Gender Differences in the Relationship between Forgiveness and Depression/Happiness

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Abstract

Being unable to forgive produces two motivational states: revenge motivation and avoidance motivation. The aim of the study was to investigate the role of gender in the relationship between these two types of motivation and well-being.

The sample consisted of 600 college students. There were 300 females and 300 males who ranged in age from 19 to 28 years. The students responded to two self-report questionnaires. Forgiving was measured with the Transgression-Related Interpersonal Motivations (TRIM) Inventory, and well-being with Short Depression-Happiness Scale.

Regression analyses showed that both revenge and avoidance motivation were significant predictors of depression for males, while for females only revenge motivation proved to be significant. Neither revenge nor avoidance motivation predicted happiness. It can be concluded that being prone to revenge and avoidance can be related to depression, but that does not mean that less avoidance and revenge will be necessarily related to more happiness.

Keywords: forgiveness, revenge motivation, avoidance motivation, depression, happiness

INTRODUCTION

Conflicts are inevitable part of everyday human life. They often result in anger, resentment, hurt and other negative feelings creating cycles of hostility and desire for revenge. By forgiving each other people are able to overcome the negative effects conflict can have on their relationships. Forgiving can also help them move

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beyond a desire for revenge and reinstitute social ties (e.g., Fincham, 2000; McCullough et al., 1998).

There has been much debate about how forgiveness should be conceptualized. Yamhure, Thompson, and Snyder (2003, pp. 302) define forgiveness as the "framing of a perceived transgression such that one's attachment to the transgressor, transgression and sequelae of the transgression is transformed from negative to neutral or positive". Enright, Freedman, and Rique (1998, pp. 46-47) view forgiveness as a "willingness to abandon one's right to resentment, negative judgment, and indifferent behavior toward one who unjustly hurt us, while fostering the undeserved qualities of compassion, generosity, and even love toward him or her". McCullough et al. (1998) define interpersonal forgiving as the set of motivational changes whereby one becomes (a) decreasingly motivated to retaliate against an offending relationship partner, (b) decreasingly motivated to maintain estrangement from the offender, and (c) increasingly motivated by conciliation and goodwill for the offender, despite the offender's hurtful actions. When an offended person is unable to forgive his/her perception of the offense produces two motivational states; that is, (a) high motivation to avoid contact with the offending partner (avoidance motivation) and (b) high motivation to seek revenge or see harm come to the offending partner (revenge motivation).

From these definitions it is evident that by forgiveness individuals counteract or modify negative behaviors which can result in restoring benevolent and harmonious interpersonal relations with persons who offended them. McCullough, Pargament, and Thorensen (2000) state that the intraindividual, prosocial change toward a perceived offender within a specific interpersonal context the intraindividual, prosocial change toward a perceived offender within a specific interpersonal context are in common in these definitions of forgiveness have.

Currently, there is great theoretical interest in the possibility that forgiveness is involved in promoting well-being. Various models suggest that forgiveness can offer opportunities for recognizing a deeper meaning in the transgression, developing compassion for others, appreciating social support systems, and discovering a renewed sense of life purpose (Enright, Freedman, & Rique, 1998). Empirical studies suggest that forgiveness have potential benefits for physical health (for review see Worthington, Witvliet, Pietrini, & Miller, 2007), mental health (for a review see Toussaint & Webb, 2005), and well-being (Brown, 2003; Karremans, Van Lange, Ouwerkerk, & Kluwer, 2003; Karuse & Ellison, 2003).

There is no strong evidence for gender differences in forgiveness for scores across a number of forgiveness measures (Barber, Maltby, & Macaskill, 2005; Brown & Phillips, 2005). In reviewing the literature on forgiveness in group interventions, Worthington, Sandage, and Berry (2000) showed that women are no more likely to forgive than men. However, sometimes results are mixed and women have been found to score significantly higher on some measures (Walker & Gorsuch, 2002). Miller and her coworkers (Miller, Worthington, & McDaniel,

2008) conducted meta–analysis with 53 articles reporting 70 studies that addressed gender and forgiveness. The mean d was .28 indicating that females are more forgiving than males. This may be a result of gender role socialization, since men are typically encouraged to suppress most emotions, except for aggressive ones, and women are expected to respond to offenses with understanding, compassion, and empathy (Gault & Sabini, 2000; Kopper & Epperson, 1996).

