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Forgiveness and its determinants depending on the interpersonal context of hurt

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ABSTRACT

Children and adolescents encounter different hurtful experiences in school settings. How these events are processed (e.g., whether they think that the transgressor was hostile) is likely to depend on the relationship with the transgressor. In this study, we examined how adolescents (58 girls and 35 boys, mean age = 14.03 years, $SD = 0.60$) dealt with the hurt caused by someone they liked or disliked. Our findings show that the hurt caused by a disliked transgressor is likely to lead to more negative cognitive (e.g., hostile attributions), affective (e.g., feelings of anger), and motivational (e.g., avoidance/revenge) outcomes than the hurt caused by a liked peer. In addition, we found that associations between cognitive processes and avoidance/revenge were mediated by feelings of anger, but only when the transgression occurred in the context of disliking. These results highlight the importance of studying how adolescents process hurtful experiences in different relational contexts.

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Introduction

A considerable proportion of students are subjected to frequent harassment (e.g., physical, verbal, and relational aggression) at school. Interpersonal offenses, however, are not limited to overt and covert acts of aggression but can also include criticism, betrayal, and other forms of hurtful behaviors. Although there is a considerable amount of research showing detrimental effects of hurtful experiences, such as victimization, on individuals' well-being, less is known about how children and adolescents process interpersonal hurt (e.g., the degree to which they attribute hostility to the offender,

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ruminate about the offense, and feel anger or sadness) and how these processes determine the degree to which they forgive their offender. Thus, this study focused on a relatively neglected construct in research on aggression and victimization among children and adolescents, *interpersonal forgiveness*, and also tested the putative processes (cognitive, affective, and interpersonal) that increase the likelihood of forgiveness.

Forgiveness as reflected by low avoidance and revenge motivation

According to McCullough and colleagues (1998), two motivational systems govern the degree to which people forgive an offender for a hurtful action. The first one, *avoidance motivation*, reflects a flight tendency (see also Miller, Pedersen, Earleywine, & Pollock, 2003) and involves feelings of hurt that motivate victims to avoid the offender. The second one, *revenge motivation*, reflects a fight tendency that is characterized by feelings of injustice and a desire to get back at the offender. Forgiveness occurs when victims no longer want to avoid and get back at the offender. Indeed, these two motivational constructs together account for a large percentage of the variance (e.g., 48%) in single-item assessments of forgiveness (McCullough et al., 1998).

Being able to forgive the harm-doer is, in turn, related to both inter- and intrapersonal benefits. For instance, forgiveness increases the probability of reestablishing closeness (McCullough et al., 1998) and reconciliation (McCullough, Worthington, & Rachal, 1997) and decreases the likelihood of future offenses (e.g., Wallace, Exline, & Baumeister, 2008), and thus it can deescalate a cycle of aversive interactions between two individuals. Forgiveness can also enhance greater satisfaction with life, increase positive (and decrease negative) affect, and boost state self-esteem (Karremans, Van Lange, Ouwkerk, & Kluwer, 2003). Yet, it is not always easy to forgive. In fact, getting back at the offender, in one way or another, could be considered a built-in biological response (McCullough & Witvliet, 2002) and is related to the equality principle (Stillwell, Baumeister, & Del Priore, 2008). In other words, individuals who have been victims of some form of transgression believe that getting back at the offender, or making the offender feel what they felt, is justified and fair. Unfortunately, revenge motivation, if actualized in aggressive retaliation, can give rise to a vicious circle of negative exchanges (see Stillwell et al., 2008) and can put children at risk for further attacks (Kochenderfer-Ladd, 2004). In contrast, avoidance motivation can possibly lead to deescalation of conflict and termination of any active relationship between the transgressor and victim.

Attributions, rumination, and emotions

Two sociocognitive constructs, *attributions* and *rumination*, are central in determining the course of events following an interpersonal offense. In fact, McCullough and colleagues (1998) considered such sociocognitive processes to be the most proximal determinants of forgiveness. Attributions have received considerable attention in studies on social information processing and aggression (Crick & Dodge, 1994). For instance, when children interpret (hypothetical or actual) ambiguous actions by peers that yield negative results as hostile, they are more likely to feel angry (Graham, Hudley, & Williams, 1992) and choose response options that are more aggressive (Graham et al., 1992; Peets, Hodges, Kikas, & Salmivalli, 2007) and less passive (e.g., withdrawal; Peets et al., 2007) in nature. In contrast, willingness to take partial responsibility for the hurtful incident (i.e., self-blame) could reflect a heightened motivation to make things better between the perpetrator and victim.

Whereas attributions can be made quickly without much reflective thought, rumination entails rethinking and reliving the painful event over and over again (e.g., Rusting & Nolen-Hoeksema, 1998). Ruminating about a hurtful incident is likely to trigger and prolong negative feelings (see also Miller et al., 2003). For instance, rumination about one's own depressed mood increases the likelihood of prolonged depression in adults (Nolen-Hoeksema & Morrow, 1991) and is associated with internalizing problems in children and adolescents (Rose, 2002). Similarly, ruminating about one's own anger is associated with a higher probability of prolonged feelings of anger (Rusting & Nolen-Hoeksema, 1998). In addition, individuals (at least adults) who are more inclined to relive their interpersonal offenses have higher avoidance and revenge motivation (McCullough, Bono, & Root, 2007; McCullough

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