Positive psychological characteristics and interpersonal forgiveness: Identifying the unique contribution of emotional intelligence abilities, Big Five traits, gratitude and optimism

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ABSTRACT

Theory and research have underlined the key role that specific positive psychological characteristics play in the process of forgiving others. However, no studies have examined the joint contribution of the four specific psychological characteristics of emotional intelligence abilities, Big Five, gratitude and optimism in interpersonal forgiveness. This study of 535 undergraduate students assessed whether these four positive psychological characteristics would each contribute uniquely and differentially to the prediction of the two components of transgression-related interpersonal motivations when considered simultaneously in the analyses. Partial support was found for the role of personality traits and emotional intelligence abilities as predictors. Regression analyses indicated that the motivation to revenge, but not the motivation to avoid, was predicted by neuroticism, agreeableness, openness and managing emotions scores, beyond the level attributable to socio-demographic variables and other well-known dimensions. These findings expand on previous studies into the antecedents of forgiveness and increase this body of knowledge by demonstrating that specific psychological characteristics, in particular, Big Five traits and managing emotions, may contribute to individual variation in some transgression-related interpersonal motivations.

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1. Introduction

Over the years, much attention has been paid to the antecedents and underpinning mechanisms involved in interpersonal forgiving human relationships (McCullough, Root, Tabak, & Witvliet, 2009). Social encounters inevitably involve the risk of being offended by others. Such transgressions typically elicit at least two transgression-related interpersonal motivations: the motivation to avoid the source of the harm and the motivation to seek revenge (McCullough, 2001). McCullough, Worthington, and Rachal (1997) observed that when individuals indicate that they have forgiven an interpersonal offence, they modulate these two motivations so that the probability of restoring harmonious and positive interpersonal relations with the transgressor is increased.

One line of research that has gained growing attention is the examination of affective and cognitive determinants of interpersonal forgiveness (Riek & Mania, 2012). An attribute that may promote interpersonal forgiveness is people's general ability to

process and regulate affective information in social encounters (Worthington & Wade, 1999). In this context, the concept of emotional intelligence (EI) has emerged in recent research as a psychological resource composed of a set of abilities concerned with the processing of emotion-relevant information, which may play an important role in promoting personal growth and maintaining mutually supportive relationships (Mayer & Salovey, 1997). From the ability approach, EI is defined as a set of skills to perceive emotions, to access and generate emotions so as to assist thought, to understand emotions and emotional knowledge, and to reflectively regulate emotions so as to promote emotional and intellectual growth (Mayer & Salovey, 1997). Worthington and Wade (1999) have hypothesized that people's ability to forgive will be influenced partially by their emotional abilities to successfully manage negative emotions after a transgression. That is, those individuals who are able to perceive, facilitate, understand and regulate their emotions should be more adaptable to stressors such as social transgressions and more able to use forgiveness to resolve interpersonal problems. Among the four core EI abilities proposed by Mayer and Salovey (1997), the ability to manage emotions is expected to be most strongly associated with transgression-related interpersonal motivations, in accord with previous findings with

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relevant social functioning criteria (Mayer, Roberts, & Barsade, 2008). These regulation abilities are thought to be important for interpersonal encounters because emotions serve communicative and social functions and might facilitate the use of effective social strategies, specifically for managing conflicts and difficult situations with others (Lopes et al., 2011). A emerging body of research has showed that emotionally intelligent people (particularly those with higher managing emotions scores) report more positive interactions and less conflict with friends than those with lower EI (Mayer et al., 2008), which should result in an increased disposition to forgive.

Although a substantial amount of evidence exists regarding the influence EI has on different positive social adaptation criteria, very little empirical work has examined explicit links between EI dimensions and the propensity to forgive others. For example, some empirical evidence has demonstrated that individuals with a high self-reported ability to manage emotions predicted a greater disposition to forgive (Hodgson & Wertheim, 2007; Rizkalla, Wertheim, & Hodgson, 2008), however, the contribution of this research has been limited because these earlier studies relied on self-reported measures of EI that do not directly measure people's emotional skills but rather people's attitudes towards emotional experiences (Mayer et al., 2008). Furthermore, none of the previous research examined the relative contribution of EI abilities in combination with other traditional predictors of dimensions of interpersonal forgiveness.

