

A Look Into Forgiveness: The Roles of Intentionality, Severity, and Friendship

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Intentionality, severity, and relationship of the transgressor to the offended party are variables that might influence a person's willingness to forgive. In this experiment, participants were asked to respond to scenarios in which we manipulated these three variables. Results suggested that it was harder to forgive friends and acquaintances who committed offenses that were severe and intentional. Of the three variables, intentionality influenced participants' willingness to forgive more than severity and relationship. Furthermore, participants' perception of reality also influenced their decision to forgive over and above the objective manipulations.

The concept of forgiveness has been important since the beginning of human existence. It has been emphasized throughout world religions (Rye, Pargament, Ali, Beck, Dorff, Hallisey, Narayanan, & Williams, 2000). Yet psychology has only recently begun to investigate it.

Psychologists are finding that forgiveness is a complex phenomenon. This is evident by the many competing definitions and diverse emphases among researchers. For example, McCullough, Worthington, and Rachal (1997) define the act of forgiveness as the "the transformation that occurs when motivations to seek revenge and to maintain estrangement from an offending relationship partner diminish and motivation to pursue conciliatory courses of action increases" (p. 322). In contrast Berry, Worthington, Parrott, O'Connor, and Wade (2001) define the trait of forgiveness as the "disposition to forgive interpersonal transgressions over time and across situations" (p. 1277). Forgiveness is also seen as a complicated phenomenon because of the many variables that influence the decision to forgive.

Researchers have looked at such variables as the offender's perceived responsibility, intentionality, motives, rumination, and the severity of the offense

(McCullough, Rachal, Sandage, Worthington, Brown, & Hight, 1998). Other researchers have investigated variables such as attribution, empathy (McCullough et al., 1997), anger (Whitesell & Harter, 1996), humility (Tangney, 2002), and compensation (Ohbuchi, Kameda & Agarie, 1989). Much of this research has used either children (Ohbuchi & Sato, 2001; Whitesell & Harter, 1996), or undergraduates (McCullough et al., 1998; McCullough et al., 1997; Ohbuchi et al., 1989) as study participants. Research involving children is informative for a study like this one, in which late adolescents (college freshmen) would participate.

Three potentially important variables that might impact forgiveness include the intentionality of the offense, the severity of the offense, and the relationship of the person committing the offense. Intentionality plays a role in how people view a situation. Ohbuchi and Sato (2001) found that children (second and fifth graders) did not accept excuses for offenses that were believed to be intentional, and therefore found it harder to forgive.

Ohbuchi et al. (1989) concluded that the more severe the offense, the less apologies facilitated forgiveness. At the same time, participants desired an

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apology more when the offense was severe. Also, Ohbuchi and Sato (2001) found that the more severe the offense, the more elaborate the apology had to be. McCullough et al. (1997) discovered that the severity of the offense might be a crucial variable for a person's ability to empathize with the offender and furthermore forgive the offense. McCullough et al. (1998) emphasized that severe offenses are harder to forgive.

Whitesell and Harter (1996) investigated the nature of one's relationship when studying forgiveness in early adolescent development (ages 11 to 15). They found that offenses associated with friends were evaluated more thoroughly, and participants experienced more intense feelings of sadness, hurt, and anger. However, at the same time participants were more willing to work through an offense with a friend than with an acquaintance. In their conclusion, Whitesell and Harter emphasized the importance of relationship context in assessing the willingness to forgive.

Although each of these variables has already been considered in some forgiveness research, no study has examined all three, enabling a comparison of the relative importance of these three variables. This study involved participants responding to scenarios, where the severity of an altercation, the relationship of the person offending, and the intentionality of the situation were manipulated in order to examine any effect on the participant. We propose three hypotheses for this study: an intentional offense will be harder to forgive than an unintentional offense; a severe offense will be harder to forgive than a minor offense; and an offending acquaintance will be harder to forgive than an offending friend.

Method

Participants

A total of 103 participants responded to one of the eight versions of the questionnaire. All participants were Grove City College students from required freshman classes and ranged in age from 18 to 23 years old. Grove City College is a church-related institution, in a rural setting, with equal numbers of male and female students, being almost exclusively white and middle-class.

Materials

Three generic scenarios were developed with two primary goals in mind. First, three topics were chosen which commonly pertain to college life: transportation, cell phones, and a research paper, so that college students could easily relate to the scenarios. Second, the scenarios were developed so that the variables could be easily and coherently altered for each version of the questionnaire. On each questionnaire,

participants read the same three scenarios; however, within the scenarios there were two levels of each of the three between-participants factors (intentionality, severity, and relationship). Severity was manipulated by including either a major or minor altercation. Relationship was manipulated by indicating that the person was either the participant's closest friend or just an acquaintance. Intentionality was manipulated by describing the transgression as either an intentional offense or an unintentional offense.

