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Effects of conceptualizations of forgiveness on specific and dispositional forgiveness

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Abstract

This paper analyzes how a sample of the general population conceptualizes forgiveness, how these beliefs relate to forgiveness and how the results can be used to draw implications for mental health counselors. 147 adults from general population participated in the study. A unilateral concept of forgiveness shows a positive and significant relation with all the types of forgiveness except self-forgiveness, whereas a bilateral understanding of forgiveness, to require the repentance of the offender, the belief in unforgivable offenses and believing that not everybody has the right to forgive any offense lead to decrements in the level of forgiveness.

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1. Introduction

The conceptualizations individuals hold about forgiveness may have important repercussions on their level of forgiveness and on their well-being. If not understood correctly, forgiveness can be experienced as maladaptive, leading individuals to return to unhealthy relationships, deny their anger, forgive too quickly, not hold offenders responsible for their actions, and automatically link forgiveness with reconciliation and forgetting.

Among the different beliefs that people have regarding forgiveness we analyze the following in this research: the concept of forgiveness, the belief that one must feel love and compassion towards the offender, whether forgiveness implies reconciliation or not, if it is necessary to apologize, if the offender must be repented and if there are some offenses which are unforgivable. (Cosgrove & Konstam, 2008; Kearns & Fincham, 2004).

One of the main controversies in this area is centered on the nature of forgiveness. Andrews (2000) identifies two models of forgiveness: negotiated forgiveness and unilateral forgiveness. In the former, forgiveness transpires through actual dialogue between the wrongdoer and the wronged. Many people who have suffered wrongs might be willing to forgive those who inflicted harm on them, if those people would admit their wrongdoing, take responsibility for it and show contrition. In the absence of such steps, however, the wronged party might refuse to forgive, believing that the essential preconditions for such an act have not been met. Unilateral forgiveness, in contrast, is a process which is contained entirely within one individual; it neither engages with nor is in any way

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dependent upon the position of the wrongdoer. It is, rather, an unconditional gift given to the one who inflicted the hurt.

Although there is a common belief in the importance of forgiveness and the role the different conceptualizations have on the process, only a few studies have investigated those concepts and its relation with the level of forgiveness.

The purpose of this paper is to analyze how a sample of the general population understands forgiveness (beliefs about the value and nature of forgiveness, about the existence of unforgivable offenses and about the effects of forgiveness on both offender and victim), to explore how these beliefs relate to forgiveness and to use the results to draw implications for mental health counselors.

2. Method

2.1. Participants

147 adults from the general population living in Madrid (Spain) participated in the study. There are 67 males (45.9 %) and 79 females (54.1%), with an age average of 37,9 years (sd = 18.8).

2.2. Variables and measurement instruments:

A self-report questionnaire was created including the following variables and assessment instruments:

2.2.1. Dispositional forgiveness

Dispositional forgiveness was measured by the Heartland Forgiveness Scale (HFS, Thompson y Snyder, 2003). It is a 18-item self-report measure comprised of three subscales: Self-forgiveness, Other-forgiveness, and Forgiveness of situations. Higher scores on the subscales indicate greater levels of forgiveness. We used only the first two subscales of the HFS.

2.2.2. Specific forgiveness

Specific forgiveness was measured by the Forgiveness Scale (FS, Rye et al, 2001) and the Transgression-Related Interpersonal Motivations (TRIM-18, McCullough, Fincham y Tsang, 2003).

The FS is a 15 item questionnaire with a Likert-type answer scale ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree). It has two subscales: a) Absence of Negative: 10 items related to the absence of negative thoughts, feelings, and behaviors regarding a specific hurt or offense, and b) Presence of Positive: 5 items related to the presence of positive thoughts, feelings, and behaviors regarding a specific hurt or offense. Higher scores on both subscales reflect higher levels of forgiveness. Both subscales have showed a good reliability in our sample (alpha = .778 and .745 respectively) and for the global scale alpha is .816.

The TRIM-18 is comprised of 18 item which are rated on a five point Likert-type scale ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree). It has three subscales: a) Avoidance subscale (7 items) measures motivation to avoid a transgressor, b) Revenge subscale (5 items) measures motivation to seek revenge, and c) Benevolence motivation (6 items). All of them showed a very good reliability in this research (alpha = .92, .87 and .87 respectively).

2.2.3. The concept about the nature of forgiveness

The unilateral concept of forgiveness was measured by two items rated on a 5 point Likert-scale ranging from 1 (Strongly disagree) to 5 (Strongly agree) and the Cronbach's alpha in this research is .69. The negotiated concept of forgiveness was measured by six items rated on an equal Likert scale and showed a Cronbach's alpha of .805.

2.2.4. Beliefs about the effects of forgiveness

A 15 item questionnaire was developed to measure the effects of forgiveness. The answers were rated on a Likert type scale ranging from 1 (Strongly disagree) to 5 (Strongly agree). A Principal Component Analysis with varimax rotation was performed on data from these items. The scree test indicated a three-factor solution which accounted for 56.9% of the total variance. The items were combined into three scales: negative effects on the offender (alpha = .742), positive effects on the offender (alpha = .819) and positive effects on the offended (alpha = .765).

2.2.5. Beliefs about the right to forgive

The belief that not everybody has the right to forgive was measured by the No Right scale (Cohen et al, 2006). Participants rated the five items on a 1 (Strongly disagree) to 5 (Strongly agree) scale. The No Right scale showed a good reliability (alpha = .729).

