EFFECT OF CONTEXT AND PERSONALITY
ON THE FORGIVENESS SCHEMA

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Abstract
The study examined the extent to which the type of aggressive behavior altered the impact of the circumstances of the aggression on the victim's willingness to forgive. The participants were 97 adults aged 17 to 68 years. They expressed willingness to forgive in three contexts: breaking of love, gossiping at work, and collision during a game. As hypothesized, (a) apologies and intent had more impact in the physical aggression condition than in the psychological aggression conditions, (b) cancellation of consequences had more impact in the psychological aggression conditions than in the physical aggression condition, (c) the structure of the forgiveness schema varied as a function of the type of harmful situation, and (d) participants with a higher score in emotional stability and agreeableness were more willing to forgive than participants with a lower score.

Keywords: forgiveness, physical aggression, psychological aggression, functional measurement.

Introduction

The present study examined the extent to which the type of aggressive behavior (physical aggression *versus* psychological aggression) affects (a) the impact of circumstances of the aggression on the victim's willingness to forgive the aggressor and (b) the structure of the forgiveness schema itself. The present study also examined the effect of two personality variables -- emotional stability and agreeableness -- on willingness to forgive and its determinants.

The only study to date which had addressed the above questions was by Gauché and Mullet (2005). In this study, the participants expressed willingness to forgive in two contexts (physical aggression and psychological aggression). The type of aggression referred to the form of manifested behavior (not the consequences). The participants were shown a series of vignettes presented with an orthogonal design. In one condition, these vignettes corresponded to all the combinations of an Apologies x Context design, and the participants were instructed to indicate the degree to which they would be willing to forgive in each case. In the other four conditions, the first factor was one of the following: intent to harm, cancellation of consequence (whether the painful consequences of the harm were removed or not), attitude of significant others (e.g., favorable to forgiveness), and social proximity (sisters versus

colleagues), respectively. The second factor was always context (physical aggression versus psychological aggression).

Apologies and intent were expected to have more impact in the physical aggression condition (collision during a game) than in the psychological aggression condition (gossiping at work); mainly because sincere apologies from the aggressor (and/or guarantees that the aggressor's behavior was not intended) are usually clear indicators that a physical aggression will not be repeated. This may help the victim to feel less fear towards the aggressor (Rogers and Kelloway, 1997; LeBlanc and Kelloway, 2002), which could then encourage a more forgiving attitude. The results were consistent with this expectation.

It was also expected that in the psychological aggression condition, the cancellation of consequences would have more impact than in the physical aggression condition; mainly because a severe psychological aggression is usually not curable in a short period; that is, the cancellation of consequences may not be easily foreseen. By contrast, except in extreme cases (e.g., death, permanent handicap), the victim of a physical aggression usually recovers. The results were again consistent with this expectation.

The Present Study

The present study aimed at replicating the findings by Gauché and Mullet (2005) using a more extreme psychological aggression situation than the one used in their study (gossiping at work). We chose to consider the breaking of love as a consequence of an indiscretion, as this is one of the most frequently mentioned situations in the forgiveness literature (Wade, 1989; Zeichmeicher & Romero, 2002).

The present study was also aimed at replicating the findings by Gauché and Mullet (2005) using a different type of design. In the study by Gauché and Mullet (2005), the variations of the impact of apologies, intent, or cancellation of consequences on willingness to forgive (as a function of the type of aggression) were examined separately. In the present study, the variations of the impacts of all factors were conjointly examined because we also wanted to examine the possible variations in the structure of the forgiveness schema itself. In most previous studies (Azar, Mullet & Vinsonneau, 1999; Girard, Mullet & Callahan, 2002), the forgiveness schema was shown to be an additive one; that is, all circumstances of a situation independently contributed to the willingness to forgive. By contrast, in the study by Mullet, Rivière and Muñoz Sastre (2007), where a negligence factor was substituted for the intent factor, negligence and apologies were found to be interacting. Thus, there are not sufficient grounds for considering additivity in the forgiveness schema as a general rule. In the present study, we considered a Type of aggression x Intent x Apologies x Cancellation of consequences design. This four-factor experimental design is much more complex than the ones used by Gauché and Mullet (2005).

Finally, the present study examined the effect of two personality variables – emotional stability and agreeableness – on the impact of intent, apologies, and cancellation of consequences on willingness to forgive. Emotional stability and agreeableness have been repeatedly shown to correlate positively with willingness to forgive (see Mullet, Neto & Rivière, 2005, for a review). Not much is known, however, on the cognitive process by which emotional stability and agreeableness result in a higher propensity to forgive.

Hypotheses

The first hypothesis, based on the findings by Gauché and Mullet (2005), was that (a) the apologies and intent factors would have more impact in the collision during a game condition than in the gossiping at work condition, and (b) the cancellation of consequences factor would have more impact in the gossiping at work condition than in the collision during a game condition.

