From Justice to Forgiveness: Stress, Resilience, and Life Satisfaction as Mediators

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ABSTRACT

In past research, beliefs about justice for the self and justice for others have been shown to both prevent and promote forgiveness. In this study, life satisfaction and resilience (but not stress) mediated the relationship between justice for the self and forgiveness. However, the belief in justice for others directly predicted forgiveness and was not mediated by the psychological processes of resilience, stress, and satisfaction.

INTRODUCTION

Past studies have begun to examine how the willingness to forgive is linked to beliefs about justice (i.e., whether the self and others receive fair outcomes and procedures). As noted by Worthington, Van Oyen Witvliet, Pietrini, and Miller (2007), “Unforgiveness is hypothesized to be directly related to the amount of remaining injustice being experienced” (p. 292).

Recent research has demonstrated that the link between justice and forgiveness may not be so simple and that a variety of variables may mediate the relationship (cf. Lucas et al., 2010). Specifically, stress and forgiveness may be linked because of a decay in anger and hostility (Orcutt, 2006). Positive (or fair) outcomes foster resiliency, which in turn fosters forgiveness by eliminating adverse events (Seery, Holman, & Silver, 2010). Also, life satisfaction, which is a result of positive well-being (Worthington, Van Oyen Witvliet, and Miller, 2007), may promote forgiveness.

Thus, the current study extended the research of Lucas et al. (2010) by examining the impact of people’s beliefs about justice for the self and others on relevant psychological processes (stress, resilience, and life satisfaction), and the role of these processes in predicting the willingness to forgive past, current, and future transgressions.

METHOD

UWSP students (N = 213) completed an online survey incorporating existing, validated measures of each of the variables below (cf. Lucas et al., 2010). All items used Likert-type scales for responding.

Justice Beliefs. Students completed measures of Justice for Others (e.g., “People are generally subjected to processes that are fair”) and Justice for the Self (e.g., “I am generally subjected to processes that are fair”).

Psychological Processes. Measures of Stress (e.g., “In the last month, how often have you felt that things are going your way?”), Resilience (e.g., “I am able to adapt and change”), and Life Satisfaction (e.g., “I am satisfied with my life”) were included.

Forgiveness. Dispositional Forgiveness (e.g., “I hold grudges against myself for negative things I’ve done”) and Forgiveness of Past Events (e.g., “I’ll make him or her pay”) were measured. A measure of Forgiveness in the Future included reading a scenario and asking how likely the student would be to forgive the person in the scenario.

RESULTS

Relationships among the variables were tested using Path Analysis. Path Analysis involves conducting a series of Multiple Regression analyses in order to identify the unique relationships among variables in a particular causal model.

Figure 1 below presents the trimmed path model (i.e., the final model after removing non-significant paths). It shows that Justice for the Self significantly predicted Life Satisfaction, Stress, and Resilience, whereas Justice for Others had no effect on Stress, Resilience, or Life Satisfaction. In turn, Resilience and Life Satisfaction significantly predicted Dispositional Forgiveness, whereas only Resilience predicted Forgiveness of Past Transgressions.

Thus, the impact of Justice for the Self on types of Forgiveness was mediated by the psychological processes (Life Satisfaction and Resilience in particular). Importantly, the belief that there is Justice for Others directly impacted Dispositional Forgiveness, and this result was not mediated by the psychological process variables.

DISCUSSION

The results indicate that certain psychological processes play an important mediational role in the link between justice and forgiveness. Consistent with emerging studies (e.g., Lucas et al., 2010), this study demonstrates that the belief that people receive fair outcomes and procedures in the course of daily events has a role in impacting people’s lives, and indirectly plays a role in the willingness to forgive the self and others.

The links between the psychological mediators and forgiveness are consistent with the literature. For example, Seery, Holman, and Silver (2010) showed that resiliency does indeed contribute to forgiveness, partly based on the events that lead people to develop resiliency. Abundant literature suggests a link between life satisfaction and forgiveness (albeit in the opposite causal order).

Interestingly, stress did not predict any of the three types of forgiveness (dispositional, past, or future). This lack of relationship between stress and forgiveness may be due to the experience of stress as a temporary and malleable state (as compared to resiliency, which may be more similar to a personality characteristic). For example, Orcutt (2006) showed that stress does predict offense-specific forgiveness, perhaps because increased time since an offending event increases the willingness to forgive. As such, stress may be less related to dispositional forgiveness.

REFERENCES


