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Why Seek Forgiveness? Using Expectancy, Instrumentality, and Valence Theory

Deborah Runke

Abstract

In our daily lives, we exist side by side with others. Offenses are inevitable. What may be much less common in our relationships with others, however, may be the attempt to repair the damage done by the offense through the process of seeking forgiveness. Why do some people apparently seek forgiveness readily while others do not? What provides the motivation to seek forgiveness or the likelihood of doing so? Vroom's (1964) theory of motivation provided a useful model for exploring these questions. Two hypotheses based on that theory provided the framework for the study. The first hypothesis proposed that expectancy (or self-efficacy in seeking forgiveness), instrumentality, and valence predict motivation to seek forgiveness, and the second stated that the same three factors of expectancy, instrumentality, and valence would also predict the likelihood of seeking forgiveness. Results support the first hypothesis and suggest that expectancy, instrumentality, and valence do predict motivation. The second hypothesis is not supported however, as the factor of instrumentality does not predict the likelihood of seeking forgiveness. Instead, expectancy, valence, and the severity of the offense predict the likelihood of seeking forgiveness. This study also offered participants the opportunity to describe why they would, or would not, seek forgiveness. These comments suggest some intriguing insights into other factors that may also affect motivation and likelihood of seeking forgiveness.

Distinguished US Naval officer and pioneer in computing, Rear Admiral Grace Hopper once advised an interviewer, “It's easier to ask forgiveness than it is to get permission” (Hamblen, 1986).

Hopper’s advice brings to mind Vroom’s expectancy, instrumentality, and valence theory of motivation (Vroom, 1964). That theory, although originally developed around motivation in the workplace, provides the framework for this study.

This article begins with a review of constructs related to seeking forgiveness. A discussion of motivation, and Vroom’s (1964) theory in particular, and each of the factors related to his theory – expectancy, instrumentality, and valence – follows. Each factor includes a review of the extant literature, which provides insights into how the factor might predict seeking forgiveness. Finally, two hypotheses regarding the use of Vroom’s theory of motivation to predict the motivation for and likelihood of seeking forgiveness are presented.

Constructs Related to Seeking Forgiveness

In the past twenty years, there has been a considerable increase in interest in the subject of forgiveness. Most of that research has examined granting forgiveness, while the subject of seeking forgiveness has not received the same level of attention.

The definition put forward by Sandage, Worthington, Hight, and Berry (2000) offers a valuable and useful perspective. Seeking forgiveness occurs when an offender accepts moral accountability for an offense and attempts to repair the relationship with the victim. This definition closely aligns with the forces of motivation described by Vroom (1964). Attempting accountability and repair implies seeking forgiveness self-efficacy. Instrumentality is evident from this definition as well, as attempts to repair a relationship may yield different outcomes. Finally, the force of valence emerges as one hopes for successful relational repair. Thus, the

Sandage et al. definition is the one that informs this study.

Although sometimes used synonymously with seeking forgiveness, it may be more accurate to view apologies as a common, and sometimes the only, step in the process of seeking forgiveness. The Cross-Cultural Speech Acts Realization Project identified five elements of apologies across a variety of cultures (Scher and Darley, 1997). These components include (a) “I’m sorry” or some other similar phrase; (b) an explanation of the situation; (c) acknowledgement of the offender’s responsibility; (d) an offer of reparation or an attempt to make the situation better; and (e) a promise not to repeat the offense. Conspicuous in its absence among these elements is a spoken request for forgiveness from the victim. Shlenker and Darby (1981) observed that the elements of apologies do vary according to the severity of the offense. They observed that these elements range from a simple phrase such as “Pardon me” in low severity offenses to expressions of remorse, offers of help, self-reproach, and, finally, requests for forgiveness in situations of greater harm.

The ideal outcome of the seeking forgiveness process is reconciliation. Reconciliation occurs when the parties involved in an offense behave in mutually trustworthy ways, and re-establish trust in the relationship (Worthington, Sandage, & Berry, 2000). It is not enough to address and satisfy the tangible issues between them. They must satisfy the emotional needs of the parties involved in a conflict before reconciliation can occur (Shnablen & Nadler, 2008).

Motivation to Seek Forgiveness

Social norms may direct the behaviors of seeking forgiveness, but offer little insight into the factors that provide the energy for it. Motivation theory offers more insight into how the offender reaches the end goal of forgiveness, and perhaps even reconciliation.

