

Angry memories and thoughts of revenge: The relationship between forgiveness and anger rumination

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Abstract

This study examined the relationship between a two-dimensional model of forgiveness and Sukhodolsky et al. (2001) 4-factor model of anger rumination among 200 university students. Angry memories were found to be the most important aspects in forgiving oneself, and dealing with revenge thoughts were found to be crucial when exploring issues around forgiving another person. The present findings suggest the importance of cognitive aspects as portrayed by Sukhodolsky et al. (2001) model of anger rumination to explore in greater depth the cognitive processes involved in forgiveness of self and others. Angry memories and thoughts of revenge: The relationship between forgiveness and anger rumination.

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1. Introduction

In recent years there has been a plethora of research examining the psychological correlates of forgiveness and its context in understanding inter-personal conflict. The main body of research has been concerned with forgiveness as it pertains to relationships with others, where the respondents are responding to questions regarding their thoughts, feelings and emotions towards a person who has transgressed against them. Rye et al. (2001) note there exist as many measures of forgiveness of others as definitions (Berry, Parrott, O'Connor, & Wade, 2001; Hargrave & Sells, 1997; McCullough et al., 1998; Subkoviak et al., 1995; Wade, 1990). The research on forgiveness of others has proved useful in distinguishing between different correlates of forgiveness and providing insights into the different psychological processes that might be involved in forgiveness (McCullough, Worthington, & Rachal, 1997; McCullough et al., 1998; Worthington, 1998).

One under-used, but very useful theoretical and empirical distinction made within the psychology of forgiveness is the distinction between forgiveness of others and forgiveness of self (Mauger et al., 1992; Yamhure-Thompson & Snyder, 2003). There are a few studies examining self forgiveness. Maltby, Macaskill, and Day (2001) report a failure to forgive oneself sharing significant positive relationships with neuroticism, depression and anxiety. This view that failure to forgive oneself has detrimental effects on mental health is reported in other studies (Mauger et al., 1992). There are currently three dispositional measures of forgiveness that include forgiveness of self as well as forgiveness of others (Mauger et al., 1992; Tangney, Fee, Reinsmith, Boone, & Lee, 1999; Yamhure-Thompson & Snyder, 2003) and these have not been used extensively within any research context.

There is growing evidence to suggest that forgiveness is linked with a number of aspects of well being (Mauger et al., 1992; Salman, 2002; Subkoviak et al., 1995). Empirical research on forgiveness and mental health has largely concentrated on negative outcomes such as failure to forgive to be related to indicators of poor mental health such as depression and anxiety. (Karremans, Van Lange, Ouwerkerk, & Kluwer, 2003; Maltby et al., 2001). However there is evidence this association is more pronounced in relationships of strong rather than weak commitment and that it is the quality of the relationship before the transgression that is important. (Karremans et al., 2003). With regards to forgiveness within relationships there is a growing awareness of the usefulness of forgiveness within relationships (Ripley & Worthington, 2002) and in the clinical arena as it is often regarded as a therapeutic tool by counselors and psychotherapists (Murrey, 2002).

While it is accepted that situational and relational characteristics are likely to affect the ease with which forgiveness occurs (Enright & Coyle, 1998; Worthington, 1998; Worthington, Sandage, & Berry, 2000b), well-being as reflected in a number of personality and individual differences dimensions also appear to be influential in determining individual willingness to forgive (Emmons, 2000). Berry et al. (2001) have suggested that one important way of conceptualizing the personality and individual difference research associated with forgiveness is to consider them in terms of whether they foster or inhibit forgiveness. Accordingly, while certain variables such as empathy and agreeableness are thought to foster forgiveness (Ashton, Paunonen, Helmes, & Jackson, 1998; Berry et al., 2001; John, 1990; Macaskill, Maltby, & Day, 2002), there are an array of variables such as neuroticism, anger, anxiety, depression, hostility and resentment that are thought to act as inhibitory variables (Davenport, 1991; Enright, Gassin, & Wu, 1992; Kaplan, 1992; Maltby et al., 2001; Williams & Williams, 1993; Worthington et al., 2000a). Within these latter set of find-

ings, two constructs emerge that are thought to be crucial in predicting levels of forgiveness; anger and rumination.

First is anger. Anger is often conceptualized as one of the main emotional barriers to forgiveness (Enright & Coyle, 1998; Worthington, 1998). Fitzgibbons (1986) defines anger as “a strong feeling of displeasure and antagonism aroused by a sense of injury or wrong” (p. 629). It has its origins in early childhood relationships with loved ones and later develops to include relationships with others, especially those we wish to trust. The experience of anger leads to a desire for revenge that does not go away until it is recognized and released (Fitzgibbons, 1986). Empirical studies have supported the association between individual acts of forgiveness and the reduction of anger (Huang & Enright, 2000; Weiner, Graham, Peter, & Zmuidinas, 1991). Berry et al. (2001) provided empirical support for the relationship between dispositional forgiveness and trait anger.