But beyond the question of whether gender differences exist in levels of forgiveness is another important research question: whether gender acts as a moderator of the relationship between well-being and forgiveness. In other words, it may be the case that the relationship between well-being and forgiveness is different for women than it is for men. So, the aim of the study was to investigate the relationship between avoidance motivation and motivation to seek revenge and well-being separately for males and females.

METHOD

Participants

Participants in the study were 600 university students (300 males and 300 females) aged from 19 to 28 years. They attended University of Zagreb (Faculty of Philosophy, Faculty of Law, Faculty of Electrical Engineering and Computing, Faculty of Economy and Faculty of Kinesiology). Students were approximately evenly distributed across faculties and study years.

Procedure

Data were gathered during regular classes by trained research assistant. All students agreed to complete questionnaires.

Instruments

Transgression-Related Interpersonal Motivations Inventory (TRIM Inventory) - Forgiving was measured with the TRIM Inventory (McCullough et al., 1998). The TRIM consists of 12 items that are used to indicate the extent to which individual experiences two negative motivational states that underlie interpersonal forgiving. The revenge subscale consists of five items that assess respondents' desire to seek revenge against someone who lately committed a specific transgression against them (e.g., "I'll make him or her pay."). The avoidance subscale consists of seven items that assess respondents' desire to maintain relational distance from their transgressor (e.g., "I live as if he or she doesn't exist, isn't around). Items are rated on a 5-point Likert-type scale (1 – strongly disagree, 5 - strongly agree).

The scale was translated from English to Croatian by two independent translators. The translations were essentially the same, except for slight differences in two items which were resolved in discussion with third translator.

Since previous research has showed that avoidance and revenge motivation scales are in moderate positive correlation, in our study principal component analysis with oblimin rotation was performed. It resulted in two factors with eigenvalues greater than 1 (5.08, 2.03, .76, .65, .60 etc.). These two factors accounted for 59.26% of the total variance (see Table 1). Items saturated with first and second factor corresponded to items of revenge and avoidance subscale defined by McCullough et al. (1998). In their study principal component analysis was also used accompanied by series of structural equation models that confirmed two-factor solution.

Table 1. Items, factor loadings, communalities and Cronbach's alphas for
the Transgression-Related Interpersonal Motivations (TRIM) inventory

	Items	Factor 1	Factor 2	h
Avoidance motivation	I avoid him/her.	.87		.70
	I withdraw from him/her.	.83		.68
	I cut off the relationship with him/her.	.80		.65
	I keep as much distance between us as possible.	.79		.59
	I find it difficult to act warmly toward him/her.	.73		.58
	I live as if he/she doesn't exist, isn't around.	.71		.52
	I don't trust him/her.	.69		.52
Revenge motivation	I'll make him/her pay.		.80	.63
	I wish that something bad would happen to him/her.		.78	.61
	I want to see him/her hurt and miserable.		.76	.62
	I'm going to get even.		.74	.50
	I want him/her to get what he/she deserves.		.63	.52
	% f Total Variance	42.36	16.89	
	Cronbach's Alpha	.89	.80	

Note: Factor loadings below .30 are not shown; h - Communalities

Short Depression-Happiness Scale (SDHS, Joseph, Linley, Harwood, Lewis, & McCollam, 2004) - The SDHS consists of six items, three items measuring happiness (e.g., "I felt happy") and three reverse coded items measure depressive states (e.g., "I felt my life was meaningless"). Participants rate how frequently they lately felt the way described in the items on a four point scale (0 = never, 1 = rarely, 2 = sometimes, 3 = often).

The scale was translated from English to Croatian by two independent translators. The translations were essentially the same, except for slight differences in one item which were resolved in discussion with third translator.

In our study principal component analysis of the data with oblimin rotation resulted in two factor solution (Table 2). These two components had eigenvalues of 2.78 and 1.02 (the following being .63, .58, .50 and .48), that accounted for 63.43% of the total variance. These results are not consistent with the authors' conceptualization of the SDHS as assessing one dimension. So, the two scores, separately for depression and happiness, were computed for each subject.

