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Forgiveness and Interpersonal Relationships: A Nepalese Investigation

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Abstract

The present study examined the practice of forgiveness in Nepal. A model relating collectivism and forgiveness was examined. Participants ($N = 221$) completed measures of collectivism, individualism, forgiveness, conciliatory behavior, and motivations for avoidance and revenge toward the offender. Collectivism was positively related to forgiveness. Forgiveness was strongly related to conciliatory behavior and motivations for avoidance and revenge toward the offender. Decisional forgiveness was a stronger predictor of motivations for revenge than was emotional forgiveness.

(75 words)

Forgiveness and Interpersonal Relationships: A Nepalese Investigation

Forgiveness has long been a topic of conversation in both religious (McCullough & Worthington, 1999) and philosophical (Griswold, 2007) circles. Recently, however, forgiveness has also been viewed as a legitimate topic of study in psychology (for reviews, see McCullough, Pargament, & Thoresen, 2000; Worthington, 2005). The study of forgiveness has spanned several fields in psychology, including clinical psychology, health psychology, and social psychology. Social psychologists have made important contributions by examining both the social-cognitive determinants of forgiveness and the relationship between forgiveness and interpersonal behavior (e.g., Fincham, 2000; McCullough et al., 1998; McCullough, Worthington, & Rachal, 1997).

Forgiveness has been defined in various ways (see Worthington, 2005, who collected definitions from 30 researchers in a handbook). Drawing on Exline, Worthington, Hill, and McCullough (2003), we view forgiveness as two distinct but related processes. *Decisional forgiveness* is a choice to reduce negative behavior toward the offender and (if possible) restore positive behavior toward the offender. However, one can make a sincere decision to forgive yet still be emotionally unforgiving toward the offender (e.g., angry, resentful, hurt). *Emotional forgiveness* is the internal experience of replacing negative emotions with positive other-oriented emotions (e.g., empathy, love, compassion).

Recently there has been increased interest in studying forgiveness across cultures. Studies have shown that forgiveness differs across a variety of cultures (e.g., Fu, Watkins, & Hui, 2004; Paz, Neto, & Mullet, 2008; Suwartono, Prawasti, & Mullet, 2007). In previous research on forgiveness in Nepal, Watkins, and Regmi (2004) found non-significant correlations between forgiveness and internal personality variables such as neuroticism and agreeableness. These internal personality variables have been found to be important predictors of forgiveness, at least among North American respondents (McCullough, 2001).

Watkins and Regmi suggested that perhaps in a collectivistic culture such as Nepal, forgiveness may be more related to social psychological variables, such as group harmony and the importance of personal relationships, than to internal personality variables. We have labeled Nepal a collectivistic nation based on prior research that has compared levels of collectivism between people from the United States of America and other nations (Oyserman, Coon, & Kemmelmeier, 2002).

Hook, Worthington, and Utsey (in press) have recently proposed a theoretical model of collectivism and forgiveness. In this model, they define collectivistic forgiveness as a decision to forgive that is motivated primarily by maintenance or restoration of social harmony and occurs within a context that values reconciliation and relational repair. There are two main propositions to the model. First, although people with a collectivistic worldview understand forgiveness to be distinct from reconciliation, they are likely to view forgiveness within the context of reconciliation, relational repair, and restoring social harmony. Second, forgiveness among people with a collectivistic worldview is likely to be focused on making a decision to forgive that aims to change behavior towards the offender rather than on achieving complete emotional forgiveness.

In the present study, we tested the two propositions of the hypothesized model in a sample from Nepal. Furthermore, we directly measured level of collectivism and individualism in our sample. Much of the past cross-cultural research on individualism, collectivism, and forgiveness was characterized by a methodological weakness. Researchers have compared two cultures on forgiveness, and have concluded that these differences represent differences in individualism and collectivism without actually measuring these variables. In the present study, we follow the example of Neto and Mullet (2004) and directly measure collectivism and individualism.

Our first hypothesis was that collectivism would be positively related to forgiveness,

and individualism would be negatively related to forgiveness. This has been found in prior research that has directly measured collectivism, individualism, and forgiveness (Neto & Mullet, 2004). However, we hypothesized that, consistent with the Hook et al. (in press) model, the relationship between collectivism and forgiveness would be more nuanced. We hypothesized that collectivism would be positively related to decisional forgiveness, but unrelated to emotional forgiveness. In other words, participants who were higher in collectivism would be more likely to make a decision to forgive the offender, but would not be more likely to experience emotional forgiveness of the offender.

