, anger, fear, and resentment ([Worthington, Berry, & Parrott, 2001](#)). There is growing evidence that each of these can affect both mental and physical health ([Toussaint & Webb, 2005](#)).

Cognitive theorists (e.g., [Gordon, Baucom, & Snyder, 2005](#)) have indicated that a reduction in negative feelings toward a transgressor may be all that is sufficient to forgive. Though recognizing the influence of empathy as a critical component of forgiveness, positive affect may develop after the decrease in negative affect, but is not necessary for forgiveness to occur. Once a transgression occurs, an individual can retaliate, seek revenge or justice, deny the transgression, become ambivalent toward the transgressor, or forgive. Forgiveness motivations can be redirected and change toward a transgressor, leading to a reduction in retaliation ([McCullough, Fincham, & Tsang, 2003](#)).

Those advocating for an emotion–motivation relationship (e.g., [Malcolm et al., 2005](#)) suggest that during the forgiveness process, positive and negative emotions are intertwined, and positive

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emotions become more dominant as the process unfolds. [Fincham, Hall, and Beach \(2005\)](#) summed up the cognitive and emotion-motivation theoretical differences by suggesting that maintaining an ongoing relationship with a transgressor (maintaining contact) requires the reduction of negative emotions and the addition of positive emotions, whereas only the reduction of negative emotions is required if an ongoing relationship is not expected. Contact (versus no contact) with the transgressor is a variable under investigation in the present study to determine its influence on positive and negative affect.

The length of time since an offense may influence forgiveness, and the phrase, “Time heals all wounds” is an adage that may have some merit. It would be expected that time does diminish negative emotions surrounding a transgression, though it is also clear that forgiveness for some transgressions may be extremely difficult (e.g., sexual abuse). [Allemand \(2008\)](#) determined that a future time orientation can play a role in forgiveness, while [Wohl and McGrath \(2007\)](#) found greater likelihood of forgiveness of a transgressor as more time elapsed since the transgression. However, Wohl and McGrath used an experimental design in which participants were asked to consider how they would act today if a scenario occurred two years ago, and did not evaluate the longitudinal effects of forgiveness.

There is no empirical evidence assessing the trajectories of positive and negative emotional factors, and temporal factors, on forgiveness over time, which is the purpose of this study. The results have clinical implications, such that it could lead to more accurate emotional and temporal clinical expectancies. If clients are better informed of the forgiveness process then perhaps they may, for example, increase adherence to treatment plans if their positive emotions decrease (e.g., quadratic effect) during part of their treatment.

1.2. Methodological concerns in forgiveness research

[McCullough and Root \(2005\)](#) have called for increased methodological pluralism to fully understand the complexities involved in the forgiveness process. Using pre-post designs to assess forgiveness change, much of the research literature involves participants completing interpersonal forgiveness instruments over two time periods, with subsequent change scores representing forgiveness. These studies have yielded much of what we know about forgiveness and unforgiveness. Time orientation (focusing less on the past and more on the present and future) is alluded to in the literature also, though not directly assessed.

In order to draw conclusions about emotional and temporal forgiveness paths, measurement must occur over multiple time periods. For example, anger toward a transgressor may decrease over time using a pre-post design, but the trajectory is currently unknown. A unique means of assessing specific forgiveness processes is through linguistic analysis of expressive writing content.

1.3. Linguistic analysis of forgiveness

Weekly writing is considered an important component of interpersonal forgiveness interventions employed by clinicians (see [Enright, 2001](#)). [Pennebaker \(2004\)](#) has long advocated for increased understanding of change processes through linguistic analyses of expressive writing, and it has been incorporated into a variety of medical, psychological, and educational situations (for a review see [Pennebaker & Chung, 2007](#)). Though the clinical forgiveness literature is replete with expressive writing exercises (e.g., [Enright & Fitzgibbons, 2000](#)), no study to date has assessed the emotional written processes over time that may influence interpersonal forgiveness. Only one expressive writing study ([McCullough, Root, & Cohen, 2006](#)) had participants write in one, 20-min setting about

potential benefits to forgiving a transgression. As noted above, empathy is considered an important component of forgiveness, though it can be assessed only indirectly in the present study. The expressive writing analytic methodology advocated by [Pennebaker, Francis, and Booth \(2001\)](#) does not include empathy as a specific dictionary term (see below). However, we determined that positive affect would be related to empathy, which can be directly measured using the methodology.

Specifically, the purpose of this study was to determine the unfolding process of three theoretically and empirically-derived factors found in previous forgiveness research (see [Pennebaker et al., 2001](#); [Worthington, 2005](#)), positive emotional responses (affect, emotions, feelings), negative emotional responses (emotions, anger, sadness), and temporal responses (past, present, future), using an expressive writing paradigm over five time periods.

First, since the reduction of negative emotions is critical to forgive, it is expected that each of the negative emotional responses will decrease over time, though hypotheses regarding the specific paths are not offered due to the lack of theoretical foundation. Second, each of the positive emotional responses will increase over time, though hypotheses regarding the specific paths are again not offered. Finally, it is expected that participants will report more present and future time orientation text over the five week period.

2. Method

2.1. Participants

A total of 123 US undergraduate students participated in the study, consisting of 103 females and 20 males. Participants self-selected to participate via a psychology research subject pool for extra credit and included only those who met two criteria; that they (1) “had someone hurt them previously and with whom they were still upset, and (2) were interested in working on the hurt.” Participant ages ranged from 18 to 45 ($M = 21.3$, $SD = 2.1$), and included almost equal numbers of Caucasian ($n = 59$) and African American ($n = 60$) students. Others self-identified as Asian American ($n = 1$), American Indian ($n = 2$) and one participant reporting “other.” They were fairly equally distributed across grade levels.

2.2. Materials

2.2.1. Enright Forgiveness Inventory (EFI; [Subkoviak, Enright, & Wu, 1995](#))

The EFI is a 60-item inventory measuring positive and negative cognitive, affective, and behavioral components of interpersonal forgiveness and is based on a 6-point Likert-type scale (Strongly Disagree to Strongly Agree). Subscales can be assessed or researchers can utilize a total forgiveness score. Individuals briefly write about a transgression, followed by the positive and negative items, and has strong psychometric properties in both the US and abroad (e.g., [Orathinkal, Vansteenwegen, Enright, & Stroobants, 2007](#)). A question was added regarding whether the participant was in contact with the transgressor, consistent with [Fincham et al. \(2005\)](#) who indicated that current contact may be an important component determining the likelihood of increasing positive emotions when forgiving. Cronbach α levels for the total score are high ($>.98$) with a retest reliability of .86 ([Subkoviak et al., 1995](#)). Validity has also been determined across studies (e.g., [Subkoviak et al., 1995](#)).

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