



# Paths to not forgiving: The roles of social isolation, retributive orientation, and moral emotions



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## ABSTRACT

The contributions of individual differences in social isolation and retribution orientation to explaining not forgiving (revenge and avoidance) were assessed in this study. I predicted that not forgiving was fueled by these basic individual difference orientations. Further, I examined the mediating role of inward-focused moral emotions (self-conscious moral emotions such as distress and shame) and outward-focused moral emotions (moral outrage) in explaining these relationships. Variables were assessed in 98 participants. Results showed that not forgiving was predicted by two indirect pathways. First, social isolation related to not forgiving indirectly through self-conscious moral emotions. Second, retribution orientation related to not forgiving indirectly through moral outrage. These findings support the idea that not forgiving involves the interplay of self and other focused individual difference factors via inward and outward focused distress.

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## 1. Introduction

Not forgiving in response to interpersonal transgressions has been the subject of a growing body of research attention in recent years. Not forgiving is generally touted a maladaptive response strategy (Harris & Thoresen, 2005) predicted by different personality and individual difference variables. Recent research has found that dark personality traits such as low agreeableness and low honesty-humility (Lee & Ashton, 2012), narcissism (Fatfouta, Gerlach, Schröder-Abé, & Merkl, 2015), machiavellianism (Rasmussen & Boon, 2014), and psychopathy (Brewer, Hunt, James, & Abell, 2015; Rasmussen & Boon, 2014) affect one's decision to not forgive. The present research extends these findings to investigate the role of two novel individual difference factors in predicting not forgiving of a transgression – social isolation and retribution orientation. Specifically, I propose an inward-outward focus framework for not forgiving in which responses to interpersonal transgressions are driven by individual differences in social isolation and retribution via self-focused and other-focused moral emotions.

### 1.1. Social isolation and not forgiving

Social isolation orientation refers to feeling ignored and excluded from social connections (Sarason, Sarason, & Shearin, 1986). It is an

individual difference variable characterized by a lack of social contacts, low support in social relationships, and low-quality social interactions (Cacioppo & Hawkley, 2009; De Jong-Gierveld, 1989; Sarason et al., 1986). Individuals high in social isolation orientation tend to focus inwardly on themselves and their preservation in response to negative events (Cacioppo & Hawkley, 2009; e.g., Kunzmann, 2008). They also tend to be more vigilant to social threats and to focus on self-protection in response to negative events (e.g., Cacioppo & Hawkley, 2009; Cacioppo, Norris, Decety, Monteleone, & Nusbaum, 2009). In this regard, individuals high in social isolation orientation may be more likely to respond to transgressions by seeking self-protection, given that transgressions are a type of negative event conceptualized as threatening to the self (Strelan, 2007; Wenzel, Okimoto, Feather, & Platow, 2008). One form of protection that socially isolated individuals may take is not forgiving a transgression. Forgiveness is adaptive in that it helps to restore relationships because victims have empathy for transgressors and resume caring about them (e.g., McCullough, Fincham, & Tsang, 2003). However, with forgiveness, victims put themselves at risk of repeated harm from the transgressor (e.g., Luchies, Finkel, McNulty, & Kumashiro, 2010).

Although I am not aware of prior work that has examined the link between social isolation and not forgiving, support for this relationship is suggested by research on victim-transgressor closeness, given that social isolation may be somewhat antithetical to closeness (Hawkley, Browne, & Cacioppo, 2005). People are much more likely to forgive those they are close to (e.g., Karremans & Aarts, 2007; McCullough

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et al., 1998), and forgiveness helps restore relationship closeness after a transgression (Bono, McCullough, & Root, 2008; Tsang, McCullough, & Fincham, 2006). People who are close to others may capitalize on connectedness and belonging needs in response to transgressions rather than self-protection needs, while those less close have more to risk in terms of self-protection without the competing need to connect with a close transgressor (e.g., Murray, Derrick, Leder, & Holmes, 2008; Murray, Holmes, & Collins, 2006; Murray, Rose, Bellavia, Holmes, & Kusche, 2002).

### 1.2. Retribution orientation and not forgiving

Retribution orientation refers to a victim's perception that the offender should be punished for his or her transgression in order for justice to be restored (Okimoto, Wenzel, & Feather, 2012). The literature on retribution orientation further specifies that it is a victim's sense of status and power that need to be restored post-transgression by the punishment of an offender (Okimoto et al., 2012). As such, retributive orientation is an outward-oriented characteristic focused on judging the offender. Because this individual characteristic has to do with the restoration of justice by offender punishment, it is plausible that individuals with a higher degree of retributive orientation will be more likely respond to a past transgression by not forgiving. Although research has yet to explicitly investigate this proposition, there is some evidence to suggest this may be the case. First, research has linked dispositional forgivingness with retribution orientation (Okimoto et al., 2012; Strelan, Feather, & McKee, 2011) and vengefulness (Brown, 2004). Second, research has also shown that individuals with a higher propensity for vengefulness post-transgression tend to be less forgiving of transgressions (Brown, 2004; McCullough, Bellah, Kilpatrick, & Johnson, 2001). Third, research shows that priming individuals with thoughts of justice generally leads to more forgiveness (Karremans & Van Lange, 2005).