Our second hypothesis was that decisional and emotional forgiveness would be related to conciliatory behavior and motivations for future behavior with the offender. Recall one of the main propositions of the Hook et al. (in press) model was that collectivists would view forgiveness within the context of reconciliation and relational repair. Based on this, we hypothesized that forgiveness would be related to conciliatory behavior and motivations for future behavior with the offender. Furthermore, we hypothesized that because making a decision to forgive is more important to maintaining social harmony, decisional forgiveness would be a stronger predictor of conciliatory behavior and motivations for future behavior than would emotional forgiveness.

Method

Participants

Participants were 221 undergraduate college students from Nepal. Participants were 59.6% male and 40.4% female. 83.6% of participants were age 25 or younger, and 16.4% of participants were age 26 or older.

Instruments

Individualism and collectivism. Individualism and collectivism were measured by the Auckland Individualism and Collectivism Scale (AICS; Shulruf, in press; Shulruf, Hattie, &

Dixon, 2007). The AICS consists of 26 items that measure one's level of individualism and collectivism. Participants indicate how often they think or behave in the way described by each item on a 6-point rating scale from 1 = *never or almost never* to 6 = *always*. The AICS has five subscales. Two subscales are associated with collectivism: advice (seeking advice from people close to one, 7 items; e.g., Before making a major decision I seek advice from people close to me) and harmony (seeking to avoid conflict, 4 items; e.g., Even when I strongly disagree with group members, I avoid an argument). Three subscales are associated with individualism: competitiveness (striving for personal goals is one's primary interest, 7 items; e.g., I define myself as a competitive person), uniqueness (distinction of the self from the other, 4 items; e.g., I enjoy being unique and different from others), and responsibility (acknowledging one's responsibility for one's actions, 4 items; e.g., I consult with superiors on work-related matters). There is evidence for the reliability of the scores on each of the subscales of the AICS (Shulruf; Shulruf et al.).

For the current sample in Nepal, the Cronbach's alpha coefficients for the harmony, uniqueness, and responsibility subscales of the AICS were unacceptably low. Examination of the inter-item correlations among scale items revealed low or inconsistent correlations between scale items. Thus, for the current study, only the collectivism-advice and individualism-competitiveness subscales were used. The Cronbach's alphas were .68 (95% CI = .61-.74) for the collectivism-advice subscale and .66 (95% CI = .58-.72) for the individualism-competitiveness subscale.

Decisional forgiveness. Decisional forgiveness of a person on a target offense was measured by the Decisional Forgiveness Scale (DFS, Worthington, Hook, Utsey, Williams, & Neil, 2007). The DFS consists of eight items that measure the degree to which one has made a decision to forgive someone of a specific offense. Participants indicate their agreement with each item on a 5-point rating scale from 1 = *strongly disagree* to 5 = *strongly agree*. The DFS

has two 4-item subscales, one indicating prosocial intentions toward the offender (e.g., If I see him or her, I will act friendly), and one indicating the inhibition of harmful intentions toward the offender (e.g., I will try to get back at him or her [reverse scored to indicate forgiveness]). Scores on the DFS had Cronbach's alpha coefficients ranging from .82 to .86 for the Full Scale, .78 to .83 for the Prosocial Intentions subscale, and .82 to .86 for the Inhibition of Harmful Intentions subscale (Worthington et al.). The 3-week temporal stability coefficient was .73 for the Full Scale, .72 for the Prosocial Intentions subscale, and .68 for the Inhibition of Harmful Intentions subscale (Worthington et al.). Scores on the DFS also showed evidence of construct validity and were correlated with other measures of state forgiveness, trait forgivingness, forgiveness-related constructs such as empathy and anger, and a behavioral measure of forgiveness (Worthington et al.).

