



Exploring the psychological processes underlying interpersonal forgiveness: The superiority of motivated reasoning over empathy☆



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ABSTRACT

When, why, and how does interpersonal forgiveness occur? These questions have generated a wealth of findings, from which have emerged two broad theoretical perspectives by which to understand the forgiveness process. One perspective suggests that empathy underlies forgiveness, whereas the other suggests that motivated reasoning underlies forgiveness. Of note is that the two models have not been directly tested against one another. This lack of comparison between the models represents an important barrier to a fuller and richer understanding of the nature of forgiveness. The present research addresses this gap. To provide a test of the two perspectives, we first synthesize and link prior research associated with motivated reasoning to advance a more general model of motivated reasoning. This model hypothesizes that relationship closeness leads to a desire to maintain the relationship, this desire leads to motivated reasoning, and this motivation leads to interpersonal forgiveness. We then compare the relative ability of the two perspectives to predict forgiveness when controlling for one another. When estimated simultaneously, the model of motivated interpersonal forgiveness significantly predicts forgiveness, whereas the empathy model does not. The superiority of the model of motivated interpersonal forgiveness replicates across three studies.

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The study of forgiveness has flourished over the past two decades. Insights from this research are plentiful and important. Forgiveness provides the crucial mechanism by which relationships are able to be maintained following interpersonal betrayals, transgressions, and disappointments (e.g., Fincham, Hall, & Beach, 2005; Worthington, 1998). In addition to these interpersonal benefits, forgiveness is also associated with psychological benefits such as feelings of well-being (e.g., Karremans, Van Lange, Ouwerkerk, & Kluwer, 2003) and physiological

benefits such as decreased blood pressure for both victim and perpetrator (Hannon, Finkel, Kumashiro, & Rusbult, 2012), greater health resilience (Worthington & Scherer, 2004), and even increased longevity (e.g., Toussaint, Owen, & Cheadle, 2012).

1. Calls for theory and clarification

What is known of when, why, and how interpersonal forgiveness emerges? Though seemingly a simple question, a clear answer has been elusive. For example, Fehr, Gelfand, and Nag (2010) conducted a meta-analysis to examine the correlates of forgiveness. From this analysis, an array of variables was identified that consistently predict forgiveness. Fehr et al. grouped the variables into three categories; constraints (relationship closeness), cognitions (sense-making), and affect (e.g., empathy, anger). This list of variables and categories raised the important question of their theoretical interrelationships with forgiveness. Fehr et al. (2010) concluded that “future research in turn should seek to understand and model these weightings and interrelationships... Do cognitions, affect, and constraints exhibit independent effects on forgiveness, or is one class of factors broadly mediated by another?” (p. 908; see also Strelan & Covic, 2006; Fincham, Hall, & Beach, 2006).

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A review of the literature reveals that there exist two dominant theoretical perspectives as to the psychological processes underlying forgiveness. One of these perspectives proposes that empathy is of fundamental importance to forgiveness, whereas the other proposes that motivated reasoning is of fundamental importance. Of note is that how close the victim feels to the transgressor has been found to be a key antecedent in both perspectives. Relationship closeness influences both empathy and motivated reasoning, as well as forgiveness.¹

Of theoretical importance is that these perspectives have existed with no research comparing the relative ability of the two to predict forgiveness. This lack of comparison represents a serious and important barrier to a fuller and richer understanding of when, why, and how forgiveness arises. And such comparison motivates this research.

2. The empathy model of interpersonal forgiveness

McCullough and colleagues provided two of the earliest and most highly cited empirical investigations into the processes underlying interpersonal forgiveness (McCullough, Worthington, & Rachal, 1997; McCullough et al., 1998). They argue that forgiveness is inextricably linked to empathy. Forgiveness per se is conceptualized as “an empathy-motivated set of motivational changes” (McCullough et al., 1997, p. 328). At the most basic, this perspective proposes that empathy is one of the “most important mediators of forgiving. Thus, although some social-cognitive, offense-level, relationship-level, and personality-level variables might be associated with forgiving, we hypothesize that the associations of such variables with forgiving tend to be relatively small after controlling for empathy” (McCullough et al., 1998, p. 1589). That is, when all is said and done, it is empathy that facilitates and governs forgiveness. And when empathy is accounted for, other variables associated with forgiveness (such as motivated reasoning) will fall away, leaving empathy as the principal mediator of forgiveness.

