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Attachment orientation and key predictors of forgiveness: implications for contemporary interventions

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Background

Forgiveness

- In the context of close relationships transgressions represent relational threat
- Forgiveness as a motivational, emotional, cognitive and behavioural response to an interpersonal transgression
(cf. Enright, Gassin & Wu, 1992; McCullough, Worthington, & Rachal, 1998)
- Numerous predictors of forgiveness, including rumination, empathy, and attributions (Riek & Mania, 2012)
- Forgiveness, and unforgiveness, predict both physical and mental health outcomes (e.g. cardiovascular health, depression, stress responses) (Toussaint et al., 2015)



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Background

Forgiveness interventions


- Existing interventions to induce and support forgiveness are psycho-educational in nature and require recall of an existing transgression (e.g. Enright & Fitzgibbons., 2000; Worthington, 2006)
- No interventions exist that support individuals to respond in a relationship-constructive pattern to the conflict created by transgressions (i.e. forgiveness)
- Intervening at an attachment-orientation level, to increase secure attachment, may support relationship-constructive responses and increase likelihood of forgiveness



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Background 


Attachment



- Attachment orientation useful as a framework for understanding individuals' response patterns to transgressions
- Forgiveness-attachment orientation research proposes that individuals with a secure (vs. insecure) attachment-orientation are more likely to forgive a transgressing relationship partner (e.g. Burnette et al., 2009; Lawler-Row et al., 2006)
- Research has tended to focus on the effect of attachment on trait forgiveness, and only looked at empathy and rumination as potential mediators (e.g. Burnette et al., 2009)


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Aims & Hypotheses 



- Study 1 aim is to examine influence of attachment orientation on different types of forgiveness through rumination, empathy, fear and anger affect, attributions, and motivation to sustain relationship
- It is expected that avoidant and anxious attachment orientations will influence forgiveness type differently through these mediators
- Attachment anxiety will result in greater rumination but also motivation to sustain the relationship
- Attachment avoidance will result in low empathy and low motivation to sustain the relationship

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Method 

- **Participants:** N=303 (77% female) Age M=27.13 (SD=11.17)
- **Design:** Online study; 2(severity: low/moderate) X 2(apology: present/ absent)
- **Measures:** Hypothetical transgression scenario, ECR-s & mini-IPIP (agreeableness & neuroticism), IRI, fear & anger affect, RAM, RVEX, TRIM-18, DFS & EFS
- **Factor Analysis:** EFA conducted on forgiveness items
- 4 factors identified: Positive Forgiveness, Grudge Motivations, Revenge and Avoidance
- Positive Forgiveness & Grudge Motivations used for analysis, alongside TRIM-18 Revenge and Avoidance subscales

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Method UNIVERSITY OF SURREY

Hypothetical Transgression Scenario

"In a conversation with your romantic partner you discover that he/she has betrayed your trust by telling a mutual friend some (very) private details about your past—embarrassing (very intimate) and personal details you had confided to him/her some time ago but not told many people about (to no-one else in the world). You are mildly (extremely) upset by this breach of privacy. When you express your upset, your partner apologises for their indiscretion."

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Results UNIVERSITY OF SURREY

Attachment anxiety and forgiveness

• PROCESS model 4 (Hayes, 2013). Only significant paths shown.
 • Effects are not moderated by apology or severity.

■ = positive
 ■ = negative

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Results UNIVERSITY OF SURREY

Attachment avoidance and forgiveness

* PROCESS model 4 (Hayes, 2013). Only significant paths shown.

■ = positive
 ■ = negative


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Results 


Summary of findings

- These results suggest that attachment-orientation is a stable framework for understanding and investigating forgiveness
- It is also clear that attachment-orientation has a significant effect on the mechanisms through which one comes to forgiveness or not
- For both insecure attachment orientations low empathy and high rumination predicted low levels of forgiveness, however, for those high in attachment anxiety fear mitigated this
- For those high in attachment-avoidance, low motivation to sustain the relationship predicted low forgiveness
- Implications for potential forgiveness interventions


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Study 2... 

- Study 2 will test whether the effects of insecure attachment on forgiveness can be mitigated through attachment security priming
- Lab experiment using couples (>6months)
- Propose an empathy-prime or attachment security-prime condition
- Transgression will be manipulated in which participant will believe their partner has let them down
- After a prescribed time participants will complete forgiveness measures



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Thank you

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