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Article 23

The Relationship Between Forgiveness and Emotional Well-Being

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Forgiveness has been previously viewed as a construct related to spirituality or religiosity. However, research studies have begun to demonstrate that forgiveness offers more than just a spiritual or religious benefit; researchers are studying the possibility that forgiveness has implications for emotional and mental well-being (Enright, 2001; Lusk,

2003). Enright and Fitzgibbons (2000) have shown strong evidence for the emotional health benefits of using a road map to learn to forgive someone who was deeply unfair to the participant” (p. 114). Other researchers have also shown positive correlations between forgiveness and well-being (Toussaint & Jorgensen, 2008; Orcutt, 2006). For example, Orcutt (2006) suggested that forgiveness may alleviate negative feelings associated with stress. Although empirical research has led some researchers to conclude that forgiveness may be a crucial component in alleviating psychological distress, more research is still needed (Orcutt, 2006).

This study investigated the relationship between forgiveness, stress, and social support to further examine the correlation between emotional well-being constructs. For the purpose of this study, we assessed forgiveness by measuring revenge motivations and avoidance motivations. Revenge and avoidance motivations have been recognized as two established indicators for forgiveness (Orth, Berking, Walker, Meier, & Znoj, 2008) following an interpersonal transgression; namely, an offense committed against someone where forgiveness may be required. Interpersonal transgressions generally result in negative feelings that precipitate emotional distress (Orcutt, 2006). The researchers in the present study theorized that the decision to forgive would reduce the amount of negative feelings and, thereby, reduce the stress response.

Forgiveness may also reflect the quality of the interpersonal relationship where the transgression occurred. Research conducted by Hoyt, Fincham, McCullough, Maio, and Davilla (2005) demonstrated that despite an individual’s tendency to be forgiving, relational factors (i.e., nature of the relationship) were linked to an individual’s willingness to forgive. In other words, the relationship and the situation in which the interpersonal transgression occurs influences the degree to which people will forgive, notwithstanding the dispositional characteristics of the forgiver. For example, if a transgression is perceived as having been unintentional, partners are more likely to forgive (McCullough, Fincham, & Tsang, 2003; Takaku, Weiner, & Ohbuchi, 2001). Likewise, when the transgression no longer has negative consequences for the victim, forgiveness is more likely to occur (Mullet & Girard, 2000). Moreover, when the transgressor is a romantic relationship partner or someone to whom the victim is closer and more committed, the victim tends to be more willing to forgive (McCullough et al., 1998; Wieselquist, Rusbult, Foster, & Agnew, 1999). Forgiveness also appeared to be more readily extended to partners who apologize (Darby & Schlenker, 1982; McCullough, Worthington, & Rachal, 1997; Mullet & Girard, 2000).

Forgiveness

Sato (2005) introduced a theoretical framework termed “internal conflict model” to indicate that lack of forgiveness leads to internal conflict. The model incorporates common themes from several psychodynamic, humanistic, and psychoanalytical theories. The internal conflict model integrated forgiveness, coping strategies, ego-transcendence, and positive and negative arousal to facilitate an understanding of emotional experiences in relation to internal conflict. For example, when circumstances in life are consistent with an individual’s desires, the individual is comfortable. Conversely, when circumstances in life are inconsistent with an individual’s desires, the individual will be anxious. Additionally, Sato believed that the act of forgiving frees an individual from the

internal conflict. Thus, when an individual is not forgiving, they are in essence refusing to let go of their own desires that lead to internal conflict, which may in turn produce psychological distress.

Further, interpersonal conflict may exacerbate the stress an individual experiences related to internal conflict. Forgiveness has an interpersonal dynamic that, without it, a person is more likely to experience distress. Orcutt (2006) conducted a longitudinal study on the correlation between forgiveness and psychological distress symptoms caused by interpersonal transgression. There were two cohorts yielding a sample size of 182 Midwestern college women. Orcutt concluded that there was a significant negative relationship between forgiveness and psychological distress. The participant demographics were limited, however, in gender, age, occupation, and location diversity; therefore, it would be interesting to see if similar results would be found with a sample with a broader demographic profile.