A total of eight different versions of the questionnaire were used, with one of the two levels of intentionality (intentional, unintentional), severity (major, minor), and relationship (best friend, acquaintance). The resulting design is a 2 x 2 x 2 completely randomized between-participants experiment. (See the appendix for one form of the questionnaire.)

Following each scenario there were four questions, all of which were rated on a 5-point scale. The first three questions were designed to serve as manipulation checks. The first question after each scenario was a manipulation check for severity. Participants were asked to rate how serious they thought the offense was (1 = *not serious at all*, 5 = *very serious*). This question measured the perceived severity of the altercation. The second question was a check of how intentional the participant believed the offense was (1 = *unintentional*, 5 = *intentional*). This question measured the perceived intentionality of the altercation. The third question was a manipulation check to see how the participants perceived their relationship with the transgressor (1 = *not close at all*, 5 = *closest friends*). This question measured the perceived closeness of the relationship. In the fourth question, participants were asked to indicate how easy it would be to forgive the offender (1 = *nearly impossible*, 5 = *very easy*).

Procedure

All questionnaires were completed on the same day in required freshman classes. Copies of the eight versions were systematically shuffled, and one questionnaire was given arbitrarily to each participant. Participants voluntarily took part and were asked to complete the informed consent form before filling out the questionnaires. They were asked to read each scenario in the questionnaire and answer the questions that followed. After completing the questionnaire, each class was debriefed and told not to talk to anyone about any information about the study until the end of the day when all data collection would be complete.

Results

Reliability tests indicated that the coefficient alpha for the manipulation check on severity across the three

scenarios was .70. The coefficient alpha for the manipulation check on intentionality across the three scenarios was .73, and for the question on relationship the coefficient alpha was .67. Finally, the coefficient alpha for the question on forgiveness across the three scenarios was .67. On the basis of these reasonable reliabilities, items were combined across the three scenarios.

A series of three $2 \times 2 \times 2$ univariate analysis of variance tests were conducted to analyze the manipulation checks. Analysis on the severity question indicated the expected main effect for severity, $F(1, 95) = 23.76$, $p < .01$, $r^2 = .14$. For those scenarios that had a major altercation, the mean severity score was 3.16 ($SD = 0.74$), and for those scenarios with a minor altercation, the mean score reported was 2.51 ($SD = 0.81$). Unanticipated, there was also a significant main effect for intentionality on the severity question, $F(1, 95) = 43.53$, $p < .01$, $r^2 = .26$. The mean severity score for the intentional offense equaled 3.27 ($SD = 0.69$) and the mean for the unintentional equaled 2.40 ($SD = 0.75$). Both severe altercations and intentional altercations were rated as more severe.

As expected, the intentionality question indicated a main effect for the intentionality variable, $F(1, 95) = 112.50$, $p < .01$, $r^2 = .52$. Scenarios in which the offense was intentional had a mean intentionality score of 3.22 ($SD = 0.78$) while scenarios in which the offense was unintentional had a mean of 1.73 ($SD = 0.66$).

Two main effects were found when analyzing the relationship variable. The expected main effect for friend was indicated $F(1, 95) = 37.64$, $p < .01$, $r^2 = .26$. The mean relationship score for scenarios indicating a best friend relationship was 4.00 ($SD = 0.61$), and the mean for scenarios indicating an acquaintance relationship was 3.26 ($SD = 0.64$). A main effect was also found for intentionality in the analysis of the relationship question, $F(1, 95) = 6.63$, $p < .05$, $r^2 = .05$. The mean relationship score for an intentional offense was 3.44 ($SD = 0.70$) and for an unintentional was 3.79 ($SD = 0.71$). The offender was seen as a closer friend either when described as a friend or when committing an unintentional transgression.

Another 3-way ANOVA was conducted on the forgiveness question. This analysis revealed several significant main effects and one significant interaction. A main effect was found for severity, $F(1, 95) = 15.46$, $p < .01$, $r^2 = .10$. The mean forgiveness score for minor altercations was 3.99 ($SD = 0.68$) and for major altercations, it was 3.53 ($SD = 0.65$). There was a non-significant trend found for relationship, $F(1, 95) = 3.74$, $p < .06$, $r^2 = .02$. The mean for acquaintance was 3.65 ($SD = 0.77$) and for best friend was 3.89 ($SD = 0.60$). There was a significant main effect for intentionality $F(1, 95) = 29.65$, $p < .01$, $r^2 = .19$. The mean

for unintentional offenses was 4.08 ($SD = 0.64$) and for intentional was 3.44 ($SD = 0.62$).