The second hypothesis, based on the interpretation offered by Gauché and Mullet (2005), was that (a) the apologies and intent factors would have more impact in the gossiping

at work condition than in the breaking of love condition, and (b) that the cancellation of consequences factor would have more impact in the breaking of love condition than in the gossiping at work condition. Indiscretions leading to breaking of love are typically experienced as a psychological aggression that is rarely curable in a short period. It was thus expected that the cancellation of consequences factor would have more impact (and the other factor less impact) in this condition than in the gossiping condition.

The third hypothesis was that the participants with higher scores in emotional stability and in agreeableness would show higher scores in willingness to forgive than the participants with lower scores in emotional stability and in agreeableness. We also hypothesized that the importance given by the participants to the intent, apologies, and cancellation of consequences factors would vary as a function of personality scores.

Regarding the forgiveness schema and owing to the complete lack of previous studies on its variations as a function of context, we were not in a position to put forward precise hypotheses.

Method

Participants

The participants were all unpaid volunteers, contacted in the streets of Toulouse (a large city in southwestern France) or on the campus of the Toulouse University. The participation rate was 65% (the main reason given for refusal to participate was lack of free time). The final sample comprised 97 French adults aged 17 to 68 years ($M = 25.15$; $SD = 10.8$), including 41 men and 59 women. They were divided into two age groups: the younger group (N = 57, $M = 18.6$), and the older group (N = 40, $M = 34.9$).

Material

The test material was made up of five sets of 54 vignettes describing a situation in which one person was the victim of a (physical or psychological) aggression by another person. These vignettes were composed by applying a 3 x 2 x 3 x 3 design: Context (breaking of love, gossiping at work, and collision during a game) x Intent (no intent to harm *versus* clear intent to harm) x Apologies (from no apologies to full apologies) x Cancellation of consequences (from no cancellation to complete cancellation). In each vignette, however, five pieces of information were provided -- social proximity between the victim and the aggressor, intent to harm, apologies, cancellation of consequences, and attitude of others. Social proximity and attitude of others were held constant.

An example of a scenario that corresponds to the breaking of love as a result of an indiscretion was the following: "Gisele and Norbert are engaged. Mariette is one of Gisele's old friends. She is not a bad person, but she is known as being very talkative. Mariette knows Norbert well. During a conversation with Norbert, she unintentionally chatted about Gisele's personality and habits. Unfortunately, as a result of this conversation, Norbert started having serious doubts about what would be his future with Gisele. He then decided to break-up with Gisele. Mariette, remorseful, tried to meet Gisele as soon as possible and fully apologised. At present, Gisele is still suffering from the break-up with Norbert. The situation is such, however, that any possibility of restoring the relationship seems to be unlikely; Norbert is now seeing someone else."

Another example of a scenario that corresponds to the collision during a game was the following: "Suzelle and Fabienne are sisters. They practice soccer, but they belong to two different teams. During a match between their two teams, Fabienne, more or less intentionally, kicked Suzelle's leg. Suzelle fell down, and she was hospitalized for a leg fracture. During Suzelle's hospital stay, Fabienne asked a common friend to visit Suzelle and tell her how much she was sorry and wanted to apologize. At present, Suzelle is still in the hospital, but she expects to be discharged in the near future. Suzelle's parents have not expressed any opinion."

Each scenario was printed on a separate sheet of paper. A question appeared below each text: "If you were (name of the victim, here Gisele or Suzelle), to what degree would you be inclined to forgive (name of the aggressor, here Mariette or Fabienne) now?" Under each scenario was a 25cm response scale with "Definitely NOT" on the left and "Definitely YES" on the right.

The material was also composed of an emotional stability questionnaire and of an agreeableness questionnaire (each composed of five items). These items were taken from the International Pool of Items of Personality (IPIP, Goldberg, 1999).

Procedure

Each participant responded individually, usually in his/her home or in a quiet room at the university. Following the recommendation by Anderson (1982), each participant went through a familiarization phase, during which he/she was given explanations by the experimenter. The participant was told that he/she had to read a certain number of scenarios (in which a person committed an aggression involving serious consequences for another person), and that he/she will be asked to express his/her personal degree of willingness to forgive in each case. Each participant was then presented with a series of 27 scenarios, in random order (taken from the complete set of 54), and asked to provide the requested ratings. After the completion of the 27 ratings, each participant was allowed to compare his/her responses and modify them if needed.

During the following, experimental phase, the 54 scenarios were presented (in a different order for each participant). Each participant provided his/her ratings at his/her own pace. In this phase, it was no longer possible to compare responses or to go back and make changes as in the familiarization phase. At the end of this phase, the participants were asked to complete the personality questionnaires. The participants took, on average, approximately 50 minutes to complete the experiment (familiarization phase, experimental phase, and questionnaire).