Second is rumination. Rumination involves a repetitious focusing on the negative things in one’s life. Collins and Bell (1997) have reported that rumination can foster aggression in response to perceived insults and results in the psychological distress experienced after interpersonal stresses being sustained for longer periods (Greenberg, 1995). Rumination has also been shown to be negatively associated with lack of forgiveness (McCullough, Bellah, Kilpatrick, & Johnson, 2001). Research suggests that people who are more forgiving of others ruminate less (Berry et al., 2001; Yamhure-Thompson & Snyder, 2003). McCullough et al. (1998) report that teaching individuals to ruminate less results in them becoming more forgiving.

Furthermore, within the anger and rumination literature, there has been research that has sought to examine the constructs of anger and rumination together. Sukhodolsky, Golub, and Cromwell (2001) suggest that anger rumination is a distinct variable that can be measured independently from aggression, hostility and rumination. They define anger rumination “as unintentional and recurrent cognitive processes that emerge during and continue after an episode of anger experience” (p. 690). They propose a four factor model of anger rumination to cover the different cognitive facets of anger rumination which are described as being the attention to current anger experience, the tendency to recall previous anger episodes, and the tendency to think about one’s anger experience. The four factors proposed are anger afterthoughts, angry memories, fantasies about revenge, and understanding of causes. Angry after thoughts involve the person maintaining thoughts about and possibly re-enacting the angry episode in their mind. Fantasies about revenge involve the respondent dreaming or fantasizing about how to retaliate against their transgressor. It could even be fantasizing about revenge of a violent nature. Angry memories involve the individual constantly dwelling on the injustices that they have experienced. Finally the sub-scale of understanding causes is concerned with people who dwell on the reasons they were treated badly and try to analyze why the things that happened did so. Sukhodolsky et al. suggest that such a model would further aid researchers understand the cognitive mechanisms involved in anger rumination.

Anger and rumination have been prominent variables in examining the relationship between forgiveness and emotional barriers to forgiveness, yet have always been examined as separate variables in forgiveness research (Berry et al., 2001; Huang & Enright, 2000; McCullough et al., 1998; Weiner et al., 1991; Yamhure-Thompson & Snyder, 2003). However, exploring the concept of anger rumination may further our understanding of emotional barriers to forgiveness by uniquely integrating these two dominant concepts within anger rumination. In terms of specific hypotheses, it is suggested that there will be a significant negative association between anger rumination and

both forgiveness of self and forgiveness of others dimensions, as individuals failing to forgive either themselves or an other are equally likely to maintain angry ruminations towards either themselves or the other person over a particular transgression. No specific prediction can be made for which dimensions of anger rumination are related to forgiveness of self or others. Therefore, this part of the study is best seen as exploratory providing researchers and practitioners information on which anger rumination dimensions best predict forgiveness of self and forgiveness of others. The aim of the study was to examine the relationship between forgiveness of self and forgiveness of others and the Sukhodolsky et al. (2001) model of anger rumination to explore which dimensions of anger rumination best predict scores in forgiveness of self and others.

2. Method

2.1. Participants and procedure

Questionnaires were given to 215 social science undergraduate students to complete in a classroom setting before a lecture. Participation was voluntary and no course credit was awarded for participation. Two hundred completed questionnaires were returned (male = 91, female = 109). The age range was 18–47 years (males, $M = 21.09$: $SD = 2.90$, females, $M = 21.46$: $SD = 5.50$). In terms of religious affiliation 40.5% were Christian, 44.5% had no religious affiliation, and 15% did not supply this information. Most of the sample (88.5%) reported to be white Caucasian, with 2.5% of respondents reporting to be of a Black ethnic origin, 4.5% of respondents reporting to be of a Asian ethnic origin and 2.5% of respondents reporting to be of an other ethnic origin. 2% of respondents did not give their ethnic origin.

3. Measures

Respondents completed demographic questions on age, sex and ethnicity along with the following measures.

