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Forgiveness for intimate partner violence: The influence of victim and offender variables

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Abstract

We examined victim and offender correlates of forgiveness for intimate partner violence. Participants were from couples (132 women, 75 men) in which males were convicted of intimate partner violence and court-ordered into an intervention program. In women, empathy and general religiousness positively related to forgiveness, but attributions of blame were unrelated to forgiveness. Several dispositional variables in men were associated with forgiveness in women. Men who were more dominant were more likely to be forgiven, but men with more psychological problems were less likely to be forgiven. Many offender effects were mediated by women's state empathy.

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1. Introduction

Although forgiveness is often encouraged by theologians and psychologists alike, some offenses may be harder to forgive. One particularly difficult case is intimate partner violence. Despite distinctions researchers make between forgiveness and reconciliation (Fincham, 2000; Worthington

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& Drinkard, 2000) or condonation (Enright & Coyle, 1998), forgiveness of intimate partner violence may be viewed negatively (e.g., Lamb, 2002; Whipple, 1988). Yet some victims do forgive their abusers (Gordon, Burton, & Porter, 2004). Given the serious consequences of intimate partner violence (Arias, Dankwort, Douglas, Dutton, & Stein, 2002) it becomes important to investigate forgiveness and its correlates in this context. The current study expands research in the area of forgiveness for intimate partner violence by examining the association between dispositional variables in the offender, and victim forgiveness. We also examine whether this association is mediated by empathy and attributions, which have been associated with forgiveness in other contexts (e.g., Bradfield & Aquino, 1999; McCullough et al., 1998).

1.1. Forgiveness and intimate partner violence

Intimate partner violence has distinct characteristics relevant to forgiveness. Abusive partners often rationalize their behavior (Cavanagh, Dobash, Dobash, & Lewis, 2001), and expressions of forgiveness might fuel these rationalizations. Forgiveness may also reinforce uneven power distributions in abusive relationships, and may be equated with tolerance of abuse (Lamb, 2002). Others have theorized that forgiveness may have a self-healing effect on survivors of intimate partner violence (Taylor, 2004). Importantly, participants from Taylor's sample were self-identified "survivors" of abuse, and therefore were presumably no longer being abused, thus differentiating forgiveness from tolerance of abuse.

Forgiveness can be studied as a reaction to a transgression (e.g., McCullough, Fincham, & Tsang, 2003) or as a disposition (e.g., Leach & Lark, 2004; Walker & Gorsuch, 2002). The current study examines forgiveness as a reaction to intimate partner violence. Although there are several definitions of transgression-specific forgiveness, most include prosocial change in the victim toward the offender (McCullough, Pargament, & Thoresen, 2000). Importantly, forgiveness is not synonymous with excusing or condoning a transgression, and it is possible and sometimes advisable for forgiveness to occur without reconciliation (e.g., Freedman, 1998).

McCullough et al. (1998) distinguished four levels of determinants of forgiveness: social-cognitive, offense-related, relational, and personality variables. Social-cognitive variables include cognition and affect victims experience toward the transgressor and the offense. Offense variables include offense severity and apology. Relational variables include variables such as relationship closeness and commitment. Personality variables include dispositional variables in the victim that facilitate forgiveness. We discuss three forgiveness variables in the context of intimate partner violence—two at the social-cognitive level, and one at the personality level—and propose a new category of analysis at the offender level.

The social-cognitive variable of attribution (McCullough et al., 1998) is one of the few variables studied in relation to intimate partner violence. Katz, Street, and Arias (1997) found that low self-esteem and self-attributions for abuse were related to increased forgiveness for hypothetical abuse, but only self-attributions were uniquely related to forgiveness. Self-attribution was negatively related to intent to exit the relationship, and this relationship was mediated by forgiveness. This study was limited by its use of hypothetical scenarios and a college student sample. Gordon et al. (2004) found that attributions for abuse predicted intent to return to the abusive partner in a sample of women at domestic violence shelters, and this relationship was again mediated by forgiveness.

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