Results

Each (experimental phase) rating by each participant was converted to a numerical value expressing the distance (measured in cm with a ruler) between the marked point on the response scale and the left anchor, which served as the initial point. These numerical values were then subjected to graphical and statistical analyses. The analyses indicated that the participants had used the entire range of the response scales when rating their willingness to forgive. The highest mean (20.98cm) was reasonably far from the maximum (25cm), which suggests that there was no ceiling effect.

Effect of Context on Willingness to Forgive

The main results are shown in Figure 1. In the collision during a game condition (top panels), the curves were ascending and clearly separated; that is, the cancellation of consequences factor and the apologies factor had an effect. The more the harm was cancelled and the fuller the apologies, the greater the willingness to forgive. The whole set of three curves was higher in the right panel than in the left panel; that is, the intent factor had an effect. The clearer the intent was, the lesser the willingness to forgive. In addition, all the curves were parallel; that is, cancellation of consequences, apologies, and intent were combined in an independent way. An ANOVA conducted on these data with an Intent x Apologies x Cancellation of consequences design showed that the three factors had a significant effect and that the interactions were not significant.

In the gossiping at work condition (center panels), the curves showed more or less the same pattern as in the collision during a game condition. (An ANOVA conducted on these data with an Intent x Apologies x Cancellation of consequences design showed that the three factors had a significant effect and that the interactions were not significant.) The curves were, however, steeper and less separated than in the collision during a game condition; that

is, the effect of the cancellation factor appeared stronger and the effect of apologies appeared weaker in the gossiping at work condition than in the collision during a game condition. In addition, the two sets of three curves were less separated in the gossiping at work condition than in the collision during a game condition; that is, the effect of intent appeared weaker in the gossiping at work condition than in the collision during a game condition. An ANOVA conducted on both sets of data with a Context (Collision versus Gossiping) x Intent x Apologies x Cancellation of consequences design showed that the Context x Cancellation, Context x Apologies and Context x Intent interactions were significant, $F(2, 188) = 36.57$, $p < .001$, $F(2, 188) = 40.42$, $p < .001$, and $F(1, 94) = 29.52$, $p < .001$, respectively.

In the breaking of love condition (bottom panel), the curves showed a qualitatively different pattern than the one shown in the two other conditions. The curves were no longer parallel but formed a fan pattern open to the right. In addition, the curves were still steeper and still less separated in this condition than in the gossiping at work condition, and the two sets of three curves were also less separated. In other words, the effect of the cancellation factor was stronger, and the effect of apologies and intent were weaker in the breaking of love condition than in the gossiping at work condition. An overall ANOVA was performed on the raw data with a 3 x 2 x 3 x 3 design: Context (Collision, Gossiping, Breaking of Love) x Intent x Apologies x Cancellation of consequences. In addition to the Context x Cancellation, Context x Apologies and Context x Intent interactions that were shown to be significant, two higher-order interactions were also shown to be significant: (a) the Context x Apologies x Cancellation interaction, $F(8, 752) = 3.94$, $p < .001$, and (b) the Context x Intent x Cancellation interaction, $F(4, 376) = 7.17$, $p < .001$. Finally, the context effect was also significant. Willingness to forgive was higher in the collision condition ($M = 11.65$) than in the gossiping condition ($M = 10.45$) and the breaking of love condition ($M = 8.91$), $F(2, 188) = 51.75$, $p < .001$.

Additional analyses showed that, (a) the Apologies x Cancellation interaction and the Intent x Cancellation interaction that were only significant in the breaking of love condition were concentrated in their bilinear component, $F(1, 92) = 27.88$, and $F(2, 184) = 16.78$, $p < .001$, respectively. An overall analysis conducted with an Age x Gender x Context x Intent x Apologies x Cancellation of consequences design showed that the effects of age and gender were not significant, and that no interaction involving these factors was significant.

Effect of Personality Variables on Willingness to Forgive

An ANOVA with Emotional Stability (higher scores versus lower scores) x Context x Intent x Apologies x Cancellation of consequences, a 2 x 3 x 2 x 3 x 3 design, showed that the Emotional stability main effect, $F(1, 93) = 5.84$, and the Stability x Cancellation interaction, $F(2, 186) = 3.32$, were significant, $p < .05$. The more emotionally stable participants had a higher forgiveness score ($M = 11.04$) than the less emotionally stable participants ($M = 9.41$), and the impact of cancellation was stronger among the more emotionally stable participants ($14.04-8.22 = 5.82$) than among the less emotionally stable participants ($11.80 - 7.23 = 4.57$).