1. The forgiveness of self and forgiveness of others subscales from *The Heartland Forgiveness Scale* (Yamhure-Thompson & Snyder, 2003). These are two 6-item measures of forgiveness of self (e.g. 'With time I am understanding of the mistakes that I have made' [item 5]) and forgiveness of others (e.g. 'If others mistreat me, I continue to think badly of them' [item 10]). Participants rate each item on a 7 point Likert scale ranging from 1 = 'almost always false of me' to 7 = 'almost always true of me.' Higher scores correspond to higher levels of forgiveness. Though a relatively new scale, the scale has been developed for use among student and non-student samples with sample sizes ranging from $n = 123$ to $n = 651$. The Cronbach's alpha for the subscales forgiveness of self and others range from .71 to .83 (Yamhure-Thompson & Snyder, 2003). The scale overall was found to have good internal reliability with a Cronbach's alpha coefficient of .87 and good validity being positively correlated with measures of hope, cognitive flexibility, relationship satisfaction, and social desirability. Overall scores on the scale were also found to be negatively correlated with measures of

vengeance, negative physiological symptoms, and chronic hostility (Yamhure-Thompson & Snyder, 2003). The reason the present scale was used, over existing measures of forgiveness of self and others (Mauger et al., 1992; Tangney et al., 1999), is that some of the items on the other existing scales assume the respondents are religious.

2. *The Anger Rumination Scale* (Sukhodolsky et al., 2001) measures the tendency to think about current anger provoking situations and recall angry episodes from the past. It comprises 19 items, which load on four factors. Angry after thoughts, ('After an argument is over, I keep fighting with this person in my imagination' [item 7]), angry memories ('I ponder about the injustices that have been done to me' [item 2]), thoughts of revenge ('I have long living fantasies of revenge after the conflict is over' [item 4]), and understanding causes ('I think about the reasons people treat me badly' [item 12]). The items are rated on a four point Likert scale ranging from 1 = 'almost never' to 4 = 'almost always'. Possible scores on the angry afterthoughts range from 6 to 42 with higher scores indicating more angry afterthoughts. Thoughts of revenge and understanding causes sub-scales yield scores that range from 4 to 28 with higher scores indicating more thoughts of revenge and more time spent trying to understand causes. Possible scores on the angry memories subscale range from 5 to 35 with higher scores indicating more angry memories. All the items were phrased so that higher score correspond to greater levels of anger rumination. Overall the scale has been demonstrated to have adequate reliability and validity with a Cronbach's alpha of .93. Separate reliability coefficients for the four ARS subscales were, angry afterthoughts .86, thoughts of revenge, .72, angry memories .85 and understanding causes, .77 (Sukhodolsky et al., 2001).

4. Results

Table 1 contains the Cronbach's alpha statistic (Cronbach, 1951) computed for all the scales among the present sample and mean scores for all the scales by sex. The alpha statistics were lower for the forgiveness of self and forgiveness of others subscales than those reported by Yamhure-Thompson and Snyder (2003). However, this may be because of the small number of items (Cattell, 1957) or a function of the relatively small sample used in the present study compared to the size of the sample reported by the authors of the scale. Consequently the present findings do not question the reliability of the scale, but suggest some caution in interpreting the findings among the present sample.

Table 1
Alpha coefficients and mean scores for all the scales

Scales	Males (<i>n</i> = 91)			Females (<i>n</i> = 109)		
	α	<i>M</i>	SD	<i>M</i>	SD	<i>t</i>
Forgiveness of self	.56	28.49	4.8	28.41	4.7	.12
Forgiveness of others	.65	26.63	5.4	28.02	5.1	−1.88
Angry after thoughts subscale	.87	11.19	3.9	11.39	4.0	−.37
Thoughts of revenge subscale	.77	07.19	2.8	06.32	2.1	2.48
Angry memories subscale	.89	10.10	3.7	10.40	3.4	−.59
Understanding causes subscale	.61	08.66	3.2	08.57	2.9	−.21

Independent groups *t* tests were computed to test for gender differences on all the scales and these are shown in Table 1 with significant differences for sex determined after a Bonferroni correction had been made for multiple tests. With this correction, no significant differences were found between males and females for scores on any of the subscales. Subsequently, all analyses were performed for the overall sample.

Pearson Product moment correlations were calculated to explore the relationships between all the subscales and these are shown in Table 2. Again, significant correlations were determined after a Bonferroni correction had been made for multiple tests.

Forgiveness of others shares significant negative correlations with the angry after thoughts subscale, the thoughts of revenge subscale, the angry memories subscale and understanding causes

Table 2

Pearson product moment correlation co-efficients of the forgiveness scales and sub-scales of the anger rumination measure

Scales	1	2	3	4	5	6
1. Forgiveness of self	1.00	.47*	–.24*	–.25*	–.40*	–.12
2. Forgiveness of others		1.00	–.38*	–.52*	–.37*	–.23*
3. Angry after thoughts			1.00	.67*	.69*	.69*
4. Thoughts of revenge				1.00	.64*	.45*
5. Angry memories					1.00	.58*
6. Understanding causes						1.00

* $p < .006$ (2-tailed; after applying a Bonferroni correction).

