

Submitted: September 14, 2017

First Revision: April 2, 2018

Accepted: July 2, 2018

### **TAKING RESPONSIBILITY FOR AN OFFENSE: BEING FORGIVEN ENCOURAGES MORE PERSONAL RESPONSIBILITY, MORE EMPATHY FOR THE VICTIM, AND LESS VICTIM BLAME**

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#### **ABSTRACT**

*This paper explores the effects of being forgiven. In study one, participants recalled times they were forgiven and times they were not forgiven. In study two, participants imagined scenarios in which they were either forgiven or not forgiven. Participants with relatively low self-esteem empathized more with the victim, took more responsibility, blamed the victim less, and reported more reconciliation behaviors if they were forgiven than if they were not forgiven. We suggest that being forgiven signals to offenders that they are accepted as moral persons thereby making it less likely that they would externalize blame as a self-protection strategy.*

#### **INTRODUCTION**

Research on interpersonal forgiveness has proliferated over the last few decades. Much of the research has focused on the antecedents of forgiving, the psychological and physical benefits of forgiving, and the consequences of forgiveness on the relationship (Fehr, Gelfand, and Nag, 2010; McCullough, Root, Tabak, and Witvliet, 2009; Riek and Mania, 2012). Many fewer studies have examined the effects of being forgiven on the offender, which is the focus of our study.

There is general agreement that true forgiveness entails an intrapersonal, pro-social motivational change toward the offender such that the victim becomes less vengeful, less avoidant, or more benevolent toward the offending party (Enright, Freedman, and Rique, 1998; McCullough, Worthington and Rachal, 1997; McCullough, 2000; McCullough, Pargament, and Thoresen, 2000; Wenzel, Turner, and Okimoto, 2010; Zechmeister and Romero, 2002). One of the strongest predictors of forgiveness is receiving an apology (Fehr, et al., 2010; Riek and Mania, 2012).

The needs-based model of reconciliation (Shnabel and Nadler, 2008; 2010) offers an explanation for why apologies promote forgiveness. According to this model, being victimized robs the person of a sense of power and control. Apologies address the victim's psychological need for power by humbling the offender and shifting the power to the victim who decides whether or not to forgive. Research confirms that victims are more likely to reconcile with offenders if their psychological need for power is satisfied (Shnabel and Nadler, 2008, 2010).

In contrast to the victim's experience, the needs-based model of reconciliation posits that the offender is likely to experience shame and thoughts of unworthiness. Hence, harming another person threatens the offender's need to be accepted as a moral person. If the need for acceptance is unmet, reconciliation is unlikely. This model is consistent with the theorizing of Exline and Baumeister (2000) who suggest that offenders often justify their action, minimize the harm created by their actions, behave aggressively, and deflect blame onto others as a way to shield themselves from shame. In fact, a recent longitudinal study of jail inmates (Tangney, Stuewig, and Martinex, 2014) found that shame-proneness was a strong predictor of externalizing blame, which in turn predicted higher rates of recidivism.

Being forgiven for one's offense, however, may reduce defensiveness by signaling to offenders that the victim understands why they may have acted as they did. This allows offenders to feel that even though they broke a moral code, they are still accepted as part of the moral community. The act of forgiveness, therefore, may meet the offender's need for acceptance, which should encourage the offender to engage in conciliatory and other pro-social behavior. In contrast, if offenders are not forgiven, their need to be accepted as a moral person remains unmet and the shame they feel for harming another person may encourage psychological defenses such as justifying one's actions, minimizing the harm, and blaming the victim (Exline, Worthington, Hill, and McCullough, 2003; Zechmeister and Romero, 2002).

Research by Struthers, Eaton, Shirvani, Georghiou, and Edell (2008) finds some support for this reasoning. In one study, experimenters rigged a scenario so that participants ("tutors") provided inaccurate information to a "virtual student" who consequently failed at a task. When tutors received a communication from the virtual student indicating forgiveness, their evaluation of the student was more positive than when the student held a grudge. In another study, participants were instructed to imagine a scene in which their poor performance cost a co-worker a promotion. When the co-worker forgave the participant, the participant self-reported more shame and more motivation to reconcile.

The present research predicts that when offenders are forgiven, they will empathize more with the victim, take more responsibility for the offense, blame the victim less, and engage in more reconciliation behaviors than those who are not forgiven.