A second, similar ANOVA with an Agreeableness factor showed that the Agreeableness effect was significant, $F(1, 93) = 18.64$, $p < .001$. The more agreeable participants had a higher score ($M = 11.37$) than the less agreeable participants ($M = 8.57$).

Discussion

The present study examined the extent to which the type of aggressive behavior (psychological versus physical) altered (a) the impact of the circumstances of the aggression on the victim's willingness to forgive the aggressor, and (b) the structure of the forgiveness schema.

Variations in the Impact of the Circumstances as a Function of the Type of Aggression

The first hypothesis was that the apologies and intent factors would have more impact, and that the cancellation of consequences factor would have less impact, in the collision

during a game (physical aggression) condition than in the gossiping at work (psychological aggression) condition. This is what was observed, and this result was apparently a robust one; it did not depend on the participant's gender or age. This finding fully replicates previous findings by Gauché and Mullet (2005). The second hypothesis was that the apologies and intent factors would have more impact, and that the cancellation of consequences factor would have less impact, in the gossiping at work condition than in the breaking of love condition. Again, this is what was found, and this result was robust as well. As a result of these two findings, it can be suggested that a continuum in types of aggression exists, from the ones that are deeply psychological (e.g., the breaking of love as a result of an indiscretion) to the ones that are purely physical (e.g., a collision during a game). According to the location of the actual offense on this aggression continuum, the determination of willingness to forgive (and possibly also the willingness to avenge) varies, as the victim's focus varies from the offender's behavior (intent and apologies) to his/her own state of recovery.

One may wonder whether this aggression continuum is not simply a reflection of the severity of the consequences of the offense for the victim. For instance, breaking of love might be viewed as having more severe consequences than collision during a game, and the differences in the impact of the circumstances might in fact simply result from the difference in severity. As shown by Girard and Mullet (1997, see also Mullet, Rivière & Muñoz Sastre, 2007), however, the effect of severity of consequences on willingness to forgive is weak among adults, and never interacts with the other circumstances of the harmful situation (unlike context which repeatedly did in the present study).

Variations in the Impact of the Circumstances as a Function of the Participants' Personality

The third hypothesis was that the participants with higher scores in emotional stability or agreeableness would show higher scores in willingness to forgive as compared to the participants with lower scores (in emotional stability or agreeableness). This is what was observed. This result was consistent with a large body of research showing moderate correlations between emotional stability or agreeableness and willingness to forgive in concrete circumstances (for a review see Mullet, Neto & Rivière, 2005).

We also expected that the importance given by the participants to the circumstances of the aggression would vary as a function of their personality. This was shown for emotional stability and the cancellation factor. In other words, the impact of the cancellation factor was stronger among more emotionally stable participants than among less emotionally stable participants. More emotionally stable participants, more than the less emotionally stable participants, tended to determine their attitude towards forgiveness as a function of one of the concrete circumstances of the offense.

Alterations in the Forgiveness Schema as a Function of the Type of Aggression

In the gossiping at work condition, as well as in the collision during a game condition, the structure of the forgiveness schema was found to be additive. This result was fully consistent with findings in most previous studies. In the breaking of love as a result of an indiscretion condition, by contrast, the structure was clearly interactive. The effect of intent and apologies depended on the current level of the cancellation factor. In the case of full cancellation, the effect of intent and apologies was considerably stronger than in the case of no cancellation. The structure of the forgiveness schema appeared thus to depend on the type of harmful behavior.

This finding has direct implications for the practice of counseling aimed at individuals who have been victims of a psychological aggression. It suggests that a person who has been the victim of a deep psychological aggression may not have the same attitude toward forgiveness as a victim who has been harmed in another way. Not only will this person attribute more importance to the cancellation of consequences than the victim of a physical

aggression or the victim of a milder psychological aggression (as already suggested in Gauché & Mullet, 2005), but he/she will also consider the degree of cancellation of consequences to determine whether or not to give importance to other cues such as the offender's intent to harm or the offender's apologies. It is only when the consequences are fully cancelled that the victim of a deep psychological aggression is going to attribute full importance to behavioral cues such as intent and apologies. In other words, in cases of deep psychological aggression, intent and apologies will tend to be considered only at the end of the process; that is, only after partial recovery finally allows the victim to begin to take them into account.

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Figure Caption

Figure 1.

Combined effect of the condition, intent, apologies and cancellation factors on the willingness to forgive. On the horizontal axis are the three degrees of cancellation of consequences. On the vertical axis is the mean judgment of the willingness to forgive. The three curves in each panel correspond to the three levels of the apologies factor. The two panels in each row correspond to the two levels of intent. Each row corresponds to one of the three conditions considered: collision during a game, gossiping at work, and breaking of love as a result of an indiscretion.