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Does forgiveness require interpersonal interactions? Individual differences in conceptualization of forgiveness

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ABSTRACT

The present studies examined whether victims believed that forgiveness requires interpersonal interaction between the victim and offender. Having an interpersonal conceptualization of forgiveness was positively related to a collectivistic worldview. Also, an interpersonal conceptualization of forgiveness was positively related to forgiveness measures that stressed interpersonal interactions with the offender. However, an interpersonal conceptualization of forgiveness was positively related to a general measure of forgiveness only for those participants who were in a continuing relationship with the offender. The current research is an important step in understanding the contexts in which one's conceptualization of forgiveness may influence its practice.

1. Introduction

The idea of forgiveness conjures up different ideas among people. Some individuals may think of forgiveness as something that occurs purely within oneself (e.g., making up one's mind to forgive and release negative emotions toward the offender), whereas others may think that complete forgiveness must involve treating the offender kindly and repairing trust in the relationship. The former represents forgiveness as an intrapersonal process whereas the latter represents forgiveness as an interpersonal process. Psychologists have debated definitions of forgiveness, especially this distinction about whether interpersonal interactions are necessary for forgiveness to be complete (Worthington, 2005). Despite what investigators think, there is considerable variation in definitions used by lay people (Kearns & Fincham, 2004). However, little is known about how one's conceptualization of forgiveness might help or hinder forgiving. Thus, in the current research, we investigate individual differences in whether individuals believe that complete forgiveness requires interpersonal interactions, and how these differences are related to the process of forgiveness.

2. Definitional issues in forgiveness research

Researchers have worked to define and measure forgiveness more precisely, and definitions are beginning to converge (Worthington, 2005). Most researchers agree on what forgiveness is not. Forgiveness is thought to be distinct from pardoning, condoning, excusing, justifying, forgetting, and (usually) reconciliation (Enright & Fitzgibbons, 2000; Freedman, 1998). Furthermore, most researchers define forgiveness as a prosocial change in thoughts, emotions, motivations, or behaviors (McCullough, Pargament, & Thoresen, 2000), although researchers may focus on one aspect more than others. Importantly, most researchers define forgiveness as an intrapersonal process, something that happens within the mind and heart of the victim (involving the victim's emotions, cognitions, and motivations).

One reason forgiveness researchers have strongly distinguished forgiveness from reconciliation is to address concerns that forgiveness may be harmful to some victims (e.g., domestic violence), making them more likely to remain in or return to a toxic relationship. For example, McNulty and colleagues have published a series of studies providing evidence that forgiveness may have negative consequences in committed relationships under certain circumstances (McNulty & Fincham, 2012). However, in their review of this research, they note a final caveat: "Notably, all of the research on the contextual implications of forgiveness has left definitions of

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forgiveness up to participants themselves" (McNulty & Fincham, 2012, p. 103). These differences in definitions may create variability in the beneficial effects of forgiving. For example, in a continuing relationship such as marriage, forgiveness and reconciliation may be more likely to be linked, which may have contributed to the negative effects of forgiving on satisfaction found in more troubled marriages.

Although forgiveness researchers have reached some agreement on definitions of forgiveness, lay conceptualizations of forgiveness do not necessarily align with scientific definitions of forgiveness (Friesen & Fletcher, 2007; Kearns & Fincham, 2004). For example, whereas psychologists mostly agree that forgiveness is distinct from reconciliation, in a study examining college students' beliefs about forgiveness, 69% reported that they believed that reconciliation was a necessary part of forgiveness (Kanz, 2000). Similarly, attributes related to reconciliation were viewed as highly central to forgiveness (Friesen & Fletcher, 2007; Kearns & Fincham, 2004). Accordingly, most forgiveness interventions devote time to achieving consensus about a definition of forgiveness (e.g., Enright & Fitzgibbons, 2000; Worthington, Sandage, & Berry, 2000).

Researchers have generally taken for granted that viewing forgiveness as an intrapersonal process (in alignment with scientific definitions) is beneficial. Namely, distinguishing forgiveness from interpersonal processes such as reconciliation may give individuals greater flexibility to decrease their negative thoughts and feelings, while making a separate decision about whether it is wise to resume interpersonal interaction with the offender. In contrast, victims who have an interpersonal conceptualization of forgiveness that does not sharply demarcate forgiveness and reconciliation may re-engage in a dangerous relationship to "complete" their forgiveness or may feel guilty for failing to forgive someone with whom relational repair is not possible (e.g., deceased parent).