Furthermore, we predict that those with relatively low self-esteem will be more affected by forgiveness. Those with high self-esteem generally feel accepted and included by others and so may not be as threatened when they are not forgiven by a friend. In contrast, those with low self-esteem generally feel less accepted by others (Leary, Tambor, Terdal, and Downs, 1995) and, consequently, may feel particularly threatened when they are not forgiven. This reasoning is

consistent with sociometer theory that posits that self-esteem acts as a buffer against feelings of social exclusion (Leary and Baumeister, 2000).

We test the first hypothesis using both a correlational (study one) and experimental (study two) method. Study two also tests the second hypothesis.

## **STUDY ONE**

### **Method**

Fifty-eight university students (42 women and 16 men) enrolled in a general psychology class participated in exchange for class credit. They ranged in age from 18-22. Forty-nine were white and nine were of other races.

All data were collected in a laboratory setting. We told participants that the purpose of the study was “to obtain a better understanding of college students’ reactions to offending, harming or hurting another person.” Participants received a packet of materials that they worked through at their own pace.

Participants were asked to recall two incidents in which they harmed a friend emotionally, one for which they were forgiven and one for which they were not forgiven. They were instructed that “common examples of such events include spreading a rumor, breaking a promise, stealing, lying, or excluding a friend from a social activity.” Half of the participants were first asked to recall an incident in which their friend forgave them. The other half first recalled an incident for which they were not forgiven. The order participants received was randomly determined and both orders occurred at each of the experimental sessions.

Directly after recalling an incident, participants were asked to write about the event emphasizing what they did that hurt their friend and how they knew they were forgiven or not forgiven. They then completed a manipulation check in which they indicated how much they think their friend forgave them. Next, they were instructed to write about the effects their actions had on the person and indicate their empathy by completing the five-item Emotional Response Questionnaire (Batson, Fultz, & Schoenrade, 1987) on which they rated how much sympathy, compassion, soft-heartedness, tenderness and warmth they feel toward their friend when thinking about the incident. They then wrote about what caused the event including why it happened, prior events leading up to the incident, and their reasoning for acting as they did. Next, they completed measures of personal responsibility and victim-blame created by the authors (see Appendix). All measures were 11-point scales (0=not at all and 10=very much).

Most of the events recalled involved excluding a friend from activities and spreading rumors, and each was recalled equally often in both the forgiveness and non-forgiveness conditions.

### **Results**

The dependent measures of empathy, victim blame, and personal responsibility all have good internal reliability. See Tables 1 and 2 for alphas and inter-correlations among the variables.

Table 1

Cronbach Alphas, Correlations with Severity Ratings, and Inter-correlations among Dependent Variables in Forgiveness Condition

Variables	2	3	4
1. Severity	-.04	.19	-.03
2. Empathy (alpha=.93)		.55*	-.22
3. Personal Responsibility (alpha=.81)			-.38*
4. Victim Blame (alpha=.83)			

\* $p < .01$

Table 2

Cronbach Alphas, Correlations with Severity Ratings, and Inter-correlations among Dependent Variables in Non-Forgiveness Condition

Variables	2	3	4
1. Severity	.16	.00	-.03
2. Empathy (alpha=.96)		.57*	-.38*
3. Personal Responsibility (alpha=.75)			-.55*
4. Victim Blame (alpha=.82)			

\* $p < .01$

A repeated measures t-test demonstrates that the manipulation was effective. When participants recalled an incident for which they were forgiven, they indicated that their friend forgave them more ( $M=8.82$ ,  $SD=1.48$ ) than when they recalled an incident for which they were not forgiven ( $M=3.04$ ,  $SD=2.31$ ),  $t(57)=15.80$ ,  $p < .001$ ,  $d=2.98$ .

In order to determine whether the severity of the incidents for which participants were forgiven varied from the severity of the incidents for which participants were not forgiven, two student researchers, blind to condition, rated the severity of each incident on 7-point scales. Inter-rater reliability was high for both the forgiven incidents ( $r=.80$ ,  $p < .001$ ) and the non-forgiven incidents ( $r=.80$ ,  $p < .001$ ). After averaging the severity ratings for each incident, we computed a repeated measures t-test to determine whether there was a difference between the forgiven and the non-forgiven conditions. This t-test was not significant,  $t(57)=.49$ ,  $p > .10$ . Severity ratings for the forgiven incidents are similar ( $M=4.03$ ,  $SD=1.77$ ) to those for the non-forgiven incidents ( $M=3.90$ ,  $SD=1.59$ ). We also ran Pearson correlations to see if severity ratings correlated significantly with any of the dependent measures. None of the correlations is statistically significant (see Tables 1 and 2). Therefore, we conclude that the severity of the incident is not confounded with whether the incident was forgiven or not.

