Inclusive justice beliefs and forgiveness: Commonality through self-transcending values

Peter Strelan *, Ian McKee

School of Psychology, The University of Adelaide, North Terrace, 5005 Adelaide, SA, Australia

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ABSTRACT

Although justice and forgiveness are generally held to be competitive constructs, increasingly, studies indicate that when justice is operationalized on the basis of its inclusive characteristics, it is compatible with forgiveness. This study ($N = 142$) applied a human values framework to provide a theoretical explanation for the positive association between justice (operationalized as just world beliefs about the self [BJW-self]) and forgiveness. Replicating previous research, BJW-self was associated positively with forgiveness and negatively with revenge in response to a specific transgression. Importantly, the self-transcendent values of universalism and benevolence, but not the self-enhancing value of power, played an explanatory role in relations between BJW-self and forgiveness and revenge. Theoretical implications and future research ideas are discussed.

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1. Introduction

Justice is fundamentally important to humans (see Lerner, 1980). So, too, is social harmony—which, following wrongdoing, is often re-established through forgiveness (e.g., Strelan, McKee, Calic, Cook, & Shaw, 2013). Yet, justice and forgiveness have traditionally been viewed as antithetical. People usually equate the former with punishment and the latter with positive responding, even love—and, often, the foregoing of justice (for a review of the many ways in which the two constructs are pitted against each other, see Strelan, Feather, & McKee, 2008). Certainly, this perspective is borne out empirically when justice is conceptualized in its classic retributive form (e.g., Strelan et al., 2008). However, there is also a varied set of studies indicating that justice and forgiveness are *positively* associated. Restorative (Strelan et al., 2008; Wenzel & Okimoto, 2013) and social justice cognitions (Karremans & Van Lange, 2005), rehabilitative punishment goals (Strelan, Feather, & McKee, 2011), procedural and distributive justice beliefs (Lucas, Young, Zhdanova, & Alexander, 2010), and just world beliefs about the self (Strelan, 2007; Strelan & Sutton, 2011) have been found to encourage forgiveness. What is common to these studies is that each operationalizes a form of justice that has an 'inclusive' orientation. That is, rather than being alienated—which is effectively what happens in the case of retributive justice—offenders are included in victims' moral circles insofar as they are given voice and their welfare and needs taken into consideration (for a detailed discussion see Strelan et al., 2011).

Taken together, these studies indicate that justice and forgiveness may not be so incompatible after all; depending on how justice is operationalized, individuals may desire, and pursue, both justice and forgiveness at the same time. Presently lacking, however, is a theoretical explanation for the association: *why* are forgiveness and several different inclusive versions of justice congruent? At the simplest of levels, each reflects concern for re-establishment of the social bond. In this article we apply a well-established and highly influential theoretical framework, that pertaining to motivational human values, to scaffold and elaborate this basic assumption. As we will see shortly, values arguably inform all aspects of human cognition, affect, and behavior, insofar as they help guide decisions and represent desirable goals (see Schwartz, 1992). Both justice and forgiveness are motivated social behaviors; as such, values would seem to provide an ideal theoretical basis for explaining their relation.

We begin with justice. To represent justice in our analyses we invoke arguably the most influential theory of justice, belief in a just world (BJW; Lerner, 1980).

1.1. BJW and forgiveness

Lerner (1980) theorized that humans need to believe in a just world. In such a world, outcomes are logical and predictable. People get what they deserve and deserve what they get; good things

* Corresponding author. Address: School of Psychology, University of Adelaide, North Terrace, Adelaide, SA 5005, Australia. Tel.: +61 08 8303 5662.
  E-mail address: peter.strelan@adelaide.edu.au (P. Strelan).

happen to good people, bad things happen to bad people. Viewing the world through such a lens provides a conceptual framework for negotiating and making sense of the world, empowering individuals to navigate through life confident that events and outcomes will indeed be logical and predictable (e.g., Sutton & Winnard, 2007). Notably, individuals partition their spheres of justice, according to whether the world is just for the self (BJW-self) or others (BJW-others) (for a brief review see Strelan & Sutton, 2011). BJW-self and BJW-others are moderately correlated. However, the former is associated with coping and prosocial responding whereas the latter is associated with harsh social attitudes (for a discussion of the differential relations, see Sutton & Winnard, 2007). Because BJW-self is concerned with how oneself is treated, whereas BJW-others is concerned with how others are treated, and forgiveness is most relevant to how oneself is treated, in this article we address only BJW-self.