Table 2. Items, factor loadings, communalities and Cronbach's Alphas
for the Short Depression-Happiness Scale

	Items	Factor 1	Factor 2	h
Depression scale	I felt cheerless.	.81		.63
	I felt that life was meaningless.	.79		.62
	I felt dissatisfied with my life	.77		.65
Happiness scale	I felt pleased with the way I am.		.84	.63
	I felt happy.		.77	.66
	I felt that life was enjoyable.		.72	.62
	% f Total Variance	46.42	17.01	
	Cronbach's Alpha	.70	.80	

Note: Factor loadings below .30 are not shown; h - communalities

RESULTS

Descriptive Statistics

Descriptive statistics and intercorrelations for the variables used in the analyses are presented in Table 3.

Avoidance motivation was generally rated higher than revenge motivation and happiness scores were higher than depression scores. Revenge and avoidance motivation were positively related, while depression scores and happiness scores were negatively related. Revenge motivation was positively correlated to depression and negatively to happiness. Avoidance motivation was positively related to depression and not significantly related to happiness.

Table 3. Intercorrelations, means and standard deviations for the variables used in the analyses

	Revenge motivation	Avoidance motivation	Depression	Happiness
Revenge motivation	-	.40**	.20**	-.11**
Avoidance motivation		-	.15**	-.04
Depression			-	-.44**
Happiness				-
M	1.95	2.98	3.28	7.38
SD	0.87	1.04	2.01	1.68

**p < .001

Gender and Age Differences

Gender and age differences in revenge/avoidance motivation and depression/ happiness are presented in Table 4. Participants were divided into two groups according to their age. Younger group included those from 18-21 years, while older group contained participants from 22 to 28 years.

Table 4. Differences in revenge/avoidance motivation and depression/happiness in relation to age and gender

	Females		Males		$F_{1,597}$		
	Younger (N=177)	Older (N=123)	Younger (N=180)	Older (N=120)	Gender	Age	Gender x age
Revenge motivation	1.86	1.89	2.10	1.97	6.31*	1.87	2.41
Avoidance motivation	2.97	2.98	3.00	2.91	0.12	0.05	0.54
Happiness	7.29	7.34	7.25	7.97	3.54	5.81*	4.64*
Depression	3.49	3.71	3.10	2.83	10.98*	0.88	1.67

*p < .05

There were no significant gender differences in avoidance motivation but males had higher results on revenge motivation. Males also had lower scores on depression, but there were no gender differences in happiness.

There were no significant age differences in avoidance motivation, revenge motivation and depression. However, older subjects had higher results on happiness (Figure 1). Significant age/gender interaction suggests that this is mainly due to the fact that older male participants were happier than younger ones.

Figure 1. Happiness in relation to age and gender
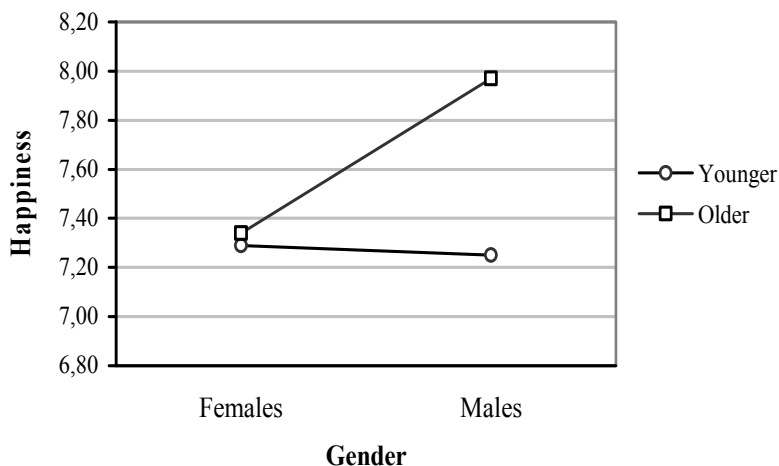
Relationship between Forgiveness and Depression/Happiness

Correlations between avoidance/revenge motivation and depression/happiness for male and female students are presented in Table 5. For male students both avoidance and revenge motivation were positively related to depression and revenge motivation was negatively related to happiness, but this relationship was rather weak. For females there was weak positive relationship between revenge motivation and depression.