Table 3

Summary of standard multiple regressions for variables predicting forgiveness of self and forgiveness of others for males and females

Scales	B	β	sr ²
<i>Forgiveness of self</i>			
Angry after thoughts	.01	.01	
Thoughts of revenge	.02	.01	
Anger memories	–.65	–.48	.23**
Understanding causes	.27	.17	
		r^2	=.18
		Adj r^2	=.16
		r	=.42
<i>Forgiveness of others</i>			
Angry after thoughts	–.07	–.06	
Thoughts of revenge	–.98	–.47	.22**
Anger memories	–.09	–.07	
Understanding causes	.10	.06	
		r^2	=.28
		Adj r^2	=.26
		r	=.52

** $p < .01$.

subscale. Forgiveness of self is negatively correlated with the angry after thoughts subscale, thoughts of revenge subscale, the angry memories subscale.

To explore further the significant relationships between the forgiveness measures and the anger rumination subscales a series of multiple regressions were performed. Table 3 shows the results of the standard multiple regressions.

With forgiveness of self as the dependent variable and all the other variables as predictor variables a multiple regression was performed. The regression statistic was significantly different from zero ($F(4,195) = 10.55, p < .001$). Angry memories account for the unique variance in scores on the self-forgiveness measure.

With forgiveness of others used as the dependent variable and all other variables as the predictor variables a multiple regression was performed. The regression statistic was significantly different from zero ($F(4,195) = 18.45, p < .001$). Thoughts of revenge accounted for the unique variance in the scores for the forgiveness of others.

5. Discussion

The general hypothesis that forgiveness would be negatively associated with anger rumination as conceptualized by Sukhodolsky et al. (2001) is broadly supported. This is consistent with previous findings that anger and rumination when measured separately inhibit forgiveness (Berry et al., 2001; Huang & Enright, 2000; Kaplan, 1992; McCullough et al., 1998; Weiner et al., 1991; Williams & Williams, 1993). However utilising the integrative anger rumination model and its associated measure with the subscales describing related processes allows for a more detailed analysis of the components contributing to anger and to rumination and how this may inhibit forgiveness.

For forgiveness of self, it is anger memories that accounts for unique variance in this aspect of forgiveness. So individuals who find it hard to forgive themselves will continue to hold angry memories. It seems that people who ruminate about events from a long time ago and still get angry also do so in relation to themselves and the mistakes that they have made, which makes sense intuitively.

Further, thoughts of revenge are found to account for the unique variance in forgiveness of others. Although vengefulness in relation to forgiving others is not a new concept (McCullough et al., 2001; Stuckless & Goranson, 1992), the present findings suggests, that when considered among a number of other concepts (anger, rumination) thoughts regarding revenge and getting even may be uppermost in individual minds when they choose not to forgive. Continuing to hold angry memories and to ruminate on them acts as a barrier to forgiveness. Results suggest that some individuals may continue to have long living fantasies of revenge when the conflict is long over. Getting back at that person and thoughts and daydreams of a violent nature may inhibit the likelihood of that forgiving the transgressor in these individuals. As such the present consideration brings together a number of constructs previously thought to be inhibitors of forgiveness (anger, revenge, rumination) and identifies an important dimension in understanding forgiveness of oneself and others. Holding on to an angry memory is an important part of not being able to forgive oneself. Similarly, thoughts of revenge are dominant when they do not want to forgive others. Identifying and understanding the part that angry memories and thoughts of revenge play in

relation to the failure to forgive is useful for the further development of forgiveness interventions. For practitioners dealing with forgiveness issues in therapeutic settings, encouraging the release of angry memories may be one way of reducing self-blame, or ameliorating thoughts of revenge may be helpful in interventions to promote forgiveness in interpersonal conflict.

The present findings suggest that anger memories and thoughts of revenge are related to forgiveness and these variables draw on other psychological theory. As such the examination of anger memories within the concept of personality traits such as neuroticism, or thoughts of revenge within the concept of vengefulness, would be useful as to provide a full account of the cognitive processes described as important within this paper. Further, these findings need replication among a general population sample. Though at present it is hard to consider why this finding may be particular to students.

In summary the results show that subscales of the anger rumination scales share a significant negative correlation with forgiveness of self and forgiveness of others. The use of Sukhodolsky et al. (2001) measure of anger rumination has allowed a more detailed exploration of the cognitive processes involved in anger rumination that appear to be associated with individuals' failure to forgive. Anger memories appear to be the most important aspects to explore when examining issues around forgiving oneself, and dealing with revenge thoughts are crucial when exploring issues around forgiving another person. The present findings suggest the importance of cognitive aspects as portrayed by Sukhodolsky et al. (2001) model of anger rumination to explore in greater depth the cognitive processes involved in forgiveness of self and others. The use of a dimensional model of forgiveness, self and others, provides a dynamic and relevant understanding of forgiveness processes within an existing model of anger rumination.

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