



Forgiveness and life satisfaction across different age groups in adults



Kinga Kaleta*, Justyna Mróz

The Jan Kochanowski University in Kielce, Institute of Pedagogy and Psychology, ul. Krakowska 11, 25-029 Kielce, Poland

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ABSTRACT

The aim of the study was to analyze the relationships between the propensity to forgive and life satisfaction in different age groups. Polish versions of the Heartland Forgiveness Scale (adapted by Kaleta, Mróz, and Guzewicz, 2016) and of The Satisfaction with Life Scale by Diener et al. (SWLS, 1985) adapted by Juczyński (2012), were used. The sample consisted of 436 individuals aged 19–67. The analyses were performed separately for all age groups. Positive and negative dimensions of forgiveness of self, of others, and of situations beyond anyone's control were considered. The results revealed relationships between different aspects of the disposition to forgive and life satisfaction across the entire sample. In addition, significant positive correlations between positive and negative aspects of forgiveness and life satisfaction were observed in individuals aged 19–30 and 41–50. On the other hand, in the group of respondents aged 31–40 a significant positive relationship between reduced unforgiveness and satisfaction with life, whereas in the group aged 50 and over, between positive forgiveness and life satisfaction, were revealed.

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1. Introduction

Findings to date have shown that forgiveness has the power of restoring difficult relations and improving one's well-being. Several studies have revealed the link between forgiveness and high quality of close relationships (Fincham, Beach, & Davila, 2004), optimism, hope, gratitude, psychological, spiritual and existential well-being (Hill & Allemand, 2010; Rye et al., 2001; Szcześniak & Soares, 2011; Toussaint & Friedman, 2009; Wohl, DeShea, & Wahkinney, 2008), physical and mental health (Lawler-Row & Piferi, 2006; Maltby, Day, & Barber, 2004), and even functioning at work (Thompson & Shahen, 2003). Thus, according to the premises of positive psychology (Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2000), forgiveness is a phenomenon associated with high quality of human life.

1.1. Forgiveness

The power of forgiveness lies in the fact that it is an unusual response to harm, in which a person who has been treated unjustly decides to reduce resentment and strives to offer some kind of benevolence toward the offender (Exline, Worthington, Hill, & McCullough, 2003; Toussaint & Friedman, 2009; Wade & Worthington, 2005). Cognitive conceptions emphasize that forgiveness occurs as a result reframing the perceived harm and modifying person's previous assumptions about oneself, other people and the world, that have been violated by

the transgression (Flanigan, 1992; Gordon & Baucom, 1998; Gordon, Baucom, & Snyder, 2005; Thompson et al., 2005).

Most frequently, forgiveness is conceptualized in terms of decreased negative affect (e.g. bitterness, anger, hostility), negative cognitions (e.g. thoughts of revenge), negative motivation (e.g. tendency to avoid any contact with the offender), and negative behavior (e.g. verbal aggression) toward the offender (McCullough, Worthington, & Rachal, 1997; Rye & Pargament, 2002). Nevertheless, according to some researchers (Enright, 1996; Fincham, 2000; Sells & Hargrave, 1998; Wade & Worthington, 2005) positive regard (love, compassion, sympathy, pity, benevolent motivation, approach behavior) for the harm-doer is required for forgiveness. Furthermore, scholars (Fincham et al., 2004; Rye et al., 2001; Worthington & Wade, 1999) pointed out that forgiveness consists of two distinct domains - negative and positive. The negative aspect entails overcoming unforgiveness, namely, reducing the resentment and retaliatory or avoidant impulses (Wade & Worthington, 2003). It can be understood as overcoming the negative self-portrayal implied by the offender's behavior, i.e. that the victim does not deserve to be treated better. Maintaining a considerable physical and psychological distance from the transgressor might be in fact an attempt to avoid the unacceptable self-image. Thus, overcoming unforgiveness can be seen as successful abandoning of the negative self-view resulting in decreased avoidance motivation, which in turn removes an internal barrier to connect with the perpetrator (Fincham et al., 2004). However, mere neutralization of negative motivational states does not evoke approach behavior that contributes to the well-being of the relationship. Therefore, the positive dimension of forgiveness involves love based emotions and pro-social actions (Fincham, 2009). It reflects the presence of benevolent and conciliatory

* Corresponding author.

E-mail addresses: k_kaleta@wp.pl (K. Kaleta), justyna_mroz@wp.pl (J. Mróz).

motivation, which is based on reformulated assumptions about oneself, other people or the world. The bidimensional conceptualization has been proposed as a more advanced characterization of forgiveness, especially in close relationships, e.g. with a spouse, parent, child or friend. As opposed to unidimensional conceptualization, in which forgiveness is inferred from the lack of negative intent, this approach allows to consider negative and positive dimensions of forgiveness separately, and to measure them directly. What is more important, the two facets have different determinants, correlates and consequences (Fincham & Beach, 2002).

Scholars have also established different objects of forgiveness. Forgiveness of others, including of diverse offenders, has been explored the most thoroughly. Nevertheless, researchers have also been interested in forgiveness of self (Wohl et al., 2008), of situations beyond anyone's control (Thompson et al., 2005), and forgiveness by God (Krause & Ellison, 2003).

Finally, the distinction between episodic and dispositional forgiveness has been emphasized. The former is related to a single act of forgiveness for a particular offense, the latter refers to trait forgiveness, or forgivingness (Roberts, 1995), which is a general propensity to forgive across a wide variety of situations, harms and relationships (Kamat, Jones, & Lawler-Row, 2006; Paleari, Regalia, & Fincham, 2009). Some scholars (Munoz Sastre, Vinsonneau, Neto, Girard, & Mullet, 2003; Thompson et al., 2005) believe that the disposition to forgive is more robustly associated with the quality of life than a single act of forgiveness.