Table 5. Correlations between revenge/avoidance motivation and depression/happiness for males and females

	Males		Females	
	Happiness	Depression	Happiness	Depression
Avoidance motivation	-.05	.19**	-.03	.11
Revenge motivation	-.12*	.22**	-.11	.21**

*p < .05;   **p < .001

Two hierarchical linear regression analyses were conducted, in which age, revenge and avoidance motivation were used to predict depression and happiness (Tables 6 and 7).

Table 6. Hierarchical regression analyses of age, revenge and avoidance motivation on happiness for males and females

Step	Predictor variables	Males			Females		
		Beta	R^2	ΔR^2	Beta	R^2	ΔR^2
1	Age	.23**	.05**	-	-.03	.00	-
2	Age	.22**			-.04		
	Revenge motivation	-.01			.01		
	Avoidance motivation	-.08	.06**	.01	-.11	.01	.01

**p < .001

Table 7. Hierarchical regression analyses of age, revenge and avoidance motivation on depression for males and females

Step	Predictor variables	Males			Females		
		Beta	R^2	ΔR^2	Beta	R^2	ΔR^2
1	Age	-.15*	.02*	-	.04	.00	-
2	Age	-.13*			.04		
	Revenge motivation	.13*			.20*		
	Avoidance motivation	.15*	.08**	.06**	.03	.05*	.05*

*p < .05;   **p < .001

After age was controlled, significant predictors of depression for males were both revenge and avoidance motivation, while for females only revenge motivation was significant. Those male students with higher scores on avoidance and revenge motivation were more depressed, as well as female students with higher scores on revenge motivation. For male participants, revenge and avoidance motivation explained six percent of total variance, while for females these variables explained five percent of variance.

Both for males and females neither revenge nor avoidance motivation were significant predictors of happiness.

DISCUSSION

Factor analyses of Transgression-Related Interpersonal Motivations (TRIM) Inventory replicated factor structure found by the authors (McCullough et al., 1998). Two factors were found corresponding to avoidance and revenge motivation. Avoidance motivation was generally rated higher than revenge motivation for both male and female subjects. This is in line with previous studies that also found that participants rated avoidance motivation higher then revenge motivation (McCullough, Bellah, Kilpatrick, & Johnson, 2001).

Factor analysis of Short depression/happiness scale revealed two factors corresponding to happiness and depression. This is not in line with data obtained by authors who found only one factor (Joseph at al., 2004). Our results showed different correlations of revenge and avoidance motivation with depression and happiness, so it seems useful to retain two-factor solution.

Gender and Age Differences

Gender differences were found for revenge motivation but not for avoidance motivation. Males reported stronger revenge motivation than females. This finding is not unusual. Men are typically found to be more vengeful than women (Brown, 2003; McCullough, Bellah, Kilpatrick, & Johnson, 2001). When gender difference in vengeance is found, it typically is in the direction of males scoring higher on vengeance relative to females.

So, our results support those previous studies indicating that women could be more prone to forgiving than men. These gender differences can have different causes. Men may be more drawn to Kohlberg's (1984) justice–based morality and to responses to transgressions emphasizing fighting, vengeance, or justice. Women may be more drawn to warmth–based virtues (including forgiveness), which are more in line with Gilligan's (1994) ethic of care. She proposed that females are oriented toward an ethic of care distinguished by the motivation to preserve relationships and to respond to the needs of others. Males are oriented toward a need to see justice done through the consideration of fairness and equity.

In addition to that females have frequently been found to be more religious than men (Freese, 2004; Miller & Hoffman, 1995) and forgiveness is often labeled as a religious value (McCullough & Worthington, 1999; Rye, 2005). The same results were obtained in Croatian sample of students of technical and humanistic oriented faculties (Repić, 2008).Thus, because women are more often more religious, they are likely to use their religion to promote personal forgiveness. Also, some studies have shown that empathy and emotion-oriented coping are positively related to forgiveness (Macaskill, Maltby, & Day, 2002; Zechmeister & Romero, 2002), and women are known to score higher on these variables (Gault & Sabini, 2000; Macaskill, Maltby, & Day, 2002).

Gender differences were also found for depression but not for happiness scores. Females scored higher than males on depression scale which is result often found in numerous studies (Bromberger & Matthews, 1996; Nolen-Hoelksema, Parker, & Larson, 1994). A number of studies have found that women show greater happiness than do men while others, however, have found either no differences or difference was in favor of men (Nolen-Hoeksema & Rusting, 1999). Some studies suggest that main contributors to happiness for women are marital status, education and social interaction (Di Cesare & Amori, 2006). It may be the case that our female participants are still too young for these factors to be significant for their happiness.