Only one interaction was found to be significant. The interaction was found between the variables of severity and intent, $F(1, 95) = 4.189$, $p < .05$, $r^2 = .03$. Simple effects tests suggest that in a minor altercation, it is easier to forgive an unintentional act ($M = 4.41$, $SD = 0.51$) than an intentional act ($M = 3.55$, $SD = 0.56$), $t(50) = 5.81$, $p < .01$. In a major altercation, the difference was smaller, but still significant ($M = 3.73$ and 3.35 , $SD = 0.58$ and 0.66) $t(49) = 2.18$, $p < .05$. Hence the nature of this particular interaction is that it complements the main effect; the effect of intentionality was significant across both levels of severity.

Another way to analyze the data is to compare the effect of the actual manipulation of the three variables with the effect of the perceived level of these variables as measured by the manipulation checks. Does the objective manipulated level of severity predict forgiveness beyond the perceived level of severity? Does the perceived level of severity predict forgiveness beyond the objective level of severity? The same questions can be asked of the other two variables.

An analysis of regression was conducted, using forgiveness as the criterion variable. The two measures of severity were used as predictors: severity as manipulated, and severity as perceived according to the manipulation check. Results indicate that the two variables together predict 55% of the variance in forgiveness. Although the two variables do overlap significantly, $r(101) = .39$, $p < .01$, their unique contributions were assessed to address the earlier question. When objective severity is entered after perceived severity, it does not predict a significant percentage of variance, $t(100) = 0.67$, *ns*. When perceived severity is entered last, however, it does predict a significant percentage of variance, above and beyond objective severity, $\beta = 0.72$, $t(100) = 0.87$, $p < .01$.

The same pattern of results was observed for the intentionality variable. Results indicate that the two variables together (intentionality as manipulated and as perceived according to the manipulation check) predict 41% of the variance in forgiveness. Although the two variables do overlap significantly, $r(101) = .72$, $p < .01$, their unique contributions were assessed to address the earlier question. When objective intentionality is entered after perceived intentionality, it does not predict a significant percentage of variance, $t(100) = 0.14$, *ns*. When perceived intentionality is entered last, however, it does predict a significant percentage of variable, above and beyond objective intentionality, $\beta = 0.65$, $t(100) = 5.91$, $p < .01$. The findings on the relationship variable, however, were not significant.

Discussion

The three hypotheses of this experiment were generally supported. Support for each hypothesis required that a main effect be found for each variable. Data analysis demonstrated that significant main effects were found for two of the three variables: severity and intentionality. The third variable, relationship, showed a nonsignificant trend. Therefore, participants generally found it harder to forgive offenses that were intentional and committed by an acquaintance.

Although the three manipulation checks did each provide the expected result, indicating the manipulations were successful, the results were more complex because of unanticipated differences associated with the manipulation of intentionality. Altercations that were intentional were indeed seen as such, but were also perceived as being more severe and indicative of a lesser friendship. Although the three factors were manipulated in an orthogonal fashion, their results on participants' perceptions were not orthogonal. The manipulation of intentionality impacted all three of the manipulation checks. This suggests that the actual severity of an event is not an objective reality, but is exaggerated when the altercation is intentional, and minimized when the altercation is unintentional. It also suggests that an intentional altercation redefines the nature of a relationship, in that an intentional act causes one to question the closeness of a friend.

The results on the forgiveness measure revealed that it was harder to forgive offenses that were severe and intentional. Though not significant there was a trend that suggested that it was easier to forgive a close friend than an acquaintance. Further analysis of this question of forgiveness portrayed an interaction between severity and intent. This interaction demonstrates that when participants perceived an offense as intentional, the severity of the offense was less relevant to the participant's willingness to forgive. On the other hand, when the offense was perceived as unintentional, the severity of the offense influenced the participant's decision to forgive. This interaction might best be understood in light of the finding on the manipulation check that severe altercations were perceived as being more intentional. People may have difficulty imagining that serious wrongs were not somehow intentional, or that in some way can be attributed to the offender.