3. Motivated reasoning and interpersonal forgiveness

In parallel, a wealth of research has found that motivated thinking underlies forgiveness. This research has not, however, been organized into a specific model. In order to test the two perspectives, it is first helpful to more clearly articulate a model of motivated thinking. To accomplish this, we synthesize and link relevant findings to build a more general model of forgiveness based upon motivated reasoning. To do so, we rely upon the seminal paper on interpersonal forgiveness by Finkel, Rusbult, Kumashiro, and Hannon (2002).

Finkel et al. (2002) explored the influence of commitment on forgiveness. They hypothesized and found that commitment is comprised of three distinct components; psychological attachment (relationship closeness), intent to persist in the relationship, and long-term orientation.² Finkel et al. (2002) investigated which of these three components uniquely predict forgiveness. When the influence of each was estimated individually, both relationship closeness and intent to persist were significant, whereas long-term

orientation was not (and as such, is not discussed further). When the influence of both relationship closeness and intent to persist were simultaneously estimated, the influence of intent to persist remained significant whereas the influence of relationship closeness was reduced to non-significance. Such a set of estimations indicates that intent to persist mediates the influence of relationship closeness on forgiveness. Thus, relationship closeness may engender forgiveness precisely because of one's desire to maintain the relationship. That is, if relationship closeness leads one to desire to maintain the relationship, then such desire may be the reason why relationship closeness leads to forgiveness. We adopt the term “desire to maintain the relationship,” rather than intent to persist, in order to emphasize the motivational nature of the construct.

Upon consideration, one wonders: *How* would such desire lead to forgiveness? We propose that although individuals may forgive in order to satisfy their desire to maintain the relationship, such forgiveness requires self-justification (Aronson, 1969). When someone with whom one has a close relationship transgresses, a state of dissonance is created: It causes internal conflict to feel close to a person who has acted in a hurtful manner (Heider, 1958). The fundamental finding of dissonance research is that individuals strive to reduce such unpleasant feelings (Festinger, 1962), most often in order to justify oneself to oneself (Stone, Wiegand, Cooper, & Aronson, 1997). Such reduction comes about through motivated reasoning. Although different researchers have used different names, conceptualizations, and measures of motivated reasoning, all rest upon the notion that individuals are able to interpret, frame, distort, construe (etc.) information in a manner such that it can be understood to be consistent with their desired outcome (Kunda, 1990). As such, it is likely that motivated reasoning plays a crucial role in reducing feelings of dissonance when individuals maintain relationships with those who have transgressed.

And indeed, research has provided support for the role of motivated reasoning in forgiveness.³ In their seminal 2002 paper, Finkel et al. found that motivated reasoning partially mediated the influence of commitment (which includes relationship closeness and desire to maintain the relationship) on forgiveness. Finkel et al. used attributions as a measure of motivated reasoning. Use of attributions is widely used to conceptualize and measure motivated reasoning in interpersonal forgiveness (Bradbury & Fincham, 1990, for a comprehensive literature review; and Fletcher & Kerr, 2010, for a meta-analysis). Gold and Weiner (2000) investigated the role of attributions following transgressions and found that “one of the main properties that distinguishes the causes (attributions) of a transgression is its stability” (p. 292). They reasoned that attributions allow a victim to forecast future behavior. Within the context of attributions following transgressions, such inferences of stability allow a victim to predict whether they will be harmed again.

Interpersonal research suggests that motivated reasoning can also include partner perceptions as part of the process by which sense is made of an incident. An example is offered by Hook et al. (2015), who assessed a victim's perception of the transgressor, and inferred motivated reasoning from the extent to which the transgressor was seen in a negative light. Though they did not examine mediation, they found both that 1) relationship closeness influenced motivated reasoning such that closeness led to the transgressor being seen less negatively, and 2) how the transgressor was perceived influenced forgiveness such that being perceived less negatively led to increased forgiveness.

Work by Murray and Holmes similarly uses perception of a partner as a process of motivated reasoning. Murray and Holmes (1993, 1997,

¹ The finding that relationship closeness influences forgiveness is robust. The more committed (e.g., Finkel et al., 2002; Tran & Simpson, 2009), satisfied (e.g., Allemand, Ambert, Zimprich, & Fincham, 2007), trusting (e.g., Rempel, Ross, & Holmes, 2001), and connected/close (e.g., McCullough et al., 1998) a relationship, the more likely one is to forgive a transgression by that partner.

² Psychological attachment represents the extent to which one feels connected to another. Intent to persist represents the extent to which one wishes and intends to maintain the relationship. Long term orientation represents the extent to which one considers the long term consequences of decisions for the relationship (Agnew, Van Lange, Rusbult, & Langston, 1998, p. 940).

³ The results of motivated reasoning within the forgiveness literature are somewhat mixed. These results are considered in the General Discussion.

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