An important aspect to consider when evaluating forgiveness is the social support a person receives and how that support, or lack thereof, influences a person's propensity to forgive. In a study conducted by Hoyt et al. (2005), the researchers concluded that if a person perceived him or herself as forgiving, then it was more likely others also perceived that person as forgiving. Likewise, if a person was forgiven of a transgression, then it was more likely that others also perceived that person as being worthy of forgiveness. The sample consisted of two-parent families with their eighth-grade daughters. However, because this study was conducted exclusively with families and no other relational interactions were evaluated, it would be interesting to see if similar results would be found with a broader definition of social support.

The previously-cited studies produced important results that have informed both researchers and practitioners, yet there are some limitations to address. The present study examined the relationship between forgiveness, stress, and social support. Specifically addressing the limitations of generalizability, the present study utilized a diverse sample and broadened the age demographic to include adults aged 18-78 years old. Family support has also been expanded upon to include social support of friends and significant others. Additionally, the propensity toward forgiveness by measuring revenge and avoidance motivations, and gender differences were examined. Four outcomes were hypothesized. Hypothesis 1: There is a positive correlation between revenge and avoidance motivations and stress. Hypothesis 2: There is an inverse correlation between revenge and avoidance motivations and social support. Hypothesis 3: Females will have a higher average score on avoidance motivations than males. Hypothesis 4: Males will have a higher average score on revenge motivations than females.

Method

Participants

Convenience, snowball, and quota sampling methods were utilized to gather a sample of 804 diverse subjects at least 18 years of age. All researchers were encouraged to generate a diverse sample by finding participants from a variety of different demographic backgrounds including ages, gender, religious affiliation, ethnicity, income, and education. Researchers recruited participants by inviting personal acquaintances, encouraging research participants to invite other individuals they knew met the study criteria, utilizing social networking websites, inviting individuals affiliated with various religious and community organizations, messages were posted on lay and professional

listservs, invites were posted on an online classified website, invites were extended to counseling clients at university counseling centers and in online and in-person mental health support groups.

Materials

Three instruments were utilized. The Transgression-Related Interpersonal Motivations Inventory (TRIM; McCullough et al., 1998) 12-item form to measure forgiveness, the Depression Anxiety Stress Scale (DASS-21; Henry & Crawford, 2005) utilizing only the stress subscale, and the Multidimensional Scale of Perceived Social Support (MSPSS; Zimet, Dahlem, Zimet & Farley, 1988) measures an individual's perception of support received by family, friends, and significant other.

Procedure

This study is a nonexperimental, correlational ex post facto quantitative research design examining the relationship between forgiveness, stress, and social support. The design utilized a survey approach, via the Internet. The researchers forwarded a cover letter containing the link to access the survey to all participants and recruitment sites. The cover letter explained that the study had been approved by the university's institutional review board, the purpose of the study, what participation involved, and criteria for participation. Participants were then directed to follow the link to the survey.

Upon accessing the link, participants began Step 1 of 4 of the survey. Step 1 directed participants to click on a button that read, "Show me the informed consent document," which lead to Step 2 of 4. At Step 2, the Informed Consent Document was displayed, participants were informed of the purpose of the study, risks and benefits associated with participation, confidentiality and limits to confidentiality, that their participation was purely voluntary, and that they were free to withdraw from the study at any time without consequence. Participants were also informed that should they choose to continue with the survey, they are acknowledging they have read the informed consent form or had it read to them, they understand the form, the research, and its risks and benefits, and are voluntarily agreeing to participate in this study. If participants agreed to continue with the survey, they were directed to proceed to Steps 3 and 4 respectively to fill out the survey. The survey consisted of 293 questions with an average completion time of 30-45 minutes.