Social norms dictate that offenders should apologize for their transgressions (Sugimoto, 1998), but offer no assurance how the victim will receive their words. Victims often have significantly different interpretations and fewer recollections about whether an apology happened at all (Baumeister, Stillwell, & Wotman 1990). Even when received, apologies can lead to trigger blame, retaliation, and aggression when the offender makes no amends and the victim sees the offense as intentional and doubts the offender's sincerity (Zechmeister, Garcia, Romeo, & Vas, 2004; Ohbuchi, Kameda, & Agarie, 1989). An assessment of the sincerity of the offender's amends mediates the victim's willingness to reconcile (Ohbuchi et al). Social norms may dictate the "what" of an apology, but victims judge the "why" of it when accepting an apology, offering forgiveness, or even reconciling with their offenders.

Vroom's (1964) theory suggests that the "why" of motivation to seek forgiveness results from conscious choices. Three factors describe these choices, those of expectancy, instrumentality, and valence. They combine multiplicatively to predict motivation. Vroom used the term "expectancy" to describe an individual's belief that his specific efforts will yield specific results. Instrumentality embodies the individual's prediction that a certain outcome will result from his actions. Finally, valence represents the degree to which the individual values a certain outcome.

Although Vroom (1964) used the term expectancy in his work, a review of the literature

reveals the word may be used in other contexts, such as alcohol expectancy (Brown, Christiansen, & Goldman, 1987) or life expectancy (Katz, Branch, Branson, Papsidero, Beck, & Greer, 1983). Bandura (1979) defines self-efficacy in terms similar to Vroom's expectancy. Self-efficacy is the belief that one can successfully behave in a way that will produce a specific outcome. For this reason, I will use the term seeking forgiveness self-efficacy instead of expectancy throughout this report.

Hopper's (Hamblen, 1986) observation that it is easier to seek forgiveness than to obtain permission squarely addresses two factors of Vroom's theory of motivation and implies the third. A certain degree of expectancy, or seeking forgiveness self-efficacy, enables an individual to perceive one action – asking for forgiveness – as easier than another does. The individual's assessment that permission will be slow or denied altogether describes instrumentality. Valence, the degree to which one values a specific outcome, is implicit in Hopper's wry comments. The individual values approval or permission, and has considered two separate strategies to obtain it.

Self-Efficacy Predicts Seeking Forgiveness

With those definitions established, I now turn my attention to examining what prior research suggests about the relationship between self-efficacy and seeking forgiveness. Bandura (1979) suggested that the degree to which an individual believes in his ability to perform a task predicts whether he will even try. Prior research suggests that moral development, personality characteristics, and even the expectations of others may negatively affect an individual's ability to act.

Some whose actions harm the relationship with another describe themselves as unable to seek forgiveness. Research suggests that they may be accurate in their self-assessment. The development of levels of reasoning and personality studies offer some insight.

Kohlberg and Hersh (2001) offer insight to how moral development may mediate an individual's ability to seek forgiveness. A child first learns certain behaviors in response to authority and as a means to avoid punishment. He develops an awareness of his own needs, but over time, begins to recognize the moral conflicts that arise between the members of his own group. Moral behavior expands in response to obtain the approval of others, and then doing one's duty to maintain order within one's group. Experience and growing awareness of others inevitably reveals different views of groups. Confronted with this dilemma, an individual embraces actions that the whole society has accepted, but acknowledges that rational examination may cause the society to change its views or laws. At the highest stage of moral development, the universal principles of the individual's conscience provide his orientation toward right action. The universal principles include justice, reciprocal and equal human rights, and dictate respect for the dignity of others. "The more one encounters situations of moral conflict that are not adequately resolved by one's present reasoning structure, the more likely one is to develop more complex ways of thinking about and resolving such conflicts" (Kohlberg et al., 2001, p. 57).

The ability to take another's perspective and capacity for guilt influence an individual's moral judgment. What, then, of those who cannot take the perspective of another? Individuals who transgress against others may fail to seek forgiveness because of narcissistic tendencies, such as self-absorption and low empathy, or self-monitoring (Sandage et al., 2000). In autobiographical accounts of offenses, perpetrators are much more likely than their victims to deny the negative consequences of their offense (Baumeister et al., 1990). Chiaramello, Sastro, and Mullet (2008) observed that, compared to those who indicate they are able to seek forgiveness, those who describe themselves as unable to seek forgiveness demonstrate lower

levels of agreeableness and openness, and higher levels of paranoid tendencies. In contrast, individuals whose worldview drives them to seek forgiveness, even if it results in a position of inferiority to their victim, demonstrate higher levels of agreeableness.

