



Self and other justice beliefs, impulsivity, rumination, and forgiveness: Justice beliefs can both prevent and promote forgiveness

Todd Lucas^{a,*}, Jason D. Young^b, Ludmila Zhdanova^{a,b}, Sheldon Alexander^b

^a Department of Family Medicine, Wayne State University, United States

^b Department of Psychology, Wayne State University, United States

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ABSTRACT

Acts of forgiveness are linked to beliefs about justice. However, a largely unsettled issue is whether strong justice beliefs prevent or promote forgiveness. Moreover, researchers have yet to identify mechanisms that might explain both positive and negative links between justice beliefs and forgiveness. We examined whether forgiveness is differentially linked to beliefs about justice for the self (BJ-self) versus beliefs about justice for others (BJ-others). In addition, we examined whether these associations are mediated by impulsivity and rumination. Participants ($N = 278$) completed measures of justice beliefs for self and others, impulsivity, rumination, and forgiveness. Structural equation modeling strongly supported an indirect effects model in which BJ-self was positively associated with forgiveness while BJ-others was negatively associated, and in which these divergent relationships were fully mediated by impulsivity and rumination. This study contributes to the literature by clarifying the ways in which justice beliefs may both prevent and promote instances of forgiveness.

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1. Introduction

As an alternative to seeking revenge, individuals may overcome social conflict in more positive ways. One possible reaction is forgiveness. Psychological theory and research have defined forgiveness as the transformation of negative responses towards a transgressor to positive responses (McCullough, Worthington, & Rachal, 1997). Instead of retaliating, seeking punishment or demanding compensation, people who forgive respond to transgressors with benevolence and compassion. Forgiveness has recently received greater attention from investigators in the behavioral and social sciences (e.g., Exline, Worthington, Hill, & McCullough, 2003). In this relatively short time, much has been revealed about the potential health and social benefits of opting for forgiveness (e.g., Brown, 2003; McCullough, Root, Tabak, & Witvliet, 2009; Thompson et al., 2005) and also the antecedent individual differences and cognitive mediators of forgiveness processes (McCullough et al., 2009).

Of present interest, research increasingly suggests that beliefs about justice are an important determinant of forgiveness (Exline

et al., 2003; Strelan & Covic, 2006). However, a largely unsettled issue is whether justice beliefs prevent or promote forgiveness (e.g., Karremans & Van Lange, 2005; Strelan, 2007). Moreover, researchers have yet to identify mechanisms that might explain both positive and negative links between justice beliefs and forgiveness. In the present study, we distinguish between beliefs about justice for the self versus justice for others to clarify the ways in which justice beliefs can be both positively and negatively associated with forgiveness. Moreover, we suggest that unique relationships between self and other justice beliefs and forgiveness are mediated by similarly divergent associations with impulsivity and ruminative thinking.

1.1. Justice and forgiveness

Justice is associated with forgiveness in numerous ways (e.g., Exline et al., 2003). For example, research has demonstrated the circumstances under which compensatory forms of justice are likely to be sought as well as the criteria that compose adequate compensation (e.g., Darley & Huff, 1990; Tripp, Bies, & Aquino, 2007). More recently, research has suggested that decisions about forgiveness may be impacted by dispositional beliefs about justice and fairness (e.g., Strelan, 2007). However, a hitherto unresolved issue concerns whether strong justice beliefs make instances of forgiveness more or less likely. In support of negative associations,

* Corresponding author. Address: Division of Occupational and Environmental Health, Department of Family Medicine and Public Health Sciences, Wayne State University, 3800 Woodward Avenue, Suite 808, Detroit, MI 48201, United States. Tel.: +1 313 577 2124.

E-mail address: tlucas@med.wayne.edu (T. Lucas).

forgiveness literature has proffered that a person may be required to relax his or her own standards of justice to accommodate forgiveness, and therefore individuals could maintain injustices or encourage future offenses when opting for forgiveness (e.g., Exline & Baumeister, 2000; Exline et al., 2003). Moreover, to restore challenged beliefs in justice, individuals might opt for revenge (e.g., Kaiser, Vick, & Major, 2004).

Recent research also has suggested justice may be positively linked to forgiveness. Specifically, individuals may be motivated to preserve a general sense of fairness in social interaction, and this may encourage rather than impede forgiveness when justice beliefs are salient (Strelan, 2007). Positive links between justice beliefs and forgiveness are empirically supported. In a seminal study, Karremans and Van Lange (2005) demonstrated that individuals were more rather than less forgiving when experimentally primed to think about justice. Moreover, research has shown that justice beliefs and forgiveness may be similarly positively associated with third factors. For example, emphasizing benefits that one may gain from experiencing and overcoming an interpersonal transgression (e.g., personal growth) can both protect individual justice beliefs (Lerner, 1980) and also facilitate a desire to forgive others (McCullough, Root, & Cohen, 2006). Forgiveness also might be essential to maintaining justice beliefs in situations where close relationships are involved (Karremans & Aarts, 2007), or where revenge otherwise is not viable. Despite theory and research that has suggested both positive and negative links between justice and forgiveness, the boundaries surrounding these relationships are not yet well understood.

