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Paths to interpersonal forgiveness: The roles of personality, disposition to forgive and contextual factors in predicting forgiveness following a specific offence

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Abstract

This study examined a multi-factorial model of forgiveness in which personality of the offended party, disposition to forgive, and context-specific factors were examined as predictors of forgiveness in a specific situation. A community sample of adults ($N = 128$) was recruited from Australia and New Zealand. Regression analyses indicated that individuals scoring higher on agreeableness and spirituality, and lower on neuroticism, reported a greater disposition to forgive. Disposition to forgive mediated the relationship between individuals' agreeableness and their reported forgiveness in a specific situation. Factors that predicted unique variance in forgiveness of a specific offence were the offended party's disposition to forgive, the value they placed on the relationship with the transgressor, positive offender actions (e.g., listening, apologising, providing compensation), and expecting the transgressor to repeat the offence. The findings support the idea that interpersonal forgiveness involves the interplay of factors that are both intrinsic and extrinsic to individuals.

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1. Introduction

In recent years, forgiveness has received increasing attention as its role in maintaining interpersonal relationships and contributing to well-being has been recognised (Exline & Baumeister, 2000; McCullough, Pargament, & Thoresen, 2000). The context of forgiveness is an interpersonal hurt or transgression perpetrated by another. When a person forgives, their thoughts, feelings and behaviours toward the offender become less negative and more positive (McCullough et al., 2000). Forgiveness can further be seen as a prosocial act, whereby motivations to avoid and/or seek revenge against the transgressor are replaced with a motivation to maintain a positive relationship (McCullough et al., 2000).

In addition to forgiveness being a response to a specific interpersonal transgression, theorists have proposed that it may be conceptualised as a personality variable. A *disposition to forgive* can be characterised along a forgiving–unforgiving continuum (Berry, Worthington, Parrott, O'Connor, & Wade, 2001; Brose, Rye, Lutz-Zois, & Ross, 2005; McCullough & vanOyen Witvliet, 2002).

Various personality traits have been conceptualised as influencing a person's disposition to forgive, although two have most consistently contributed unique variance to forgiveness-related variables: agreeableness and neuroticism (e.g., Berry et al., 2001; Berry, Worthington, O'Connor, Parrott, & Wade, 2005; Brose et al., 2005; McCullough, Bellah, Kilpatrick, & Johnson, 2001; McCullough & Hoyt, 2002; McCullough & vanOyen Witvliet, 2002; Mullet, Neto, & Rivière, 2005). *Agreeableness* incorporates attributes such as empathy and generosity (McCullough, 2001). Individuals who are more agreeable may be more tolerant of others (McCullough & Hoyt, 2002) resulting in being more forgiving. *Neuroticism* has been proposed to affect individuals' disposition to forgive, as more neurotic persons may be less effective at letting go of negative motivations toward a transgressor and more anxious and distrustful (McCullough & Hoyt, 2002; Walker & Gorsuch, 2002).

Another personality dimension proposed to increase disposition to forgive is *spirituality*, which is defined as a personal search for meaning, unity, and connectedness to humanity and nature (Emmons, 1999; Piedmont, 1999). A central tenet in many religious and spiritual doctrines is the offering and receipt of forgiveness (McCullough & Worthington, 1999). Various studies have suggested that people who report being highly spiritual or religious value forgiving and view themselves as more forgiving (Brose et al., 2005; Leach & Lark, 2004; McCullough & Worthington, 1999; Mullet et al., 2005).

While research has supported the idea that personality variables predict a general disposition to forgive, how well these variables predict a person's response to forgiveness in a specific situation has received minimal attention, and when examined, results have been mixed (e.g., Brose et al., 2005; Eaton, Struthers, & Santelli, 2006; Hoyt, Fincham, McCullough, Maio, & Davila, 2005; McCullough & Worthington, 1999). Researchers have suggested that this may be due to the influence of many situation-specific factors that may predict forgiving better than personality-level determinants (McCullough et al., 1998).

1.1. Contextual factors related to forgiving a transgression

Increasing evidence suggests that transgression-related contextual factors predict a person's *situational forgiveness*, i.e., forgiveness following a specific transgression. These can be grouped as factors related to the characteristics of the transgression, the transgressor and the relationship.

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