1.2. Age differences in forgiveness

Willingness to forgive (episodic and dispositional) changes over one's lifetime. In general, it has been found to increase with age (Girard & Mullet, 1997; Subkoviak et al., 1995; Toussaint, Williams, Musick, & Everson, 2001), which is consistent with Erikson's psychosocial development theory.

According to Erikson (1993), human development has eight stages in which an individual faces specific conflicts. The conflicts are of psychosocial nature as psychological needs of an individual conflict with the needs of the society. In each stage things may go right or wrong, depending on one's previous experience and current life circumstances. Successful resolution of each conflict leads to a stronger sense of identity and more rewarding interactions with people. Especially adult individuals might derive satisfaction from moving from a self-centered orientation to another-centered orientation (Gold & Rogers, 1995; Hamachek, 1990; Slater, 2003). However, this process requires compromise, tolerance and acceptance. Therefore, the growing ability to forgive might be related to successful expansion of the self-concept to include others.

Although forgiveness increases with age, changes in different aspects of forgiveness are not identical. For instance, in a Polish study, Charzyńska and Heszen (2013) revealed a positive correlation between age and the capacity to forgive. They found significant associations between age and forgiveness of others, the feeling of being forgiven by God, and a general tendency to forgive, but not with self-forgiveness. Ghaemmaghami, Allemand, and Martin (2011), who examined episodic forgiveness in different age groups, found associations between age and the negative strategy of forgiveness (revenge and avoidance), but not with the positive strategy (benevolence). Avoidance was higher among middle-aged adults than in other age groups. In turn, revenge was higher among young adults, especially young men. Benevolence increased with age, though age differences in this dimension failed to reach statistical significance. However, as various aspects and dimensions of forgiveness and different types of measures were used in the studies, it seems to be too early to draw firm conclusions about the trajectory of the willingness to forgive across the lifespan (Allemand, 2008). Thus, scholars (Hill, Allemand, & Heffernan, 2013) claim that work on whether and how forgiveness develops during the adult years is still needed.

1.3. Forgiveness and life satisfaction

Erikson's (1982) theoretical work shows likewise why forgiveness may be a proper outcome measure in research on well-being in adulthood. Successful resolution of subsequent conflicts entails drawing satisfaction from affiliating with others, focusing more on what one can give to others, being needed, and contributing to society. Forgiveness should be helpful in establishing and maintaining relationships that bring such satisfaction and account for an individual's psychological well-being. In this study, we focus on the cognitive aspect of subjective well-being - satisfaction with life. It relates to one's evaluation of the positive aspects in one's life (Diener, Emmons, Larsen, & Griffin, 1985) which relies on the comparison of one's life with what is thought to be a desirable life. As striving to live a rewarding life is present over one's entire lifetime, it is important to identify factors related to life satisfaction at each developmental stage.

Some studies indicated links between forgiveness and life satisfaction (e.g. Lawler-Row & Piferi, 2006; Macaskill, 2012; Munoz Sastre et al., 2003; Szcześniak & Soares, 2011). However, the results are surprisingly inconsistent, depending on the type of forgiveness, a sample or age cohort.

For example, episodic motivation for revenge and for avoiding the offender was reported not to correlate (McCullough et al., 2001), or found to be negatively, though weakly associated with satisfaction with life (Szcześniak & Soares, 2011). Dispositional forgiveness was found to be positively related to life satisfaction when conceptualized as an absence of rumination (Allemand, Hill, Ghaemmaghami, & Martin, 2012) or overcoming unforgiveness (Macaskill, 2012). However, that way the studies explored only the negative dimension of forgiveness. Only few research included items (Thompson et al., 2005) or subscales (Munoz Sastre et al., 2003) referring to the positive aspect of forgiveness, however its association with life satisfaction is unclear. As regards age and various types of forgiveness, researchers also reported differences in life satisfaction among cohorts (Lawler-Row & Piferi, 2006; Munoz Sastre et al., 2003; Toussaint et al., 2001). For example, adults aged 36–45, who tended to less foster resentment and were more willing to forgive, were more satisfied with their life (Munoz Sastre et al., 2003). At the same time, forgiveness of self and life satisfaction were negatively linked among individuals aged 18–44 (Toussaint et al., 2001). Among older adults, forgiveness of others was positively associated with life satisfaction (Krause & Ellison, 2003; Toussaint et al., 2001), but no significant relationship was observed between self-forgiveness and life satisfaction (Toussaint et al., 2001). However, the studies on forgiveness and life satisfaction in different cohorts have seemed to be preliminary and requiring further research. What is more, no data is available on the positive and negative aspects of forgiveness and well-being among people of different ages. On the other hand, Erikson (1982) and Carstensen (Carstensen, Isaacowitz, & Charles, 1999) provide theoretical grounds for the formulation of predictions concerning interactions between the positive and negative dimension of forgiveness and life satisfaction as people age.

Erikson (1982) pointed out that after establishing one's sense of identity, an adult individual needs to pass through further stages: intimacy vs. isolation, generativity vs. stagnation and integrity vs. despair. When people reach adulthood, they should have a firm sense of their own identity, which provides grounds for expanding connections with others. Then, adults should achieve a sense of intimacy and they should be able to create close emotional bonds, trust others, accept differences perceived in other people, and to resign from some of their own needs (Hamachek, 1990). The ability to forgive, especially to let go of resentment, seems to be necessary to form intimate and cooperative relationships and draw satisfaction from them. The successfully resolved, subsequent conflict of generativity versus stagnation in middle adulthood is likely to involve not only negative, but also positive strategy of forgiveness. This is because being generative and promoting the welfare of others, in particular caring about young people, requires a benevolent

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