1.2. Beliefs about justice for self and others

One possible explanation for positive and negative associations between justice beliefs and forgiveness concerns the multidimensional nature of justice beliefs (for review, Furnham, 2003). In recent times, theory and research have emphasized that personal justice beliefs (i.e., beliefs about justice for the self) are distinct from general justice beliefs (i.e., beliefs about justice for others). Considerable research has suggested that self justice beliefs are psychometrically distinct from beliefs about justice for others, and that they are moderately correlated with one another (e.g., Bègue & Bastounis, 2003; Dalbert, 1999; Sutton & Douglas, 2005). Moreover, general and personal justice beliefs have different correlates that further highlight the distinction – while personal justice beliefs have been shown to predict measures of psychological adjustment and individual well-being (e.g., Bègue & Bastounis, 2003; Dalbert, 1999), general justice beliefs best predict harsh social attitudes (e.g., Connors & Heaven, 1990; Montada, 1998).

Although distinguishing between general and personal justice beliefs is both psychometrically feasible and empirically useful, possible differential links to forgiveness have not yet been articulated. Examining self-other differences could explain how justice can be both positively and negatively associated with forgiveness. For example, the positive association between justice beliefs and forgiveness reported by Karremans and Van Lange (2005) might be attributable to differential activation of either general or personal justice beliefs. However, because their research did not formally distinguish between these spheres of justice, it is yet unknown whether general or personal justice dispositions explain their results.

1.3. Rumination and impulsivity

Another important but unresolved issue concerns cognitive intermediaries that can convey both positive and negative links between justice beliefs and forgiveness. Two possible mediators include ruminative thinking and impulsivity. It is well recognized

that rumination plays a vital role in decisions to forgive (e.g., McCullough, 2000; Worthington & Wade, 1999), and that ruminating about a perceived transgression is negatively associated with forgiveness (e.g., McCullough et al., 1998; Ysseldyk, Matheson, & Anisman, 2007). Theory and research also have suggested a time-order relationship – excessive rumination usually precedes an unforgiving or vengeful response (e.g., Bushman, Bonacci, Pedersen, Vazquez, & Miller, 2005; though see also Ysseldyk et al., 2007). Of present interest, a link between ruminative thinking and justice beliefs is also suggested in the literature. Specifically, Dalbert (2002) demonstrated that a strong belief in a just world may reduce self-focused rumination, and that decreased rumination partly explains the capacity of strong dispositional justice beliefs to reduce anger. Thus, current literature highlights that rumination is related to both justice beliefs and forgiveness, and that rumination possibly mediates a link between justice beliefs and forgiveness.

Although not as often recognized as rumination, impulsivity may be another important cognitive antecedent of forgiveness. For example, impulsivity is well linked to acts of aggression and thus may be evident in forgiveness through decisions to opt for revenge (e.g., Bushman & Anderson, 2001). Moreover, individuals have been shown to respond with more vengefulness when encouraged to respond quickly to an interpersonal transgression (Rusbult, Kumashiro, Finkel, & Wildschut, 2002). Curiously however, recent research also has suggested that, forgiveness can sometimes occur relatively automatically and with little cognitive deliberation (Karremans & Aarts, 2007). Thus, impulsivity and forgiveness also may be positively related in some circumstances, such as close relationships. Of present interest, impulsivity also has been discussed in linking beliefs about justice to interpersonal behavior. For example, Henle (2005) showed that perceived organizational injustices were especially strong at forecasting vengeful behavior in employees who were dispositionally high on impulsivity. Current literature therefore highlights that impulsivity also is related to both justice beliefs and forgiveness, and that impulsivity too could mediate a link between justice beliefs and forgiveness.

1.4. The present study

The primary objectives of the present study were to examine whether general and personal justice beliefs are differentially associated with forgiveness, and whether these differentiated relationships would be mediated by links to impulsivity and rumination. To explore these possibilities, we utilized an individual differences approach. Specifically, we collected dispositional measures of general and personal justice beliefs, impulsivity, ruminative thinking, and forgiveness in a diverse convenience sample of US participants. We hypothesized that self and other justice beliefs would relate positively and negatively to forgiveness, respectively, through impulsivity and ruminative thinking (i.e., a fully mediated model).

2. Method

2.1. Participants

A random convenience sample of 278 participants (103 male) was recruited from across the United States to complete a short online survey using a reputable non-profit academic internet sample recruitment service (Stanton & Weiss, 2002). Participants were predominantly Caucasian (172) and African American (98) and ranged in age from 19 to 74 years ($M = 46.96$, $SD = 12.86$). Participants were entered into a lottery to receive a small retail prize as compensation.

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