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CONCEPTUALIZATIONS OF FORGIVENESS

Collectivist-Congolese Versus Individualist-French Viewpoints

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The present study investigates the cross-cultural differences in conceptualizations of forgiveness, using a modified version of the Conceptualizations of Forgiveness Scale. In the Congolese (collectivistic) culture, forgiveness was expected to be mainly conceived as an “interpersonal” construct, and in the French (individualistic) culture as an “intrapersonal” process. The findings supported these views. The Congolese more than the French conceived forgiveness as aimed at reconciling with the offender and extensible to people outside the offended–offender dyad.

Keywords: forgiveness; conceptualizations; Congo; France

In recent years, the concept of interpersonal forgiving has received increased empirical attention from social scientists who have examined the potential relevance of interpersonal forgiving in human relationships (Worthington, 2005). Cross-cultural studies on this topic, however, have remained scarce (Sandage & Williamson, 2005). Namely, we should mention Takaku, Weiner, and Ohbuchi’s (2001) studies on Japanese adults; Park and Enright’s (1997) study on Korean adolescents; Fu, Watkins, and Hui’s (2004) study on Chinese adults; and finally, Azar and Mullet’s (2002) study on a Lebanese sample. Regarding African samples, the only work to date was conducted by Kadima Kadiangandu, Mullet, and Vinsonneau (2001), who examined willingness to forgive in Congo, using the Forgiveness scale (Mullet, Barros, Frongia, Usai, & Neto, 2003). The results suggested that willingness to forgive may be more characteristic of collectivistic cultures than individualistic cultures.

The present study was aimed at exploring the differences between the Congolese (collectivist culture) and the French (individualist culture) in the way that forgiveness is conceptualized. It should be noted that despite their close relationship, conceptualizations of forgiveness and willingness to forgive are separate constructs. Conceptualizations of *forgiveness* refer to the nature of forgiveness and the way it is defined. *Willingness to forgive* refers to the (daily) practice of forgiveness. Conceptualizations of forgiveness have recently been studied by Mullet, Girard, and Bakhshi (2004) on a French sample. Four conceptualization factors were identified. Change of Heart expresses the idea that forgiveness supposes the replacement of negative emotions toward the offender by positive emotions. Forgiveness

Is Good expresses the idea that forgiveness encourages the offender to accept past wrongs and behave better in the future. Forgiveness Is Bad expresses the view that forgiveness is a process that devaluates both parties. Finally, More-Than-Dyadic Process expresses the idea that forgiveness is not limited to the individuals directly involved in the conflict and may extend to close relationships or even institutions (e.g., the state or the church).

In the present study, we used a slightly modified version of the 20-item Conceptualizations of Forgiveness Questionnaire used in Mullet et al. (2004) with samples of Congolese and French participants. Our hypotheses were based on the consideration that forgiveness may be differently conceptualized in collectivistic and individualistic societies (Sandage & Williamson, 2005). Collectivistic worldviews construe the self as socially embedded and emphasizes collective norms and relationships and collective well-being. For example, in Congo, forgiveness is at the core of the traditional justice system. A harm doer is perceived by his or her acquaintances as cut off from society as a result of the damage committed. The other members of the society attempt to reintegrate the harm doer into society, mainly out of respect for the principle that it is bad for a society to be divided (Kadima Kadiangandu et al., 2001). As a result, in collectivistic cultures, forgiveness should be conceived mostly as an interpersonal construct, forgiveness and reconciliation should be closely related, and relational motivations for forgiveness should dominate. Also, when forgiveness occurs, it may be offered not just by an individual victim to an individual offender but by one group to another group (Kadima Kadiangandu & Mullet, 2007). By contrast, individualistic worldviews construe the self as independent and self-reflective and emphasize personal responsibility and personal well-being. For instance, in France, by contrast with Congo, it is the penal sanction that is at the core of the justice system (and forgiveness is not even mentioned in this process). Thus, in individualistic cultures, forgiveness should be conceived mostly as an intrapersonal construct, forgiveness and reconciliation should be clearly dissociated, and justice or personal healing motivations for forgiveness should dominate.

We expected that the main difference between the Congolese and the French should be observed for the Change of Heart factor, which expresses the idea of restoration of previous relationships. A typical item was "To forgive someone necessarily means to start feeling affection towards him/her again." We expected that the Congolese scores should be higher than the French scores. We also expected that the endorsement of the items linked with More-Than-Dyadic Process should be higher among the Congolese than among the French. Moreover, items linked with Forgiveness Is Good should receive higher agreement ratings among the Congolese than among the French (and the reverse should be observed for items linked with Forgiveness Is Bad). However, for these last two factors, we expected weaker Congo–France differences than for the other factors mainly because in both individualistic and collectivistic cultures, and despite possible differences in conceptualizations, forgiveness tends to be positively viewed.