Repeated-measures t-tests yielded significant results on all three dependent measures.

Participants reported that they empathized more with their victim when they were forgiven ( $M=6.58$ ,  $SD=2.42$ ) than when they were not forgiven ( $M=3.94$ ,  $SD=2.83$ ),  $t(57)=6.08$ ,  $p < .001$ ,  $d=1.00$ . Participants also took more responsibility when they were forgiven ( $M=7.04$ ,  $SD=1.67$ ) than when they were not forgiven ( $M=5.90$ ,  $SD=1.90$ ),  $t(57)=3.83$ ,  $p < .001$ ,  $d=0.64$ . Finally, participants blamed their friend less when they were forgiven ( $M=2.91$ ,  $SD=3.04$ ) than when they were not forgiven ( $M=4.39$ ,  $SD=3.25$ ),  $t(57)=-2.59$ ,  $p=.01$ ,  $d=-0.47$ .

## STUDY TWO

### Method

Forty-four female and 36 male undergraduates participated in exchange for class credit. All were between the ages of 18 and 22. Sixty-four participants self-reported as white, four as black, eight as Asian, one as Latino, and three as other.

Data were collected in a laboratory setting using the Qualtrics online survey tool. We told participants that the purpose of the study was “to obtain a better understanding of college students’ reactions to imagined situations that involve hurting another person.” They first completed the Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale (Rosenberg, 1965). They were then randomly assigned to read and reflect on a hypothetical scenario in which they were forgiven or not forgiven for harming a friend by excluding them from an activity.

The scenario begins: “You and your new friend from class, Sam, made plans to go out together on Saturday night. As you are getting ready with your roommate Alex, you realize it is getting close to the time you and Sam said you would meet up. You text Sam asking if they’re ready to go but you get no response. After waiting 20 minutes, Alex says, ‘Wow! This is a change... it’s usually you who is running late! Should we go check on Sam?’ You send Sam another text and you still get no response, so you say, ‘I don’t know where Sam is and we’ve been waiting a long time, let’s just go.’ You both head to the party together, without Sam. An hour later, you get a text from Sam asking where you are but you’re having so much fun that you don’t answer.” At this point in the narrative, participants are asked to write their thoughts about what they did and how they think their actions affected their friend. Participants then resume reading the scenario, which continues: “The next day, you see Sam in the cafeteria. Sam comes over and asks what happened last night, and you notice that Sam is upset. You apologize and explain that you waited for quite awhile.” In the forgiven condition, the scenario continues: “Although still hurt, Sam accepts your apology and you make plans to have lunch later that week.” In the non-forgiven condition, the scenario continues: “Sam responds, ‘that is not okay. I’m done with you.’” Participants were then instructed to write their thoughts about Sam’s reaction.

Finally, participants completed the same measure of empathy as in study one, and measures of personal responsibility, victim blame, and reconciliation (see Appendix). We modified the personal responsibility and the victim blame measures used in study one to emphasize the target of the participant’s actions (e.g., “I am responsible for hurting *Sam’s* feelings” and “*Sam* could have avoided the situation”). We also included a manipulation check by asking participants how much they thought Sam forgave them and asked participants to indicate how well they could relate to the scenario. All measures were 11-point scales (0=not at all and 10=very much).

### Results

The self-esteem measure and the dependent measures of empathy, victim blame, personal responsibility, and reconciliation all have good internal reliability. See Table 3 for alphas and inter-correlations among the variables.

