Forgiveness and psychological adjustment following interpersonal transgressions: A longitudinal analysis ☆

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Abstract

Forgiveness is often assumed to be adaptive for psychological adjustment following interpersonal transgressions. Three hundred and forty seven individuals who had experienced a recent interpersonal transgression were surveyed on four occasions over the course of six weeks. Forgiveness was assessed with scales measuring interpersonal avoidance and revenge motivation and psychological adjustment was assessed with scales measuring depression and rumination. Latent growth curve analyses showed that intraindividual changes in forgiveness were positively correlated with changes in adjustment. Latent difference score analyses indicated that adjustment predicted subsequent change in forgiveness, but that forgiveness did not predict subsequent change in adjustment. The results suggest that adjustment facilitates forgiveness, but not that forgiveness facilitates adjustment.
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1. Introduction

The concept of forgiveness has received increased attention by researchers in personality and social psychology during the last decade (cf. Exline, Worthington, Hill, & McCullough, 2003). One reason why forgiveness attracts attention might be its prosocial character, making it a focus of the positive psychology movement (cf. Gable & Haidt, 2005; Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2000). A related reason might be that, aside from its positive interpersonal effects, forgiveness is often assumed to have positive intrapersonal effects on the psychological adjustment of the forgiving individual (Baumeister, Exline, & Sommer, 1998; Enright, Freedman, & Rique, 1998; Exline et al., 2003). If forgiveness influences psychological adjustment, then it has important implications for counseling and psychotherapy following hurtful experiences. However, the empirical evidence, which we review below, does not allow for firm conclusions regarding the temporal sequence of forgiveness and psychological adjustment (see also the cautionary note by McCullough, 2000). Therefore, the aim of the present study was to investigate the relation between forgiveness and psychological adjustment through the use of longitudinal data.

In the psychological literature, several definitions of forgiveness have been proposed, but there is growing consensus that forgiveness may be defined by prosocial motivational changes towards a transgressor, consisting in a decrease in interpersonal avoidance, a decrease in revenge motivation, and an increase in benevolence (cf. McCullough & Hoyt, 2002; McCullough, Worthington, & Rachal, 1997; McCullough et al., 1998). McCullough, Fincham, and Tsang (2003) investigated this conception of forgiveness by explicitly modeling forgiveness as intraindividual changes in forgiveness indicators (avoidance, revenge, benevolence). By use of longitudinal data and latent growth curve analyses, the authors analyzed three psychologically meaningful parameters, i.e., the intercept of the curve (interpreted as initial degree of forbearance), the slope of the curve (interpreted as trend forgiveness), and situational deviations from the curve (interpreted as temporary forgiveness). This model then allowed investigation of distinct effects of predictors (e.g., transgression severity, empathy) on the three statistical parameters. The results showed, for example, that empathy was related to forbearance and temporary forgiveness, but unrelated to trend forgiveness (adjustment indicators were not examined by McCullough et al., 2003).

2. Empirical evidence on the relation

So far, numerous studies have pointed to forgiveness being related to indicators of psychological adjustment. Correlational studies have shown that forgiveness is positively associated with mental health (Berry & Worthington, 2001), positive affect (Thompson et al., 2005), and life satisfaction (Brown & Phillips, 2005; Lawler-Row & Piferi, 2006; Thompson et al., 2005), and negatively associated with depression (Berry, Worthington, O'Connor, Parrott, & Wade, 2005; Brown, 2003; Brown & Phillips, 2005; Exline, Yali, & Lobel, 1999; Lawler-Row & Piferi, 2006; Orcutt, 2006), rumination (McCullough, Bellah, Kilpatrick, & Johnson, 2001; McCullough, Bono, & Root, 2007; McCullough et al., 1998; Suchday, Friedberg, & Almeida, 2006; Thompson et al., 2005), neuroticism (Berry, Worthington, O'Connor, Parrott, & Wade, 2005; Berry, Worthington, Parrott, O'Connor, & Wade, 2001; McCullough & Hoyt, 2002; Walker & Gorsuch, 2002), negative affect