We think it is important to examine these assumptions empirically for two reasons. First, scientific definitions of forgiveness have emerged primarily within an individualistic culture that values autonomy over communal virtues. Conceptualizations of forgiveness may differ based on cultural context. Hook, Worthington, and Utsey (2009) theorized that individuals with a collectivistic worldview tend to understand forgiveness within the context of social harmony, reconciliation, and relational repair. Second, although forgiveness researchers generally make clear distinctions between forgiveness and interpersonal interactions with an offender, this is not the case for all lay people. This suggests that there is likely variability in the degree to which a person believes that interpersonal interactions are necessary for complete forgiveness to occur. At present, despite the tremendous growth of research on forgiveness in personality and social psychology, we know almost nothing about how such beliefs are related to the practice of forgiveness. Some initial phenomenological research on this topic has found that individuals do tend to view forgiveness differently on the intrapersonal—interpersonal dimension, and these differences may influence feelings about the relationship (Wohl, Kuiken, & Noels, 2006). Specifically, participants who viewed forgiveness as more interpersonal reported more improvement in their relationship with the offender than did participants who viewed forgiveness as more intrapersonal.

Indeed, there may be some situations or contexts in which interpersonal conceptualizations of forgiveness are more helpful than intrapersonal conceptualizations of forgiveness. For example, a victim who views forgiveness as including interpersonal processes may be less likely to avoid the offender and more likely to engage in benevolent behaviors with the offender, which might promote forgiveness and relational repair. These behaviors could be important for promoting forgiveness and reconciliation in continuing relationships. Therefore, it is important for researchers to study how different conceptualizations of forgiveness affect when and how people forgive.

3. Overview of current studies

To that end, the purpose of the present series of studies was to examine how one's conceptualization of forgiveness was related to the practice of forgiveness in different contexts. In Study 1, based on theory by Hook et al. (2009), we examined the relationship between cultural worldview and conceptualization of forgiveness. We hypothesized that participants with a more collectivistic worldview would be more likely to view forgiveness as requiring more positive interpersonal interactions. In Study 2, we examined the relationship between conceptualization of forgiveness and practice of forgiveness by examining differences in reactions to offenses. We hypothesized that the relationship between conceptualization of forgiveness and practice of forgiveness would be nuanced: having an interpersonal conceptualization of forgiveness would be unrelated to a general measure of forgiveness, but would be positively related to measures of forgiveness that stressed interpersonal interactions with the offender. In Study 3, we assessed the relational context by examining reactions to offenders in continuing vs. non-continuing relationships. We hypothesized that having an interpersonal conceptualization of forgiveness would promote forgiveness in participants who were in continuing relationships, but would hinder forgiveness in non-continuing relationships (because continued interpersonal interactions were no longer able to occur).

4. Study 1

The purpose of Study 1 was to examine the relationship between conceptualization of forgiveness and cultural worldview. We hypothesized that having an interpersonal conceptualization of forgiveness would be (a) positively related to having a more collectivistic worldview and (b) unrelated to having a more individualistic worldview.

4.1. Methods

4.1.1. Participants

Undergraduate college students (N = 141, 83 females, 58 males) from a large university in the Southwestern United States ranged in age from 18 to 52 years (M = 21.1, SD = 4.0). Participants reported a variety of ethnicities (59.6% White/Caucasian, 13.5% Black/African American, 5.0% Asian/Asian American, 14.9% Latino/Latina, 0.7% Native American and 6.4% Multiracial).

4.1.2. Instruments

4.1.2.1. Interpersonal conceptualization of forgiveness. We measured interpersonal conceptualization of forgiveness with the interpersonal subscale of the Forgiveness Understanding Scale (FUS; Hook, Worthington, Utsey, Davis, & Burnette, 2012). This scale consists of 6 items that measure the extent to which a person believes that interpersonal interactions are necessary for complete forgiveness (e.g., "Forgiveness must involve acting more positively toward the offender"). Participants rate each item on a 5-point rating scale from 1 = *strongly disagree* to 5 = *strongly agree*. Scores on this measure have shown evidence of internal consistency (Hook et al., 2012). For the current sample, the Cronbach's alpha coefficient was .80 (95% CI = .74–.85).

4.1.2.2. Collectivism. We measured collectivism with the interdependent subscale of the Self-Construal Scale (SCS; Singelis, 1994). This scale consists of 12 items that measure one's tendency to