

# Does activating justice help or hurt in promoting forgiveness? ☆

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## Abstract

Do justice values promote or obstruct forgiveness? This question has received virtually no empirical attention, even though past theorizing suggest two different answers. The literature on forgiveness suggests that justice constitutes a barrier to forgiveness, suggesting that the activation of justice values should decrease the probability of forgiveness. Conversely, the literature on justice and human values indicates that justice and forgiveness are positively associated, suggesting that the activation of justice should enhance the probability of forgiveness. Consistent with the latter line of reasoning, three studies, using complementary priming methods, provide converging evidence for the prediction that the activation of justice promotes (rather than obstructs) forgiveness. Implications for extant theory regarding forgiveness and justice are discussed.

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## Introduction

Only until recently, social scientists have started to acknowledge the important role of forgiveness for understanding important life outcomes, such as relationship well-being, as well as psychological and physical well-being (e.g., Fincham, 2000; Karremans & Van Lange, 2004; Karremans, Van Lange, Ouwkerk, & Kluwer, 2003; Witvliet, Ludwig, & Vander Laan, 2001). Social psychologists have devoted extensive empirical attention to the precursors of forgiveness, thereby focusing on personality factors, relationship factors, and offence-specific factors that determine level of forgiveness (for an overview, see McCullough, Pargament, & Thoresen, 2000). However, an important issue that has received considerable theoretical attention in the for-

giveness literature, but has received only little empirical attention, is the relationship between people's justice values and forgiveness (e.g., Exline, Worthington, Hill, & McCullough, 2003). Are people's justice values related to forgiveness? And if so, do people's justice values increase, or decrease level of forgiveness towards others?

It is surprising that these questions have not been addressed empirically, since several authors have argued that the relationship between justice and forgiveness seems pertinent to our understanding of when and why people forgive their offenders (e.g., Enright, Gassin, & Wu, 1992; Exline & Baumeister, 2000; Exline et al., 2003). Moreover, empirical research on the relationship between justice and forgiveness is especially important, since previous theory and research can support two opposing hypotheses, as we argue in this article. The central purpose of the present research is to examine whether the activation of justice exerts enhancing or detrimental effects on forgiveness. We now turn to discussing why activating justice may exert detrimental or enhancing effects on forgiveness.

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### *Detrimental effects of justice*

Why are people sometimes not able to forgive the offender, even in the face of offered apologies, strong commitment, and a generally forgiving personality? An important barrier to forgive others that has been proffered in the literature on forgiveness includes a person's justice values (e.g., Enright et al., 1992; Exline & Baumeister, 2000; McCullough, Sandage, & Worthington, 1997). That is, a person who forgives his or her offender may violate his or her own values of justice. The reasoning is that justice conceptions entail an eye-for-an-eye approach to the offender ("I will pay him back!"), whereas forgiveness involves the cancellation of a debt created by the offender's action ("Despite what he did, I forgive him." Hebl & Enright, 1993). According to this reasoning, forgiveness requires "the loosening of justice standards in order to permit mercy" (Exline & Baumeister, 2000, p. 147). It is, at least from this perspective, conceivable that people perceive, and hold, negative associations between justice and forgiveness. Hence, activating the concept of justice would plausibly lead to decreased levels of forgiveness. Indeed, the seemingly incompatibility of justice and forgiveness led Exline and Baumeister (2000) to propose that if justice concerns are very salient, a person would be less likely to forgive.

Hitherto, however, the forgiveness literature has implicitly focused on only one justice motive, namely *retributive* justice. Feelings of retributive justice entail the motivation to take actions in response to wrongdoing, and to sanction the offender for his or her actions (e.g., Tyler, Boeckmann, Smith, & Huo, 1997). Indeed, if retribution would be the only conception of justice people have, justice salience would conceivably lead to decreased levels of forgiveness. However, forgiveness researchers have typically focused on retributive justice alone, thereby largely neglecting other important justice motives. Indeed, forgiveness researchers using the general term justice typically mean retributive justice (e.g., Exline et al., 2003).

### *Enhancing effects of justice*

A completely different picture emerges if one considers the more general literature on social justice, and the literature on human values. Surprisingly, these two literatures have received only modest attention in the literature on forgiveness, despite the fact that, as noted, forgiveness researchers have often stressed the importance of studying justice values in order to broaden our understanding of when and why people forgive.

There is strong evidence from the general literature on justice that people's subjective conceptions of justice are much broader than retribution alone. First, research on procedural justice indicates that justice values not only involve punishment of the offender for his or her

actions (i.e., retribution), but according to a person's justice beliefs, the conflict should also be solved in a fair manner (e.g., Thibaut & Walker, 1975; Tyler, 1987). More generally, it has been widely shown that the fairness of procedures appears to be an important justice concern to people. In fact, this research shows that people are concerned not only with how fairly they are treated themselves, but people are also very much concerned with how others are being treated (LaTour, 1978; Van den Bos & Lind, 2001).

Second, research on distributive justice has demonstrated that people's conceptions of justice also entail a fair distribution of resources. For example, a person typically is more satisfied with equal rewards if he or she and another person have contributed equally to a task, than when he or she receives more rewards than the other (i.e., overpayment; Adams, 1965). Also, people seem to have a strong tendency to distribute resources equally among themselves and others (e.g., Deutsch, 1975; Van Lange, 1999). Thus, importantly, both lines of research on procedural and distributive justice suggest that justice conceptions for an important part include concern for the welfare of others (Tyler et al., 1997).

The idea that justice can be considered a prosocial belief (i.e., concern for the welfare of others) is further empirically supported by findings from the literature on human values. In their extensive work on the content and structure of human values, Schwartz and his colleagues (Schwartz, 1992; Schwartz & Bilsky, 1987, 1990) showed that human values can be categorized in different motivational types (for an overview see Schwartz, 1992). Importantly, in their research it is consistently found that justice and forgiveness are two values that are strongly correlated in terms of how much people endorse these two values. Their research demonstrates that justice and forgiveness are two values that can be arranged into the same domain of values serving the same motivational goal, namely promoting the welfare of others. Other values that can be categorized in this prosocial domain of values are for example helpfulness, loyalty, and honesty (Schwartz & Huisman, 1995). Thus, in line with the general literature on justice, the value literature empirically supports that justice is indeed strongly related to other values that pursue the welfare of others.

### *The present research*

The preceding discussion suggests that justice is a much more *social* construct than forgiveness researchers often seem to assume. Based on findings from both the general justice literature and the literature on human values, it can be predicted that justice salience leads to increased levels of forgiveness (Hypothesis 1). However, we began this introduction with a brief overview of the relationship between justice and forgiveness as proposed in the literature on forgiveness. In this literature, it is of-

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