METHOD

PARTICIPANTS

The participants came from the Kasai region of Congo and the Midi-Pyrénées region of France and were recruited on the campuses of universities or in the streets of the main cities and villages. There were 276 Congolese participants (156 females and 120 males) and 343 French participants (185 females and 158 males). Age ranged from 18 to 82. Mean

ages were 40.75 ($SD = 16.78$) for Congolese and 39.78 ($SD = 14.11$) for French. The participation rates were 72% and 80% for the Congolese and the French, respectively (in other words, originally 380 Congolese and 430 French were contacted for participation). The data were gathered from January to June 2001, and all participants were fluent in French.

MATERIAL

We used a slightly modified version of the Conceptualizations of Forgiveness Questionnaire by Mullet et al. (2004; in French, Questionnaire de Conceptions du Pardon), which contained 20 items (see Table 1). A pilot study was conducted with 10 Congolese individuals, who expressed their opinion on the possible ways in which these items may be understood. Four items from the original questionnaire were judged ambiguous by these informants and were therefore rephrased (with their help). A 17-cm scale was placed after each sentence. This was chosen to provide enough latitude in the responses (especially in case the answers are at one or the other extreme of the scale). The two extremes of the scales were labeled *completely disagree* and *completely agree*.

PROCEDURE

The participants responded individually at home or at the university (depending on what was most convenient for each participant). They were asked to rate the extent to which they agreed with each item on the 17-cm scale. When the participants said that they did not understand an item, the item was individually explained to them (in such a way that the responses were not influenced). This occurred in 11 cases.

RESULTS

Each participant's rating was converted to a numerical value expressing the distance (1 to 17) between the point on the response scale and the left anchor, which served as the origin. These numerical values were then subjected to statistical analyses. A confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) was first conducted on the French sample. The model tested was the correlated four-factor model proposed by Mullet et al. (2004). All path coefficients were significant (goodness-of-fit index [GFI] = .91, comparative fit index [CFI] = .88, $\chi^2/df = 2.24$, root mean square residual [RMR] = .07, root mean square error of approximation [RMSEA] = .06). On the More-Than-Dyadic Process factor, however, several loadings were judged to be low, and the overall CFI value was lower than .90. As a result, four of the five items corresponding to this factor were parceled, and two parcels were created (see Table 1). A second CFA was conducted on the remaining items and the two parcels. The fit of the model was judged satisfactory (GFI = .92, CFI = .90, $\chi^2/df = 2.30$, RMR = .06, RMSEA = .06). A third CFA was conducted on the Congolese sample using the same model. Again, all path coefficients were significant (GFI = .93, CFI = .93, $\chi^2/df = 1.37$, RMR = .05, RMSEA = .04). Table 1 shows the results of the CFAs and the Cronbach's alpha values.

For each factor, a mean score was computed by averaging the five corresponding item scores. A series of four ANOVAs with a Gender \times Country (2×2) design was conducted on these mean scores. Regarding Change of Heart, the Congolese scores were significantly higher than the French scores, and the effect was strong ($12.09 - 7.65 = 4.44$, Cohen's