Expectations of others affect perceptions of one's ability. Offenders anticipate that victims are more likely to expect and desire an apology if the offense resulted in severe harm (Ohbuchi et al., 1989). Individuals with high social anxiety who are confronted with both high expectations and knowledge that another will know of their actions are more likely to underperform people with low social anxiety (Baumgardner & Brownlee, 1987).

Thus, factors such as moral development, personality characteristics, and the expectations of others may negatively influence an individual's seeking forgiveness self-efficacy.

Instrumentality Predicts Seeking Forgiveness

As for self-efficacy, prior research suggests that instrumentality, the belief that a certain outcome will occur, also predict seeking forgiveness. Positive instrumentality, Vroom (1964) suggested, occurred when an individual predicted or believe that a specific outcome was impossible without a specific prior behavior.

Exline, Deshea and Holeman (2007) observed that the most commonly cited motives for apologizing are a desire to help the other person or the relationship and relieving guilt. Is it reasonable to anticipate these goals will result from seeking forgiveness? The answer, it seems, is yes.

When an offense was relatively minor, there is greater support for predictions of a positive outcome. Ohbuchi et al. (1989) suggest that offenders can expect less verbal aggression from their victims when they quickly and spontaneously apology for these minor hurts. The effects of a quick apology diminish, however, as the severity of the harm increases.

Seeking forgiveness may also result in positive affect. For example, those who imagine themselves seeking forgiveness from a victim feel reduced sadness, anger, guilt, shame (Witvliet, Ludwig, & Bauer, 2002; Bassett, Bassett, Lloyd, & Johnson, 2006) or increased gratitude and hope (Witvliet et al).

It seems, then, that offenders are justified in predicting a positive outcome will result from seeking forgiveness. Prior research suggests that an offender may reasonably expect that an apology will contribute to improved affect or lower levels of aggression from the victim.

Valence Predicts Seeking Forgiveness

The third force identified by Vroom (1964) is valence, a preference for a particular outcome. Seeking forgiveness is an interpersonal behavior, and thus it is likely that the value of the relationship provides the valence for motivation.

Baumeister and Leary (1995) hypothesized that human beings have a need to belong, and will show distress and resist breaking the bonds of attachment. In addition, they observed that “forming or solidifying social attachments generally produces positive emotion, whereas real, imagined, or even potential threats to social bonds generate a variety of unpleasant emotional states” (p 520). It seems reasonable to assume that offenses committed against another may represent a threat to a social bond and generate distress for the offender. It is likely, however, that nature of the relationship moderates the level of distress.

The social exchange theory posits that a cost-benefit analysis and comparison of this relationship with alternatives forms human relationships. In contrast, when one partner in a communal relationship gives benefits to another, the need of the other dictates the benefit, and not an expectation of reciprocity (Clark & Mills, 1979). Thus, social exchange theory more typically applies to casual and impersonal relationships, while communal relationships are more

likely to describe close friendships, romantic, and family relationships (Clark, Mills, & Powell, 1986).

When an offense occurs, both the offender and the victim incur a cost. For example, the victim is more likely to continue to feel anger or anxiety about the offense (Berry, Worthington, Parrott, O'Connor, & Wade, 2001), while the offender may feel guilt or shame, or believe that others view him as relatively immoral (Shnablen et al., 2008). Shnablen et al. describe these diverse responses in terms of needs that each party experiences. Each party must meet the needs of the other before reconciliation is likely to occur. The offender must meet the victim's needs for power. The victim's conciliatory response meets the offender's need for social acceptance.

Clark et al. (1986) observed that the type of relationship – exchange or communal – predicts how, if at all, the partners will keep track of these needs of the other. This suggests that if the offending partner wants a communal relationship, with the victim he is more likely to keep track of her needs, even if she cannot respond in a like manner. In contrast, if the offender prefers an exchange relationship with her victim, she is more likely to keep track of his needs only if he is likely to reciprocate.

Would these outcomes cause an offender to value receiving forgiveness from another? The research seems to support this observation.