Although the manipulations of severity and intentionality did impact forgiveness as hypothesized, it was observed that perceived severity and intentionality, as measured on the manipulation checks, added significantly to the prediction of forgiveness. These results

suggest that it is not just the objective severity or the objective intentionality that influences victims, but rather how these are experienced. This finding is consistent with memory research. Given that our memories are subjective, based on personal needs and biases (Wilkinson, 2004), it is not surprising that forgiveness would be influenced by subjective reality and not just objective manipulations.

Overall, of the variables studied, intentionality had the most influence on whether or not the participant would forgive the offender. The effect of intentionality seemed to overwhelm the other two factors. When making this conclusion, however, it must be noted that even though intentionality showed a stronger influence on forgiveness, it was also the variable that seemed to be the easiest to manipulate. Therefore, participants may have been able to detect the intentionality variable more easily than either severity or relationship, causing a stronger influence on their decision to forgive.

There were several weaknesses in this research endeavor that could be improved upon in the future. First, scenarios could be written to make a larger distinction between major and minor offenses. In the broader content of interpersonal disputes, even these major offenses were relatively insignificant. A broader range of severity could have been investigated. Next, it would be interesting to conduct this study on participants outside of conservative Christian college environment. Due to the Christian atmosphere of this small college campus, participants may be more apt to forgive the offender than participants from a different population. Alternatively, they might have felt more pressure to appear to be forgiving, and given socially desirable responses, responding to a greater extent to experimenter demands. Finally, it would be beneficial if researchers could create laboratory altercations to assess the variables of severity, relationship, and intentionality and their impact on forgiveness.

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APPENDIX

Questionnaire A

Please read the following paragraphs and answer the questions to the best of your ability.
Try hard to put yourself in the character's shoes and respond accordingly. Circle the answer that best fits.

You cannot attend class the day a paper is due. Your best friend who sits near you in class offers to hand the paper in for you. When the paper is handed back you are astonished to have received a big fat F accompanied by an explanation declaring that the paper was late. After class you approach your best friend and inquire to know why the paper was marked late. Your best friend woke up that morning and felt really tired so he/she decided to sleep in and skip class. Later that afternoon, he/she remembered that the papers were due that day and tried to take them to the professor's office, but he was gone for the day. He/she slipped the papers under the door fully aware there would be a penalty for being late.

A week ago you asked your best friend to pick you up after work on Thursday. He/she kindly agreed and marked it on his/her calendar. When Thursday night rolled around, you went outside after work to wait for your ride but your best friend never showed up. You end up having to call your already stressed-out roommate and inconveniencing him/her to come pick you up. Later, when you approach your best friend about the situation, he/she explains that on the way to pick you up he/she decided to stop at the store to pick something up. While in the store, he/she ran into his/her latest crush and could not let this opportunity to make a move slip away.

1. On a scale from 1-5 how serious do you feel this offense was?

1 2 3 4 5

Not Serious At All Very Serious

- 2. Do you feel the actions in this scenario were intentional or unintentional?**

1	2	3	4	5
Unintentional				Intentional

- 3. In this scenario, how close are you to the person you envisioned offending you?**

1	2	3	4	5
Not Close At All			Closest Friends	

- 4. How easy or difficult would it be for you to forgive the other person for this offense?**

1	2	3	4	5
Nearly Impossible				Very Easy

5. On a scale from 1-5 how serious do you feel this offense was?

1 2 3 4 5

Not Serious At All Very Serious

- 6. Do you feel the actions in this scenario were intentional or unintentional?**

1	2	3	4	5
Unintentional			Intentional	

- 7. In this scenario, how close are you to the person you envisioned offending you?**

1	2	3	4	5
Not Close At All			Closest Friends	

8. How easy or difficult would it be for you to forgive the other person for this offense?

1	2	3	4	5
Nearly Impossible				Very Easy

Your best friend has to go by himself to pick up a relative at the Pittsburgh airport and asks to borrow your cell phone in case of an emergency. You graciously agree, happy to help out. When you get your next phone bill, however, you are astonished to see that it is double what it normally is. After closer examination you notice that your best friend is responsible for running up the bill. When you approach him/her about the bill, he/she casually explains that he/she decided to call a friend back home while waiting in the airport to help pass the time.

9. On a scale from 1-5 how serious do you feel this offense was?

1	2	3	4	5
Not Serious At All			Very Serious	

10. Do you feel the actions in this scenario were intentional or unintentional?

1	2	3	4	5
Unintentional			Intentional	

11. In this scenario, how close are you to the person you envisioned offending you?

1	2	3	4	5
Not Close At All			Closest Friends	

12. How easy or difficult would it be for you to forgive the other person for this offense?

1	2	3	4	5
Nearly Impossible			Very Easy	