Results

A total of 804 adults participated in the study, 303 men (37.6%), 499 women (62.4%), and 2 individuals who did not report their gender. Participant age ranged from 18-78 ($M = 35.62$; $SD = 13.60$). Caucasians represented 64.8%; African Americans, 18.7%, Latinos, (5.6%); Asians, (4.5%); multiracial, (2.7%); Middle Easterners, (1%); and American Indians, (1%). Religious affiliation was declared by 90.2% ($n = 725$), with 9.6% ($n = 77$) indicating no spiritual affiliation. Of these affiliations the majority were Christian 76.4% ($n = 614$), and the rest were non-Christian including such affiliations as Jewish, Muslim, Hindu, and Wiccan. The majority of participants were from the Eastern, US (53.8%, $n = 434$), followed by Southern, US (18.1%, $n = 146$), Midwest (16%, $n = 129$), Western, US (7.1%, $n = 57$), outside the US (4.3%, $n = 35$), and five did not

report their geographic location. Participants reported income at more than 81,000 (32.3%), followed by 21,000-40,000 (20.8%), 41,000-60,000 (19.4%), 61,000-80,000 (14.9%), and less than 20,000 (12.7%). Eighty-seven percent reported having completed some form of college (less than two years, Associates, Bachelors, Masters, or Doctorate), 6.6% completed high school, 4.2% completed trade school, and .9% less than high school.

Multiple Regression

Avoidance motivation. Prior to executing a multiple regression analysis, data was checked for outliers, missing data, and violation of assumptions. Outliers were removed from the data and missing data was not included in the analysis. Assumptions were not violated (multicollinearity, sample size, and normality, linearity, and homogeneity of variance among the residual). A multiple regression analysis was conducted with avoidance motivations as the dependent variable and stress and total social support as the independent variables. In this regression, 4.0% of the shared variance was explained by the model ($R = 0.206$, $p < .01$). The unstandardized regression coefficient (β_1) was equaled to .13 ($p < .01$) for stress, and (β_2) was equaled to -.04 ($p < .01$) for total social support with the intercept equaled to 26.86 ($p < .01$). The variance accounted for (R^2) equaled .04 (adjusted $R^2 = .04$), which was statistically significant, $F(2,773) = 17.06$, $p < .01$. Thus, the first and second hypotheses were supported.

Revenge motivations. Prior to executing a multiple regression analysis, data was checked for outliers, missing data, and violation of assumptions. Outliers were removed from the data and missing data was not included in the analysis. Assumptions were not violated (multicollinearity, sample size, and normality, linearity, and homogeneity of variance among the residual). A multiple regression analysis was conducted with revenge motivations as the dependent variable and stress and total social support as the independent variables. In this regression, 4.0% of the shared variance was explained by the model ($R = 0.193$, $p < .01$). The unstandardized regression coefficient (β_1) was equaled to .06 ($p < .01$) for stress, and (β_2) was equaled to -.05 ($p < .01$) for total social support with the intercept equaled to 13.61 ($p < .01$). The variance accounted for (R^2) equaled .04 (adjusted $R^2 = .04$), which was statistically significant, $F(2,773) = 14.97$, $p < .01$. Again, this supported both the first and second hypotheses.

Stress was positively related to both avoidance and revenge motivations; the higher the stress, the higher the avoidance and revenge motivations. Total social support was inversely related to both avoidance and revenge motivations; the lower the total social support, the higher the avoidance and revenge motivations. Both avoidance and revenge motivations had a mutual result of 4.0% of the shared variance explained by the model. In spite of a low-shared variance, both stress and total social support were statistically significant.

Independent T-test

Avoidance motivation. In order to test for the third hypothesis, an independent t-test was conducted to compare the means for men and women on avoidance motivation scores. Prior to conducting an independent t-test analysis, data was checked for normal distribution on avoidance for forgiveness and homogeneity and no assumptions were violated. An independent t-test was conducted to compare avoidance scores for males and

females; $t(775) = -2.02$, $p = .16$, mean difference = .80, 95% CI: -1.57 - .02. The result was not statistically significant. The differences in the means are not a reflection of true differences, but are probably due to chance. Hypothesis 3 was not supported.