Bassett et al. (2006) described a construct called behavioral sorrow. Offenders who experience behavioral sorrow have genuine care about the impact of an offense on their victim. Further, they intend to change their ways, and want to repair damage done by their offense. As they predicted, behavioral sorrow positively relates to seeking forgiveness. Exline et al. (2007) noted a similar tendency. When asked to recall situations in which individuals apologized for harm done to another, a close relationship with the victim predicted an apology. Further, the

study suggests that the apology situations were successful in solidifying attachments, as these situations were more likely to include reports of reconciliation.

It seems likely, then, that the nature of, and value attached to, the interpersonal relationship with the victim predicts an offender's valence for seeking forgiveness. Research suggests that closer relationships predict the offender will attach greater value seeking forgiveness.

Hypotheses

The first hypothesis is that the greater the levels of seeking forgiveness self-efficacy, instrumentality, and valence, the greater the motivation to seek forgiveness. The second hypothesis is similar to the first, but focused on the likelihood of seeking forgiveness. I predict that the greater the levels of seeking forgiveness self-efficacy, instrumentality, and valence, the greater the likelihood that the offender will seek forgiveness.

Method

Participants and Procedures

Participants in this study were 134 college students, but the responses provided by two cases were strongly anomalous, with responses that were highly inconsistent and more than three standard deviations from the mean in nearly every category. Consequently, this study focused on the remaining 132 students (56% males, 44% females) who participated for a small amount of extra credit in a psychology class. Ages of the participants ranged from 17 to 41 years. The median age was 19, while the mean was 20.28 ($SD = 3.6$). First year students represented the largest group that participated in this study (39%). Second year students represented 21% of the participants, while 11% were third year, 17% were fourth, 11% were fifth year, and one graduate student (1%). Because this study used a sample of college students, use extreme caution in

generalizing to populations.

The institution's research review board approved this study, the informed consent form, the survey, and study debriefing form. Each participant received an informed consent form that clearly indicated the study's purpose was to understand motivation for seeking forgiveness. Further, the consent form indicated that participation in the study was confidential and voluntary, and participants could withdraw at any time without penalty. All participants signed the form and completed the survey fully.

The participants were solicited at the end of the marking period from undergraduate psychology classes. Each interested student ($N = 132$) received a survey form, which they completed independently and silently, and then returned to individual who administered the study. Participants took between 10 and 15 minutes to complete the form. The experimenter gave each participant a debriefing form upon receipt of the completed survey.

Instrument and Measures

This study modified a five-item, scenario-based scale – the Transgression Narrative Test of Forgiveness (“TNTF”) – developed by Berry et al. (2001). The TNTF scale was designed to measure dispositional forgivingness across situations in which the relationship with, and the blameworthiness of, the offender varied. Given the significant dispositional correlation between granting forgiveness and seeking forgiveness (Sandage et al., 2000; Chiaramello et al., 2008), the scenario perspective was changed from the victim to that of the offender. Instead of assessing the victim's willingness to forgive, the modified instrument explored the offender's motivation to seek forgiveness.

Each TNTF scenario includes only one five-point scale on which an individual indicates how likely he is to forgive the offender. The scenarios included academic cheating, a child

injured by babysitting negligence, a forgetful act, gossip about a coworker, and a drunken assault. The modified instrument used for this study includes several scales for each scenario. Participants used the additional scales to indicate (a) likelihood of seeking forgiveness (e.g. “How likely am I to seek forgiveness from the person who loaned me the paper?”); (b) ability to seek forgiveness (e.g. “How able am I to seek forgiveness from the person who loaned me the paper?”); (c) prediction whether the victim would grant forgiveness (e.g. “If I ask for forgiveness from the person who loaned me the paper, how likely do I think I would be to receive forgiveness?”); (d) desire to receive forgiveness (e.g. “How much do I value receiving forgiveness from the person who loaned me the paper?”); (e) motivation to seek forgiveness (e.g. “How motivated am I to seek forgiveness from the person who loaned me the paper?”); (f) perception of severity of the offense (e.g. “I would rate the seriousness of what I did as ...”); and (g) assessment of how easy it was to relate to the scenario (e.g. “I found it easy to relate to this story.”). Participants recorded their responses to each question on a five-point Likert scale that ranged from 1 (not at all) to 5 (extremely). Additionally, each participant described why they would, or would not, seek forgiveness for each scenario. The entire, modified survey instrument is reproduced in Appendix A.