Table 3  
Cronbach Alphas and Inter-correlations among Dependent Variables

Variables	2	3	4
1. Empathy (alpha=.96)	.50*	-.47*	.47*
2. Personal Responsibility (alpha=.94)		-.71*	.58*
3. Victim Blame (alpha=.82)			-.45*
4. Reconciliation (alpha=.94)			

\* $p < .01$

Participants indicated that they could relate fairly well to the scenario, and this did not differ by whether they imagined being forgiven ( $M=6.76$ ,  $SD=2.05$ ) or not forgiven ( $M=5.97$ ,  $SD=2.66$ ),  $t(78)=1.48$ ,  $p=.14$ . The manipulation was successful in that participants in the forgiven condition ( $M=6.20$ ,  $SD=1.86$ ) indicated that they were more forgiven than did those in the non-forgiven condition ( $M=1.59$ ,  $SD=1.98$ ),  $t(78)=10.72$ ,  $p<.001$ ,  $d=2.40$ . Participants' average self-esteem was high ( $Mdn=4.1$ ; range=1-5). Those who scored at or above the median were grouped as "high self-esteem" and those who fell below the median were grouped as "low self-esteem." This resulted in four conditions: Forgiven/low self-esteem ( $n=24$ ), forgiven/high self-esteem ( $n=17$ ), not forgiven/low self-esteem ( $n=15$ ), not forgiven/high self-esteem ( $n=24$ ). Two-way ANOVAs were then computed to test the hypotheses.

Those in the forgiven condition expressed greater empathy than those in the non-forgiven condition,  $F(1,76)=22.16$ ,  $p<.001$ , but this effect was qualified by the predicted two-way interaction,  $F(1,76)=5.23$ ,  $p=.025$ . Among participants with low self-esteem, those who were forgiven expressed greater empathy ( $M=5.70$ ,  $SD=1.90$ ) than those who were not forgiven ( $M=2.68$ ,  $SD=1.35$ ),  $t(37)=5.36$ ,  $p<.001$ ,  $d=1.83$ . In contrast, among participants with high self-esteem, whether the subject was forgiven ( $M=4.41$ ,  $SD=1.99$ ) or not ( $M=3.37$ ,  $SD=2.08$ ) did not significantly impact ratings of empathy,  $t(39)=1.63$ ,  $p=.12$ ,  $d=.52$ . No main effect was found for self-esteem on the empathy measure,  $F(1,76)=.49$ .

A significant main effect of self-esteem emerged on the personal responsibility measure,  $F(1, 76)=4.32$ ,  $p=.04$ , with low self-esteem participants expressing more personal responsibility ( $M=5.51$ ,  $SD=2.18$ ) than those with high self-esteem ( $M=4.23$ ,  $SD=2.50$ ). Although the interaction was not significant,  $F(1,76)=2.24$ ,  $p=.14$ , a priori contrasts revealed that participants with low self-esteem expressed more responsibility if they were forgiven ( $M=6.11$ ,  $SD=2.27$ ) than if they were not forgiven ( $M=4.55$ ,  $SD=1.69$ ),  $t(37)=2.28$ ,  $p=.03$ ,  $d=.78$ . In contrast, among subjects with high self-esteem, whether they were forgiven ( $M=4.21$ ,  $SD=2.59$ ) or not ( $M=4.24$ ,  $SD=2.50$ ) was unrelated to how much responsibility they expressed,  $t<1$ . The main effect for condition on responsibility was not significant,  $F(1,76)=2.06$ ,  $p=.16$ ,  $d=.40$ .

Participants with low self-esteem expressed less victim blame than those with high self-esteem,  $F(1,76)=4.02$ ,  $p=.04$ , but this effect was qualified by the marginally significant two-way interaction,  $F(1,76)=3.53$ ,  $p=.06$ , and a priori contrasts. Among low self-esteem participants, those who were forgiven expressed less victim blame ( $M=5.48$ ,  $SD=1.69$ ) than those who were not forgiven ( $M=6.85$ ,  $SD=1.51$ ),  $t(37)=-2.56$ ,  $p=.02$ ,  $d=-.85$ . In contrast, among high self-esteem participants, whether the subject was forgiven ( $M=7.05$ ,  $SD=1.76$ ) or not ( $M=6.94$ ,  $SD=1.83$ ) did

not impact ratings of victim blame,  $t < 1$ . The main effect for condition on victim blame was not significant,  $F(1,76)=2.59$ ,  $p=.11$ ,  $d=-.44$ .