According to BJW theorizing, individuals implicitly agree, as a result of early socialization experiences, to abide by a personal contract with the world: In exchange for following social rules and norms, the world will treat them accordingly. As such, BJW-self is an inclusive representation of justice insofar as it reflects an imperative to treat others as one would expect oneself to be treated—that is, decently, appropriately, and fairly (Lerner, 1980). Importantly, when individuals with strong BJW-self experience victimization, there is evidence that, rather than responding in kind (e.g., by retaliating), they may go beyond prescribed moral duty and respond in an approach-oriented manner, including forgiving (Strelan, 2007; Strelan & Sutton, 2011) and accommodating (Lipkus & Bissonnette, 1996).

There are several inter-related theoretical explanations for why individuals with high BJW-self are able to respond constructively to personally-experienced transgressions. First, they may do so out of the motivation to act consistently with their just world beliefs (i.e., treat others appropriately, for to do otherwise would cause dissonance). Second, they may refrain from negative responding because negative responding in itself potentially violates the contractual obligation to show restraint, even in the face of unfair treatment (e.g., Sutton & Winnard, 2007). Third, constructive responding is easier to enact when the unfair treatment is unusual (e.g., Kelley & Thibaut, 1978)—which it is, by definition, for those who believe the world generally treats them fairly. Fourth, individuals with strong BJW-self have learnt that abiding by the social contract is usually rewarding and often reciprocated down the line. As such, the contract empowers individuals with the confidence to respond constructively, rather than destructively, to a transgression (e.g., Sutton & Winnard, 2007). Thus,

H1. *BJW-self will be positively associated with forgiveness.*

1.2. Human values

Human values occupy a central space in cognitive networks of attitudes and beliefs (see Rokeach, 1973), and have been implicated in a wide variety of social psychological and personality phenomena (for a brief review, see Maio & Olson, 1998). Values are cognitive representations of general or abstract learned beliefs that people think are important guiding principles in their lives. As such, values are motivating. If a value is important to an individual, then it will be relevant across a wide range of actions and situations. Values serve as standards, insofar as they help people evaluate their own and others' past and potential actions. Notably, value activation depends on context and the importance of the value to the individual. The more important a particular value, the more likely a person will act in accordance with that value in a given situation. Finally, individuals prioritize their values in order of

importance. Thus, because any attitude or behavior usually has implications for multiple values, one value is more likely to be expressed in a given situation in preference to others that might also be relevant (see Schwartz, 1992).

Schwartz (1992) identified 10 motivationally-distinct value types arranged in a circumplex, conceptualized along two bipolar dimensions to reflect their compatibilities and conflicts: openness/conservation, and self-transcending/self-enhancing. Although some values on the former dimension may be relevant to justice (e.g., conformity, security; see Feather, 1991), it is arguable whether they are also relevant to forgiveness (we address this issue further in the discussion). Thus, we examine only values on the self-transcending/self-enhancing dimension.

Self-transcending values emphasize concern and respect for others. They are represented by two value types: *benevolence* (preservation and enhancement of the welfare of people with whom one is in frequent personal contact), and *universalism* (understanding, appreciation, tolerance and protection for the welfare of all). Conversely, self-enhancing values reflect self-interest and preoccupation with social comparison, represented by *power* (social status and prestige, control, or dominance over people and resources), and *achievement* (personal success through demonstrating competence according to social standards) (Schwartz, 1992). Because achievement values are conceptually unrelated to both justice and forgiveness, we will use only power to represent the self-enhancing pole.

The self-transcending values of universalism and benevolence are given expression in inclusive behavioral preferences. For example, they predict positive attitudes by majorities towards improving the lives of the marginalized (e.g., Feather, Woodyatt, & McKee, 2012) and are associated with a prosocial disposition (Strelan et al., 2011). Conversely, power values are manifested in defensive and controlling tendencies. For example, power is related to right wing authoritarianism (Feather, 2005) and social dominance orientation (McKee & Feather, 2008), and expressed in negative social attitudes such as punitive goal preferences (Strelan et al., 2011), prejudice (Feather & McKee, 2012), and endorsing aggressive responses in conflict situations (Cohrs, Moschner, Maes, & Kielman, 2005).

1.3. BJW-self and values

When their just world framework is threatened, individuals with strong BJW-self are empowered by the personal contract to respond prosocially—consonant with the expression of self-transcending values. The personal contract also requires individuals with strong BJW-self to restrain themselves from defensive, avoidant, or antisocial responding; that is, non-inclusive behavior which reflects power values. Thus,

H2. *Individuals who endorse BJW-self are more likely to endorse self-transcending values and less likely to endorse power values.*

1.4. Values and forgiveness

One previous study has examined relations between values and forgiveness. Strelan et al. (2011) reported that universalism and benevolence values were positively related to dispositional forgiveness whereas power was negatively related. These results are consistent with theorizing and research discussed earlier: Values emphasizing concern for others are likely to be reflected in behaviors or dispositions consistent with such values (Schwartz & Bardi, 2001)—in this case, an other-oriented response or disposition such as forgiveness. Conversely, the more individuals endorse values that emphasize social distance and defensive responding to