For the current sample in Nepal, the Cronbach's alpha coefficients for the DFS and subscales were unacceptably low. Examination of the inter-item correlations among scale items revealed that participants were not interpreting some items consistently. This was especially true for the Inhibition of Harmful Intentions subscale, which included items mostly involving revenge or "getting back" at the offender, the meaning of which were apparently not clearly understood in Nepalese culture. To achieve a scale that was consistent and culture-sensitive, we dropped the Inhibition of Harmful Intentions subscale, as well as one item from the Prosocial Intentions subscale. The revised 3-item Prosocial Intentions subscale of the DFS had a Cronbach's alpha coefficient of .54 (95% CI = .43-.64).

Emotional forgiveness. Emotional forgiveness of a person on a target offense was measured by the Emotional Forgiveness Scale (EFS, Worthington et al., 2007). The EFS consists of eight items that measure the degree to which one has experienced emotional forgiveness and peace for a specific offense. Participants indicate their agreement with each item on a 5-point rating scale from 1 = *strongly disagree* to 5 = *strongly agree*. The EFS has

two 4-item subscales, one indicating the presence of positive emotions toward the offender (e.g., I feel sympathy toward him or her), and one indicating the reduction of negative emotions toward the offender (e.g., I no longer feel upset when I think of him or her). Scores on the EFS had Cronbach's alpha coefficients ranging from .69 to .83 for the Full Scale, .80 to .85 for the Presence of Positive Emotion subscale, and .76 to .79 for the Reduction of Negative Emotion subscale (Worthington et al.). The 3-week temporal stability coefficient was .73 for the Full Scale, .81 for the Presence of Positive Emotion subscale, and .61 for the Reduction of Negative Emotion subscale (Worthington et al.). Scores on the EFS also showed evidence of construct validity and were correlated with other measures of state forgiveness, trait forgivingness, forgiveness-related constructs such as empathy, rumination, anger, and a behavioral measure of forgiveness (Worthington et al.).

For the current sample, the Cronbach's alpha coefficient for the Presence of Positive Emotion subscale was .76 (95% CI = .70-.81). However, the Cronbach's alpha coefficient for the Reduction of Negative Emotion subscale was unacceptably low. Examination of the inter-item correlations among scale items revealed that participants were also not interpreting some items on that subscale consistently. We dropped the Reduction of Negative Emotion subscale and only analyzed the Presence of Positive Emotion subscale of the EFS.

Avoidance and revenge motivations. Avoidance and revenge motivations toward the offender were measured using the Transgression-Related Interpersonal Motivations Inventory (TRIM; McCullough et al., 1998). The TRIM consists of 12 items that measure avoidance motivations (e.g., I'd keep as much distance between us as possible) and revenge motivations (e.g., I wish that something bad would happen to him/her) toward an offender. Participants indicate their motivations toward the person who hurt them on a 5-point rating scale from 1 = *strongly disagree* to 5 = *strongly agree*. Scores on the TRIM have been shown to have Cronbach's alphas ranging from .84 to .93 for the avoidance and revenge subscales

(McCullough et al.). Estimated three-week temporal stability in a sample of people who had difficulty forgiving ranged from .79 to .86 for the avoidance and revenge subscales

(McCullough et al.). Estimated eight-week temporal stability in a sample of recent victims ranged from .44 to .53 for the avoidance and revenge subscales (McCullough et al.). Scores on the TRIM have shown evidence of construct validity, and they have been found to be positively correlated with measures of forgiveness, degree of hurtfulness of transgression, relationship satisfaction, and commitment (McCullough et al.).

For the current sample, the Cronbach's alpha coefficient for the avoidance subscale of the TRIM was .74 (95% CI = .68-.79). However, the Cronbach's alpha coefficient for the revenge subscale of the TRIM was unacceptably low. Examination of the inter-item correlations among scale items revealed that participants were not interpreting some of the revenge-oriented items consistently. Similar to the problems with the Inhibition of Negative Intention subscale of the DFS, the problematic items on the revenge subscale of the TRIM related to items such as "I'll make him or her pay," which seemed difficult to understand in Nepalese cultural context. We retained two items of the revenge subscale, which had a Cronbach's alpha coefficient of .60 (95% CI = .48-.70).

Conciliatory behavior. This measure consisted of six items that measured the degree to which participants had engaged in behaviors that indicated attempts at reconciliation with the offender (e.g., I took steps toward reconciliation: wrote him/her, called him/her, expressed love, showed concern, etc.). Participants indicate their agreement with each item on a 5-point rating scale from 1 = *strongly disagree* to 5 = *strongly agree*. Items measuring conciliatory behavior have been used in previous forgiveness research (e.g., McCullough et al., 1997). For the current sample, the Cronbach's alpha coefficient for this scale was .62 (95% CI = .53-.69).