TABLE 1
Results of the Confirmatory Factor Analyses

Items	Congo Factors					France Factors				
	I	II	III	IV	M	I	II	III	IV	M
<i>Change of Heart</i>										
To forgive someone necessarily means to start feeling affection toward him or her again.	.65				12.34	.81				6.86
To stop feeling resentment towards someone means that he or she has been forgiven.	.35				13.24	.56				8.33
To forgive someone necessarily means to reconcile with him or her.	.47				12.95	.68				7.72
To forgive someone necessarily means to start trusting him or her again.	.47				10.49	.48				7.32
To forgive someone necessarily means to start feeling sympathy towards him or her again. ^a	.62				11.49	.77				8.11
<i>Forgiveness Is Good</i>										
To forgive someone is the best way of ensuring that he or she will forgive you when the time comes.	.38				9.20	.44				7.26
To forgive someone necessarily means to lead that person to accept his or her wrongs.	.63				10.68	.76				8.56
To forgive someone means to encourage him or her to behave better in the future.	.55				11.79	.60				10.21
To forgive someone necessarily means to make him or her set right his or her wrongs.	.58				10.79	.73				8.01
To forgive someone necessarily means to make this person regret his or her acts. ^a	.64				8.83	.65				7.61
<i>Forgiveness Is Bad</i>										
To forgive someone necessarily means to approve of what he or she has done to you.	.39				5.43	.57				2.44
To forgive someone means to encourage him or her to behave wrongly again.	.57				3.59	.65				3.91
To forgive someone is to act in a morally wrong way.	.77				3.49	.70				3.16
Forgiving necessarily shows that one has no backbone. ^a	.51				3.83	.61				3.83
Forgiving is demonstrating that one is overproud. ^a	.64				2.93	.42				3.53
<i>More-Than-Dyadic Process</i>										
It is possible to forgive someone even after he or she has gone far away.	.52				13.50	.61				11.01
It is possible to forgive a person even after he or she has passed away.	.35				12.02	.73				10.35
It is possible to forgive a person even without personally knowing the person. ^b	.46				13.64	.78				7.88
It is possible to forgive the wrongs that have been done to people close to you (e.g., parents). ^b	.46				13.64	.58				9.69
It is possible to forgive the person(s) responsible for an institution (e.g., the state, the church, an association, etc.). ^b	.46				12.81	.76				7.60
Alpha (computed on each sample)	.65	.68	.68	.54	.79	.77	.72	.68		
Alpha (computed across the two samples)	.80	.75	.69	.69						

a. Items that were rephrased.

b. Items that were parceled.

$d = 1.23$), $F(1, 615) = 226.13$, $p < .001$. Also, regarding More-Than-Dyadic Process, the Congolese scores were significantly higher than the French scores, and the effect was strong ($13.13 - 9.30 = 3.83$, $d = 1.20$), $F(1, 615) = 203.19$, $p < .001$. Regarding Forgiveness Is Good, the difference between the Congolese and the French was also significant, and the effect was moderate ($10.26 - 8.34 = 1.92$, $d = .50$), $F(1, 615) = 37.62$, $p < .001$. Regarding Forgiveness Is Bad, the difference between the Congolese and the French ($3.84 - 3.40 = 0.44$, $d = .17$) was not significant. The gender effect was never significant. Finally, correlations with age were not significant.

DISCUSSION

The same four-factor structure that was found in Mullet et al. (2004) was replicated on the Congolese and the French samples. As hypothesized, the Congo–France differences found for Change of Heart were strong and significant. For the Congolese (collectivistic culture) more than the French (individualistic culture), forgiveness was conceived more as the end of resentment toward the offender and the restoration of sympathy, affection, and trust leading to reconciliation with the offender. As hypothesized, the Congo–France differences found for More-Than-Dyadic Process were also strong and significant. For the Congolese participants, more than for the French participants, forgiveness was conceived as extensible to state and religious officials, associations, and even personally unknown or deceased people. The items linked with Forgiveness Is Good received higher agreement ratings among the Congolese than among the French, although as hypothesized, the difference between the two groups was weaker. It should be noted that even among Congolese participants, the mean level of agreement was close to the middle of the agreement scale. Finally, both groups presented a low degree of agreement with items related to the Forgiveness Is Bad factor.

These results strengthen the views expressed by Sandage and Williamson (2005) stating that willingness to forgive may be more characteristic of collectivistic cultures than individualistic cultures. However, this may not be related to forgiveness's being more valued in collectivistic cultures than in individualistic cultures but may be more because of the fact that in collectivist cultures, forgiveness is conceived as extensible to groups of persons (e.g., an association, the state, the church, etc.) and even sometimes is offered on behalf of close relationships. As a result, opportunities for forgiving are probably more numerous in collectivist societies than in individualist societies. Also, in societies where individuals are primarily viewed as members of groups, as in Congolese villages, forgiveness may be more frequently considered simply because it constitutes a strategy that allows being relieved from resentment toward members of the group. This may ease life considerably where contacts with others are an everyday necessity. Finally, these results are also consistent with findings by Kadima Kadiangandu and Mullet (2007) showing that for Congolese people, intergroup forgiveness (collective forgiveness) is considered a meaningful concept and should be implemented in politics (e.g., as it was in the South African Truth and Reconciliation Commission).

Future research using the four subscales of the Conceptualizations of Forgiveness Questionnaire is needed to explore whether the four-factor structure found in the Congolese and French samples is applicable to other cultures and to determine if there are other important cultural differences regarding the conceptualizations of forgiveness.

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