2.2.6. Belief in unforgivable offenses

Beliefs about the existence of unforgivable offenses were measured by the Unforgivable offenses scale (Cohen et al, 2006). Participants responded to five items on a 1 (Strongly disagree) to 5 (Strongly agree) scale. The scale showed a high reliability (alpha = .773).

2.2.7. Belief in the need of repentance

The belief in the need of offender repentance for granting forgiveness was measured by the Repent scale (Cohen et al, 2006). Participants rated seven items on a 1 (Strongly disagree) to 5 (Strongly agree) scale. The Repent scale showed good reliability (alpha = .797).

2.3 Procedure

The questionnaires were completed anonymously. All participants in this research and the obtained data have been treated complying with the ethical principles of scientific research.

2.4 Data Analysis

All data were analyzed by SPSS 15.0.

3. Results

Table 1 shows the average scores in the different beliefs instruments. In our sample is more frequent the unilateral than the negotiated concept of forgiveness ($t = 3.77, p < .001$), the participants tend to hold the belief that forgiveness has more positive than negative effects, and this positive effects are expected mainly on the offender behavior than on the offended ($t = -3.53, p = .001$).

Table 1. Descriptives of beliefs

	N	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Sd
Unilateral	157	1.00	5.00	3.3631	1.17480
Negotiated	155	1.00	5.00	2.7817	0.92729
Need of repentance	151	1.00	5.00	3.0634	0.92679
No right to forgive	153	1.00	5.00	2.4967	0.97255
Unforgivable	152	1.00	5.00	2.3791	0.81891
Positive effect on the offender	156	1.00	5.00	3.3558	1.00163
Positive effect on the offended	156	1.00	5.00	3.0801	0.85687
Negative effect on the offender	158	1.00	5.00	1.4608	0.58460

Correlations between the beliefs about forgiveness and the degree of dispositional forgiveness are shown in Table 2. The only belief which doesn't correlate with the level of forgiveness is to believe that forgiveness has positive effects on the offender. Both the belief that forgiveness is positive for the offended and a unilateral concept of forgiveness show a positive relation with forgiveness of others and with the total score in dispositional forgiveness. All the other beliefs show a significant negative correlation with forgiveness of others and with the total score in dispositional forgiveness..

Table 2. Correlations between beliefs and dispositional forgiveness

	HFS self	HFS others	HFS total
Unilateral	,112	,315**	,291**
Negotiated	-,180*	-,482**	-,452**
Need of repentance	-,203*	-,413**	-,410**
No right to forgive	-,185*	-,317**	-,338**
Unforgivable	-,152	-,420**	-,398**
Positive effect on the offender	,090	,109	,126
Positive effect on the offended	,141	,316**	,305**
Negative effect on the offender	-,158*	-,088	-,149

* p < .05.**p < .01.

Correlations between beliefs and degrees of forgiveness after a specific offense are shown in Table 3. All the beliefs except those related with the effects of forgiveness have a significant correlation with all the scales of specific forgiveness. When the person holds a unilateral concept of forgiveness and when he or she believes that forgiveness has a positive effect in the offended they will tend to show higher levels of forgiveness and lower levels of revenge and avoidance. On the other side to hold a negotiated concept of forgiveness, the belief in the necessity of repentance by the offender, the belief that there are unforgivable offenses and the belief that not everybody has the right to forgive, are related to lower levels of forgiveness and more behaviors and feelings of avoidance and revenge.

Table 3. Correlations between beliefs and specific forgiveness

	FS Absence -	FS Presence +	FS Total	TRIM Evitation	TRIM Revenge	TRIM Benevolence
Unilateral	,161*	,311**	,290**	-,178*	-,288**	,207*
Negotiated	-,343**	-,391**	-,461**	,237**	,408**	-,208*
Need of repentance	-,296**	-,343**	-,401**	,214*	,326**	-,205*
No right to forgiveness	-,244**	-,317**	-,355**	,288**	,368**	-,229**
Unforgivable	-,334**	-,545**	-,542**	,351**	,491**	-,315**
Positive effect on the offender	-,101	,213**	,096	-,008	,100	,127
Positive effect on the offended	,122	,416**	,352**	-,159	-,178*	,335**
Negative effect on the offender	-,219**	-,121	-,196*	,121	,196*	-,031

*p < .05. **p < .01.

4. Conclusions

Our research shows the important role that ideas and beliefs about forgiveness have on the level of forgiveness experienced by the subjects. The unilateral concept about the nature of forgiveness shows a positive and significant relation with all the types of forgiveness but self-forgiveness, whereas a bilateral understanding of forgiveness leads to decrements in all the levels of forgiveness. To believe that forgiveness requires the repentance of offender is linked significantly with lower levels of forgiveness, in the same way that happens with the belief in unforgivable offenses as well as believing that not everybody has the right to forgive any offense.

As we have found the beliefs the person holds about forgiveness may facilitate or prevent the process and, therefore they should be explored before any interventions aimed at promoting forgiveness are implemented. More detailed knowledge of how the general population makes sense of the psychological construct of forgiveness will allow mental health counselors, educators, and researchers to work more effectively to help others forgive.

Because an individual's understanding and experience of forgiveness may be quite different from research and theoretical conceptualizations, researchers should compare lay understandings of forgiveness to academic ones.

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