Revenge motivation. In order to test for hypothesis number four, an independent t-test was conducted to compare means for men and women on revenge motivation scores. Prior to conducting an independent t-test analysis, data was checked for a normal distribution on revenge motivation and outliers were removed from the analysis. The homogeneity assumption was violated; consequently, results are reported for equal variances not assumed. An independent t-test was conducted to compare revenge scores for males ($M = 11.49$, $SD = 4.61$) and females ($M = 10.22$, $SD = 4.05$); $t(775) = 3.89$, $p < .01$ (mean difference = 1.27, 95% CI: 1.91- 2.68 was small effect size (eta squared = .02). The outcome was statistically significant indicating that men and women do differ. The results showed that males scored higher on revenge motivations than females; thus, hypothesis 4 was supported.

Discussion

A review of findings demonstrated that the results of the present study supported hypotheses 1, 2, and 4. Results indicated that the higher an individual's level of stress, the higher their motivation to avoid the person whom is believed to have wronged them (i.e., "I keep as much distance between us as possible") and are also more likely to have revenge thoughts (i.e., "I'll make him/her pay") about that person. Similarly, with regard to social support and forgiveness, results indicated that the lesser amount of perceived social support, the higher the motivation to avoid the person whom they perceive has wronged them, and the more likely they are to have revenge thoughts about the wrongdoer. Gender difference was also supported on hypothesis 4, in that men tended to report more revenge motivations about the person whom they perceive wronged them, more so than women. Hypothesis 3 was not supported. No differences were found between men and women on avoidance motivations.

It is possible that an explanation for these results centers around the emotional discomfort and psychological distress associated with expending the energy and effort of avoiding or getting revenge. A possible explanation for the gender difference may weigh on the personality and communication styles of men and women; whereas men are typically described as having a more aggressive nature than women. This may explain why men scored higher on the revenge scale than women.

This study also supported Sato's (2005) research related to forgiveness as measured by avoidance and revenge motivations since avoidance and revenge motivations are positively related to stress. Orcutt (2006) indicated the same results, yet with a much smaller sample size among only females. This study adjusted for this limitation by including over 600 more female and male participants of diverse backgrounds. Lower levels of social support are related to avoidance and revenge motivations according to this research. This was similar to Hoyt et al. (2005); however, this study expanded the results to a broader social network of friends and significant other in addition to family when examining social support. One potential explanation of these results may be understood in the context of the more people (social support) a person has, the more people or avenues a person has to distribute the buildup of emotional tension

arising from interpersonal transgressions. This may in turn lower the psychological distress as well as the amount of energy expended on avoidance and revenge motivations. In contrast, the lesser amount of social support (friends, significant other, family) one has, the more one has to depend on self and deal with the effects of the transgression in isolation. In other words, without a safe, supportive outlet, internalizing behaviors like revenge and avoidance thoughts are more likely to develop.

Limitations

Certain limitations of this study should be noted. All instruments used to obtain data were self-report measures. As with any self-report inventory comes the challenge of relying on participants to accurately evaluate and honestly report their true conditions. In addition, the internal validity for this study was low due to its nonexperimental design. The study design researched only the degree of correlation between the variables; not cause and effect relationships. This research was part of a larger research study and a number of constructs combined to make one 293-question survey may also have been a limitation due to the wide variety of constructs measured and questions asked. Another limitation was data collection. Though attempts were made to collect data from a diverse sample, the participants were predominantly Caucasian or European decent with Asian and Native American groups being under-represented in the study.

Additionally, the researchers coded variables in the study to increase sample size for certain categories. Specifically, ethnicity was an open response that was later coded into the specific categories of Caucasian, African American, Latino, Asian, multiracial, Middle Easterner, and American Indian. Other researchers may code the variables differently, yielding different results. Another limitation may be the affiliation of the researchers with a Christian university. Despite anonymity, respondents may have considered that the responses would be viewed from a morally judgmental perspective, thus influencing participant responses. Furthermore, the majority of the participants reported a Christian background.

Recommendations for Future Research

For future research, it may be more efficient to use only those scales pertaining to the research study to minimize any fatigue or haphazard responses by participants having to answer an abundance of questions on a variety of topics in one sitting. In an effort to obtain a more accurate report, a study of individuals who are known to be suffering from psychological distress, such as stress, anxiety, or depression because of relational or interpersonal conflicts, including those experiencing grief or loss, is also warranted.