Procedure

Participants were recruited from undergraduate classes. Participants read a consent form that explained the procedures of the study and their rights as a participant, and they indicated consent to participate. They thought about someone who had hurt or offended them and wrote a summary of the transgression. Participants then completed questionnaires. All items were presented in the original English version as English is the medium of instruction at the university.

Results

Prior to conducting the primary statistical analyses, the data were checked for missing data, outliers, and normality. Three cases had large amounts of missing data and were deleted from the analysis. After these cases were deleted, there was a small amount of additional missing data (less than 3% per item). Mean substitution was used to correct for missing data. Items on each scale were then summed to create a total scale score for each variable. The data were checked for outliers by examining the standardized values for each variable. There were a small number of outliers with standardized scores above 3 or below -3 (less than 1% per variable). However, the outliers fell within the ranges of expected values, and thus are thought to represent true responses, and were retained in subsequent analyses. Examination of the skewness and kurtosis statistics for each variable revealed no problems with normality.

We computed means, standard deviations, and Pearson's correlation coefficients (see Table 1). Our first hypothesis was that collectivism would be positively related to forgiveness, and individualism would be negatively related to forgiveness. Furthermore, we hypothesized that collectivism would be positively related to decisional forgiveness, but unrelated to emotional forgiveness. This hypothesis was partially supported. Collectivism was positively related to decisional forgiveness, $r(217) = .14, p < .05$, and unrelated to emotional forgiveness, $r(217) = .08, p = .23$. However, a *t*-test that tested the difference between dependent correlations revealed that the difference between these correlations was not

significant, $t(215) = .68, p = .50$. Individualism was not related to decisional or emotional forgiveness.

Our second hypothesis was that decisional and emotional forgiveness would be related to conciliatory behavior and motivations for future behavior with the offender. Furthermore, we hypothesized that, based on the review of prior research studies summarized in the model by Hook et al. (in press), decisional forgiveness would be a stronger predictor of conciliatory behavior and motivations than would emotional forgiveness. This hypothesis was tested with three multiple regression analyses with conciliatory behavior, avoidance motivations, and revenge motivations as the criterion variables, and decisional and emotional forgiveness as the predictor variables in each analysis. This hypothesis was partially supported. Decisional and emotional forgiveness together significantly predicted conciliatory behavior, avoidance motivations, and revenge motivations toward the offender (see Table 2). For conciliatory behavior, both decisional and emotional forgiveness were significant predictors. Although the beta was larger for decisional forgiveness ($\beta = .30$) than for emotional forgiveness ($\beta = .19$), this difference was not significant, $t(215) = 1.31, p = .19$. Similarly, for avoidance motivations, both decisional and emotional forgiveness were significant predictors. Although the beta was larger for decisional forgiveness ($\beta = -.35$) than for emotional forgiveness ($\beta = -.26$), this difference was not significant, $t(215) = 1.20, p = .23$. For revenge motivations, decisional forgiveness was a significant predictor ($\beta = -.32$), but emotional forgiveness was not ($\beta = -.02$), as hypothesized. A test for the significance of the difference between beta weights revealed that decisional forgiveness was a stronger predictor of revenge motivations than emotional forgiveness, $t(215) = 3.78, p < .01$.

Discussion

The present study describes the practice of forgiveness in Nepalese culture. It builds on previous research that has examined the predictors of forgiveness in Nepal (Watkins &

Regmi, 2004). This study also adds to the growing literature that has examined the ways in which having a collectivistic worldview affects the understanding and practice of forgiveness. Specifically, this study tested aspects of a hypothesized model of collectivism and forgiveness in a sample from Nepal (Hook et al., in press). The model received partial support. Having a collectivistic worldview was related to making a decision to forgive. Forgiveness was strongly related to conciliatory behavior and motivations for avoidance and revenge behavior with the offender. For revenge motivations, lack of decisional forgiveness was a stronger predictor than was failure to experience emotional forgiveness.