A marginally significant interaction effect emerged on the reconciliation measure,  $F(1,76)=3.57$ ,  $p=.06$ . A priori contrasts revealed that participants with low self-esteem expressed greater intention to engage in reconciliatory behaviors when they were forgiven ( $M=6.84$ ,  $SD=1.71$ ) than when they were not forgiven ( $M=5.27$ ,  $SD=1.90$ ),  $t(37)=2.69$ ,  $p=.01$ ,  $d=.87$ . In contrast, among participants with high self-esteem, whether the subject was forgiven ( $M=5.85$ ,  $SD=2.43$ ) or not ( $M=6.14$ ,  $SD=2.47$ ) did not impact ratings of reconciliation,  $t < 1$ . The main effect for condition on reconciliation was not significant,  $F(1,76)=1.73$ ,  $p=.19$ ,  $d=.29$ . Likewise, there was no main effect for self-esteem,  $F < 1$ .

## DISCUSSION

This set of studies supports our hypotheses. Study one found that participants had greater empathy for the victim, took more responsibility for the harm inflicted, and blamed the victim less when they recalled an incident in which they were forgiven compared to one in which they were not forgiven. A strength of this study is that participants reported on actual events that happened to them. A weakness, however, is that the study is correlational and therefore is unable to demonstrate cause and effect. It's possible that victims forgave participants when participants showed greater empathy and took more personal responsibility rather than participants becoming more empathic and taking more responsibility when they were forgiven. Study two allows for causal inference by employing an experimental design in which participants were randomly assigned to imagine a scenario in which they were forgiven or not forgiven. This study found that participants with relatively low self-esteem who imagined being forgiven compared to those who imagined that they were not forgiven, had more empathy, took more responsibility, blamed the victim less, and indicated that they would engage in more reconciliation behaviors. As predicted, those with high self-esteem (greater than 4.1 on a 5-point scale) were not affected by the forgiveness manipulation.

We reasoned that harming someone may lead to shame and feelings of exclusion (Exline & Baumeister (2000); Shnabel & Nadler, 2008; 2010; Tangney et al., 2014). When not forgiven, feelings of exclusion are exacerbated and offenders may be motivated to protect their self-esteem by downplaying their own culpability, and blaming and distancing themselves from the victim (Exline, et al., 2003; Zechmeister & Romero, 2002). Being forgiven, on the other hand, signals to the offender they are still accepted as a moral, worthy person even though they behaved badly. This reassurance of social acceptance may result in more pro-social behavior by freeing offenders to accept their own culpability, empathize more with the victim, and increase their motivation to reconcile. This process, as our data suggest, may be especially present among those with lower self-esteem who are more sensitive to signals of social exclusion and acceptance (Leary and Baumeister, 2000). A limitation of our study, however, is that the participants were all young adult college students who recalled or imagined rather mundane and not very serious offenses. More significant offenses may in fact trigger feelings of social exclusion, regardless of one's level of self-esteem.

Future research is needed to test whether self-esteem moderates the effects of being forgiven when offenses are more severe. Future research should also more directly test whether social exclusion does in fact mediate the link between forgiveness at time one and acceptance of personal responsibility, empathy with the victim, and behaviors aimed at repairing the relationship at time two. Additionally, future experimental research in which participants are induced to harm someone who either forgives or does not forgive them would lend credibility to our conclusions.

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## APPENDICES

### Personal Responsibility Scale

Indicate how much you agree with each of the following statements (0=Not at all; 10=Very much)

1. I am responsible for hurting my friend's feelings.
2. I understand why my friend is upset.
3. I am aware that my behavior is to blame for the situation.
4. I acknowledge that my friend has the right to be upset.
5. My actions initiated the problem.
6. I regret my actions toward my friend.
7. I realize that I was wrong.

### Victim Blame Scale

Indicate how much you agree with each of the following statements (0=Not at all; 10=Very much)

1. My friend is mostly to blame for the situation.
2. My friend could have avoided the situation.
3. My friend's actions contributed to the situation.
4. My friend is overreacting.
5. My friend should take more responsibility for the situation.

### **Reconciliation Scale**

Indicate how much effort you think you would put into the following (0=Not at all; 10=Very much)

1. Trying to make it up to Sam.
2. Working to regain Sam's trust.
3. Finding ways to make Sam feel valued by you.
4. Finding ways to interact with Sam.

### **AUTHORS' NOTE**

We wish to thank Sayeh Bozorghadad, Sara Van Tilburg, Allison Sonneborn, Amanda Dauber, and Maya Martignetti for help developing materials and collecting data.

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