### 1.3. The mediating role of moral emotions

I further contribute by investigating the mediating mechanisms that associate social isolation orientation and retributive orientation, respectively, with not forgiving. Two types of moral emotions have been featured in the extant literature: *self-conscious moral emotions* (i.e., self-focused emotions that occur one's value or social status is threatened; Gruenewald, Kemeny, Aziz, & Fahey, 2004; Kemeny, Gruenewald, & Dickerson, 2004), and *moral outrage* (i.e., anger and outrage at the perception that a moral standard has been violated; Batson et al., 2007). Self-conscious moral emotions reflect an inward-focused form of distress in response to a perceived moral violation (Tangney, Stuewig, & Mashek, 2007), while moral outrage reflects an offender-targeted anger reaction (e.g., Batson et al., 2007; Lotz, Okimoto, Schlösser, & Fetchenhauer, 2011). It is therefore likely that transgressions activate moral emotions, given that transgressions are a form of violation. Further, given that people who are socially isolated interpret events through a self-focused, self-protective lens, those who are highly socially isolated may therefore experience more self-conscious moral emotions in the aftermath of a transgression. Similarly, given that people with a higher retributive orientation tend to respond to events by viewing those events as a breach of justice and seek punishment for the offender (e.g., Okimoto et al., 2012), it is possible that those higher in retributive orientation will experience moral outrage. Thus, in sum, I predict two distinct indirect pathways for how different inward (self) focused and outward (offender) focused individual difference factors (social isolation and retributive orientation) predict not forgiving. I predict that social isolation impacts not forgiving indirectly through self-focused self-conscious moral emotions. I further predict that retributive orientation impacts not forgiving indirectly through moral outrage.

## 2. Method

### 2.1. Participants and procedure

Ninety-eight participants ( $M_{\text{age}} = 20.43$ ,  $SD = 4.26$ , range: 18–46; 85% female) from a North American university participated in the study under supervised laboratory conditions. A power analysis revealed that this sample size was sufficient ( $1 - \beta = .86$ ), yet not so large as to capitalize on small effects that have little practical significance (Kirk, 1996).

Participants were asked to recall a transgression in which they did not forgive the offender. They described the transgression, provided some contextual information about the transgression, and reported whether they still had contact with the offender. To measure the perceived severity of the offense, participants also reported how hurtful the event was at the time it occurred (from 1 = *not at all hurtful*; 5 = *very hurtful*; Harper et al., 2014). Then, participants were asked to respond to the scales described below.

### 2.2. Measures

#### 2.2.1. Social isolation

To assess social isolation I used the 20-item UCLA loneliness scale (Russell, Peplau, & Ferguson, 1978). Participants were asked to consider how often each statement described them on a scale anchored from 1 (*I never feel this way*) to 4 (*I often feel this way*) (e.g., “I feel isolated from others”;  $\alpha = .95$ ).

#### 2.2.2. Retributive orientation

Retributive orientation was measured using Okimoto et al.'s (2012) retributive orientation measure (e.g., “an offender deserves to be penalized”;  $\alpha = .92$ ). The scale was anchored from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 7 (*strongly agree*).

#### 2.2.3. Moral emotions: self-conscious moral emotions and moral outrage

In line with previous researchers (Batson et al., 2007; Lotz et al., 2011), I measured moral emotions using participants' emotional responses to the an offense (1 = *not at all*; 5 = *extremely*). Along with filler items (e.g., grateful, relieved) participants completed a five-item measure of moral outrage (angry, bitter, spiteful, hatred, hostile;  $\alpha = .85$ ) and a three-item measure of self-conscious emotions (ashamed, distressed, fearful;  $\alpha = .65$ ).

#### 2.2.4. Lack of forgiveness

In line with Fatfouta et al. (2015), I measured lack of forgiveness using the revenge and avoidance subscales of the Transgression-Related Interpersonal Motivation Inventory (TRIM; McCullough et al., 1998). To reduce the burden on participants of completing a long study, I used a shortened version of the revenge subscale with four items (e.g., “I'll make this person pay”;  $\alpha = .87$ ), and the avoidance subscale with three items (e.g., “I cut off a relationship with this person”;  $\alpha = .90$ ), anchored on a scale from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 7 (*strongly agree*) for a total ‘not forgiving’ score ( $\alpha = .83$ ).

## 3. Results

### 3.1. Descriptive statistics and preliminary analyses

Participants reported transgressions committed by friends (41.8%), romantic partners (29.6%), family members (23%), authority figures (4.1%), and a roommate (1%). Transgressions occurred between two weeks and 23 years ago ( $M = 2.98$  years,  $SD = 3.83$  years). Three people did not report how long ago the transgression occurred. About half (50.7%) of the participants retained some form of contact with the offender. The types of transgressions varied, and included infidelity by a romantic partner (17.7%); betrayal, argument, insult, rejection, or

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