This was one of the first studies to explicitly examine the relationships between collectivism, decisional forgiveness, and emotional forgiveness in a collectivistic culture. These findings relate to past theory that relates a collectivistic worldview more with making a decision to forgive to restore social harmony and less with complete emotional forgiveness (Hook et al., in press). The finding that forgiveness was related to conciliatory behavior and motivations for avoidance and revenge behavior was related to past theory and research that has linked forgiveness in a collectivistic culture with reconciliation and relational repair (Hook et al., in press; Sandage & Wiens, 2001; Sandage & Williamson, 2005; Sigmund, 1999). At least for members of this Nepalese culture, forgiveness was closely linked with behaviors that attempted to reconcile with the offender.

There are several limitations to the present study. First, the study used a cross-sectional, correlational design. Although we analyzed variables in the order we think is most consistent with the dominant theories of forgiveness (e.g., forgiveness leads to conciliatory behavior), it is impossible to infer causality with the design of our study. Second, and importantly, there were several measurement issues in the present study. Although the suitability of items was checked by members of the research team familiar with Nepalese culture, some scales had reliability coefficients that were unacceptably low. Items on some

scales had to be dropped to create scales that were suitable for analysis. Even in the final versions of the scales, the alphas were lower than are usually found in United States college samples (e.g., our alphas were between .54 and .76). DeVellis (2003) suggested that .8 was the ideal alpha, with .6 being weak and .5 being questionable. These low alphas undoubtedly lowered the correlations and the power to detect differences. This is not an uncommon finding in cross-cultural research (Byrne et al., 2009). This also limited the questions that could be asked in the present study. For example, only the positive subscales of decisional and emotional forgiveness were used in the present study. It could be that collectivism affects the positive and negative aspects of forgiveness differently; questions such as these were not able to be answered given the problematic measurement issues. Furthermore, it is worth considering that in the collectivistic Nepalese culture, revenge is simply not a viable option. Thus, the failure of the revenge and inhibition of negative behaviors to cohere as scales may reflect a genuine finding itself rather than a methodological weakness. Third, the sample was homogenous, consisting of all Nepalese college students.

There are several areas for future research. First, more work must be done to ensure that forgiveness measures are appropriate for use within the Nepalese cultural context using focus groups. Items containing largely United States colloquialisms (e.g., payback) could be replaced with words familiar to Nepalese culture or direct tests on revenge motives could be made. Second, these findings could be replicated using a different population (e.g., Nepalese adults rather than college students; or rural rather than urban settings). Finally, it would be interesting to compare levels of decisional and emotional forgiveness between members of a collectivistic culture such as Nepal with an individualistic culture such as the United States.

Forgiveness is an important way for individuals and groups to heal from interpersonal hurts and offenses. It has become an important area of study in the field of psychology. It is important to study forgiveness within its cultural context. The present study adds to the small

but growing literature that has examined forgiveness in Nepal and other collectivistic cultures.

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Table 1

Means, Standard Deviations, and Correlations for all Variables

Variable	M	SD	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
1. Collectivism Advice	31.87	6.15	-						
2. Individualism Compete	31.47	6.34	.32**	-					
3. Decisional Forgive Pos	10.80	2.61	.14*	.07	-				
4. Emotional Forgive Pos	12.02	3.85	.08	-.08	.31**	-			
5. Avoidance Motivations	20.51	6.32	-.03	.07	-.43**	-.37**	-		
6. Revenge Motivations	4.51	2.37	-.01	-.14*	-.33**	-.12	.18**	-	
7. Conciliatory Behavior	20.48	4.87	.02	.04	.36**	.29**	-.16*	-.17*	-

Note: * $p < .05$; ** $p < .01$

Table 2

Conciliatory Behavior, Avoidance Motivations, and Revenge Motivations Regressed on Decisional and Emotional Forgiveness

Variables	B	SE B	95% CI	β	R²
Conciliatory Behavior					.16**
Decisional Forgiveness	.55	.12	.31, .79	.30**	
Emotional Forgiveness	.25	.08	.08, .41	.19**	
Avoidance Motivations					.24**
Decisional Forgiveness	-.84	.15	-1.14, -.54	-.35**	
Emotional Forgiveness	-.43	.10	-.63, -.22	-.26**	
Revenge Motivations					.11**
Decisional Forgiveness	-.29	.06	-.41, -.17	-.32**	
Emotional Forgiveness	-.01	.04	-.09, .07	-.02	

Note. CI = confidence interval

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