Previous studies showed that older individuals are more prone to forgiveness than younger ones (Girard & Mullet, 1997; Konstam, Holmes, & Levine, 2003) but this tendency was not confirmed in our study. However, it also must be noted that our participants were rather young which may contributed to weak relationship between forgiveness and well-being. Worthington, Witvliet, Pietrini, and Miller (2007) suggested that despite these positive findings about role of forgiveness in well-being that caution should be taken in generalizing results especially to a younger population.

Gender Differences in Relationship between Forgiveness and Depression/Happiness

For male students positive correlations were found between both revenge and avoidance motivation and depression. In female sample only revenge motivation was positively correlated to depression. Two regression analyses revealed similar results. For male students both revenge and avoidance motivation were significant predictors of depression explaining 6.2% of depression variance, while for females only revenge motivation was significant predictor explaining 4.6% of variance. Since both revenge and avoidance motivation indicate less forgiving it is evident that for all participants less forgiving is related to higher depression scores. Previous research also revealed that the tendency not to forgive was associated with higher depression (Macaskill, Maltby, & Day, 2002).

How can we explain the result that avoidance motivation was positively related to depression in male but not in female sample? One could argue, on the basis of these findings, that avoidance motivation is important for men in developing depressive mood, while for women this is not the case. It is known from previous research that women are more prone to avoidance and emotion-focused coping than men, while men have higher tendency for problem-oriented coping (Day & Livingstone, 2003; Matud, 2004). In the case of offence problem solving coping is often ineffective since nothing can be done so avoidance coping can be all that is left. Since men are socially less expected to use avoidance motivation than women they can interpret it as weakness which in turn can produce negative feelings.

In the case of happiness there were no significant predictors of happiness neither for males nor females. The present results cast doubt on the hypothesis that forgiving one's offenders has a beneficial effect on happiness. It seems that being prone to revenge and avoidance can be related to depression, but that does not mean that less avoidance and revenge will be necessarily related to more happiness.

Limitations of the Study

There are several limitations to the present study. It is important to note that the results are correlational and do no impute causality. It is possible that not forgiving produces depression and less happiness. But it is also possible that depressed people are less prone to forgive or happy people are more prone to do so. In a study by Orth, Berking, Walker, Meier, and Znoj (2008) results suggest that adjustment facilitates forgiveness, but not that forgiveness facilitates adjustment.

We must note that the relationship between avoidance/revenge motivation and depression/happiness in our study was rather weak. Our participants were selected sample of students who were relatively highly educated and fell within narrow range regarding financial resources and age. That could have influence on our results since some studies revealed that financial resources may provide the economic security that allows individuals to be less defensive and less motivated to seek revenge and thus more prone to forgive (Worthington & Wade, 1999). Replication of the study is needed with financially and educationally diverse populations, as well with participants of different age.

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Spolne razlike u odnosu između praštanja i depresije/sreće

Sažetak

Nesposobnost opraštanja proizvodi dva motivacijska stanja: motivaciju za osvetom i motivaciju za izbjegavanjem. Cilj ovog istraživanja bio je ispitati ulogu spola u odnosu između ove dvije vrste motivacije i dobrobiti.

U istraživanju je sudjelovalo 600 ispitanika, od toga 300 studentica i 300 studenata u dobi od 19-28 godina. Primijenjena su dva upitnika. Opraštanje je mjereno TRIM upitnikom a dobrobit kratkom Skalom depresivnosti i sreće.

Regresijske analize pokazale su da su za studente značajni prediktori depresivnosti bili i motivacija za osvetom i motivacija za izbjegavanjem, dok je kod studentica značajan prediktor bila samo motivacija za osvetom. Kada je u pitanju sreća ni motivacija za osvetom ni motivacija za izbjegavanjem nisu bili značajni prediktori. Može se zaključiti da sklonost ka neopraštanju može biti povezana s depresivnošću, ali istovremeno manja sklonost osveti i izbjegavanju nije nužno povezana s većom razinom sreće.

Ključne riječi: opraštanje, motivacija za osvetom, motivacija za izbjegavanjem, depresivnost, sreća