Similarly, much of the literature about personal antecedents of forgiveness has focused on differences in the five-factor model of personality (Emmons, 2000). Specifically, research suggests that the disposition to forgive may be related most strongly to higher-order dimensions of the five-factor personality domains revealing, for example, that non-neurotic, agreeable, conscientious and extroverted people typically report a greater dispositional tendency to forgive others (McCullough et al., 2009). To explain the personality–forgiveness linkage, dispositional traits are considered to impact on forgiveness by shaping the way a person interprets their perceptions of the transgressor, experienced betrayals and the quality of the relationship (McCullough & Hoyt, 2002).

In addition, gratitude appears to operate in a similar manner to personality traits in relation to forgiveness. McCullough, Emmons, and Tsang (2002) defined the grateful disposition as a generalized tendency to recognize and respond with positive emotion to the roles of other people's benevolence in the positive experiences and outcomes that one obtains. As a moral emotion, grateful individuals are more helpful, supportive, forgiving and empathic toward others. Consistent with this framework, grateful individuals are less likely to respond with anger after being hurt by others (McCullough et al., 2002). Consequently, as forgiveness and gratitude are interpersonal strengths and empirically related (Neto, 2007), we included a measure of gratitude to examine the joint association with the remaining psychological characteristics on transgression-related interpersonal motivations.

Optimism is another dispositional factor that may promote forgiveness. Dispositional optimism is the generalized expectancy that good things will happen in the future (Scheier & Carver, 1985). Studies have shown that optimism is associated with lower social alienation (Scheier & Carver, 1985) and engaging more constructively during an interpersonal conflict (Srivastava, McGonigal, Richards, Butler, & Gross, 2006). Worthington and Wade (1999) have stated that an optimistic view of a relationship and oneself in that relationship is expected to influence whether forgiveness will occur. In fact, some research suggests that optimism might predict forgiveness to the degree that it facilitates positive coping and cooperative problem solving after a conflict (Assad, Donnellan, & Conger, 2007).

Relatively new positive and emotion-related constructs such as EI abilities have utility to the extent that they not only predict significant individual and social outcomes but also explain incremental validity with respect to well-documented constructs (Zeidner, Roberts, & Matthews 2008). To the extent that EI abilities, Big Five, gratitude and optimism reflect the emotional and cognitive self-regulatory processes involved in social functioning, individual differences among these basic dimensions may share some associations with interpersonal forgiveness. Likewise, since there is clear evidence that conceptually related variables such as EI (Hodgson & Wertheim, 2007), Big Five dimensions (McCullough et al., 2009), gratitude (Neto, 2007) and optimism (Assad et al., 2007) show important links with transgression-related interpersonal motivations, research efforts are necessary to examine their unique and joint contributions in predicting interpersonal dimensions when considered simultaneously.

Given the aforementioned considerations, the purpose of the present study was twofold. The first purpose was to examine concurrent relationships among EI abilities, personality traits, gratitude, optimism and transgression-related interpersonal motivations. Second, since it is a more recent construct, no previous research has examined the relationship of EI abilities (assessed by performance measure) to two different facets of transgression-related interpersonal motivations beyond what is accounted for by the influence of personality traits, gratitude and optimism. According to the aforementioned studies, higher levels of EI, Big Five traits, gratitude and optimism were expected to be significantly associated with transgression-related interpersonal motivations. Thus, our study hypothesized that EI abilities (particularly managing emotions) will explain further variance in interpersonal motivations after removing any variance explained by Big Five traits, gratitude and optimism.

2. Method

2.1. Participants and procedure

The participants were 535 undergraduate students (165 males and 367 females; 3 unreported) enrolled at the University of Málaga who participated voluntarily and received a psychology course credit for taking part in the study. The mean age was 21.97 years (SD = 5.71). All subjects were informed in class that they would be asked to participate in a research study of personality and emotions, and informed consent was obtained.

2.2. Materials

2.2.1. Mayer Salovey Caruso Emotional Intelligence Test version 2.0 (Mayer, Salovey, & Caruso, 2002)

The MSCEIT is a 141-item ability scale designed to measure the four branches of Mayer and Salovey's (1997) theory of EI: (a) perceiving emotions, (b) using emotions to facilitate thought, (c) understanding emotions and (d) managing emotions. EI abilities were measured using a Spanish translation of the MSCEIT, which showed similar psychometric properties to the original instrument (Extremera, Fernández-Berrocal, & Salovey, 2006). In the present sample, split-half reliability (corrected by the Spearman–Brown formula) for total scale was .90 (see Table 1 for split-half reliabilities of the four branches).

2.2.2. Big Five inventory-44 (BFI-44; Benet-Martinez & John, 1998)

The BFI-44 is a 44-item, self-report inventory designed to assess the Big Five factors of personality: extraversion, agreeableness, conscientiousness, neuroticism, and openness to experience. The