Additionally, a longitudinal study may be appropriate to study offense-specific type transgressions instead of the more general or overall transgressions, such as a study designed to solicit survivors of criminal assaults to examine any shifts or changes in attitude toward the perpetrator, as well as any changes in the survivor's level of forgiveness and emotional well-being. Future research may also consider studying the impact of forgiveness on incarcerated individuals as it relates to self-forgiveness or other forgiveness toward someone whom they feel is responsible for their current life condition.

Implications for Counselors

This study's findings have important practical implications. Forgiveness might foster emotional well-being in several ways. For example, when working with clients, clinicians could help their clients achieve closure with a transgression and decrease the frequency of transgression-related thoughts that precipitate avoidant and revenge motivations (Gold & Wegner, 1995; Martin & Tesser, 1996). Achieving closure may reduce the client's anger and hostility, and thereby decrease the level of stress and negative affect (Orth et al., 2008). Additionally, the way in which one responds to a transgression may be indicative of the significance of the relationship; thus, counselors could also explore with their clients the nature of the relationship between the client and transgressor. This can be both a beneficial and motivating factor of treatment. Within relationships that the client views as close or significant, forgiveness may help reestablish relationship quality and thereby increase well-being (Orth et al., 2008); whereas, lack of forgiveness may reinforce maladaptive characteristics of powerlessness in the client's self-concept (Baumeister, Exline, & Sommer, 1998). These factors may be helpful when assessing the benefits and risks of forgiveness.

Secondly, targeting forgiveness as an intervention for conflict resolution work with couples and families offers a promising strategy for tackling relational conflict (Gordon, Baucom, & Snyder, 2000). Solomon, Dekel and Zerach (2009) suggest that promoting forgiveness in marriages may improve marital adjustment. For instance, as opposed to focusing on the individual level of intervention, clinicians can conceptualize conflict in a relational context and support efforts to address family patterns of conflict systematically, along with the driving motivations that influence responses to conflict (Orth, et al., 2008). By helping to sustain the marital relationship, forgiveness may indirectly contribute to the well-being of the marital couple.

Additionally, our findings indicate that higher levels of stress and lesser amounts of social support were positively correlated with higher avoidant and revenge motivations. From an applied standpoint, interventions might focus on assisting clients in developing a social support network as a means to manage stress. Encouraging clients to seek support from others may serve as a valuable tool for coping with stress and, thereby, preserving social and emotional well-being, particularly when working with older adults (Lawler-Row & Piferi, 2006). For instance, a common occurrence in later life includes experiencing diminished social networks due to death of significant others. Helping them to identify and mobilize supportive environments (i.e., faith communities) and develop peer supports can greatly enhance their quality of life and improve emotional well-being (Dong Pil, 2006). Equally important is that clinicians assess and understand the role of forgiveness when working with elderly clients. Many elderly individuals are strongly influenced by their sense of faith and spirituality. Religious values and beliefs oftentimes include principles of forgiveness. Lawler-Row and Piferi (2006) suggest that with the elderly, forgiveness may represent a set of skills that have clear benefits for developing and maintaining important relationships, in addition to providing an important opportunity for self-development. Both of these foster experiences of subjective well-being. Therefore, assisting clients in developing emotional supportive networks can

provide protection against a wide range of different stressful events (Cohen & Wills, 1985).

Our findings further suggest that forgiveness can possibly affect emotional well-being indirectly. For example, forgiveness might increase emotionally supportive networks, improve marital quality, promote reconciliation (Worthington & Scherer, 2004), reduce anxiety and depression while increasing self-esteem and healthy decision making (Reed & Enright, 2006). Following forgiveness, clients may be better able to engage in personal and social causes without the hindrance of persistent and often debilitating resentment

In summary, clinicians treating clients that are dealing with stress, anxiety, and/or depression may have to probe into the past to see if there are any past emotional wounds the client may need to work through and perhaps foster the forgiveness process. By withholding forgiveness, it could be causing some stagnation in the client's progress or ability to experience healing and move forward with his or her life. When clients harbor ill will or unforgiveness, they may dwell on the hurt or trauma, which triggers the negative effects of stress. It is equally important that clinicians consider social support as a resource for clients, since social support positively correlates with forgiveness.

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