As shown in the table in Table 1, five of the seven subscales of the modified instrument – seeking forgiveness self-efficacy, valence, motivation to seek forgiveness, perceived severity of the offense, and ease of relating to the scenario – have adequate reliability, with a Cronbach’s alpha (α) of .7 or higher. Additionally, all of the questions except that concerning instrumentality (likelihood of receiving forgiveness) had good inter-item correlation. Consequently, an average score for each of the instrument subscales provided the basis for the analysis.

The survey instrument gave participants an opportunity to comment why they would or would not seek forgiveness in each scenario. Most of the comments reflected the negative affect of guilt or shame. Other comments mentioned behaviors and attitudes more consistent with impression regulation. Yet others pointed to the nature of the relationship with the victim as a significant factor in the decision to seek or not seek forgiveness. Many of the comments incorporated more than one of these dimensions. Appendix B contains the guidelines used to identify the themes of the comments.

A second rater provided a validity check on the comment categorization. This rater is a trained and experienced facilitator who works in a program based on twelve-step principles to help individuals and couples reconcile damaged relationships. A sample of 20 questionnaires was selected. The second rater then reviewed and categorized all of the comments of the sample. Next, four groups of sums were created for each participant. Two groups of sums, one for each of the raters, reflected the count of comments assigned to the categories related to the decision to seek forgiveness. The other two groups of sums reflected the number of comments each of the raters assigned to categories related to the decision not to seek forgiveness. For example, one participant stated, "I'd feel horrible for endangering the other person's academic career" as a reason for seeking forgiveness. The researcher categorized the comment to the guilt category. The second rater also assigned the comment to the guilt category. After calculating the sum groups, there was one in the guilt category in the researcher's sum group, and the second rater's sum group had a count of one for guilt. Finally, the sum groups for each of the raters were analyzed for correlation between them.

The correlation between the two raters was generally both significant and strong, with one notable exception. There was no correlation for the comments related to the importance of

relationships in the decision to seek forgiveness. Correlation coefficients for the other comment categories range from shame cited in the decision to seek forgiveness ($r = .66, p < .01$), to preferring to not seek forgiveness for fear it would not be granted ($r = .97, p < .01$). The table in Table 2 contains the inter-rater correlations for the comment categories and the percentage of participants who made at least one comment assigned to the category. The high degree of correlation between the researcher and second rater justified using the original ratings in the analysis.

Results

The average score reflects the same 1 (not very) to 5 (extremely) scale as the subscale. Means and standard deviations respectively for each subscale are likelihood of seeking forgiveness (4.48, 0.51, $N = 132$); seeking forgiveness self-efficacy (3.46, 0.88, $N = 132$); instrumentality (2.85, 0.57, $N = 131$); valence (4.10, 0.64, $N = 131$); motivation to seek forgiveness (4.31, 0.60, $N = 130$); severity of offense (4.11, 0.60, $N = 132$); and ease of relating to the scenario (2.79, 0.87, $N = 132$). All of the subscales, except ease of relating, were skewed. A Kolmogorov-Smirnov test of normality revealed that the skewness was significant.

Since the skewness was significant, it was appropriate to compare the Pearson's and Spearman's correlation coefficient. Both analyses yielded essentially the same results, thus it seemed reasonable to use parametric techniques to analyze the results.

As shown in Table 3, a positive relationship was observed between seeking forgiveness self-efficacy (the offender's perception of her ability to seek forgiveness) and other factors. Offenders who believe they have the ability to seek forgiveness have higher instrumentality and express somewhat more confidence in the likelihood they will receive forgiveness ($r = .27, p < .01$). They similarly describe themselves as somewhat more motivated ($r = .25, p < .01$) and

more likely to seek forgiveness ($r = .25, p < .01$).

The offender's instrumentality, the prediction that he would receive forgiveness, did not correlate to the likeliness that he would seek forgiveness, but a small, negative correlation was observed between instrumentality and motivation to seek forgiveness ($r = -.22, p < .05$). This relationship was unexpected; it was anticipated that a positive relationship would exist between instrumentality and both the motivation to seek forgiveness and the likelihood of seeking forgiveness.

As predicted, the value that an offender attaches to receiving forgiveness from the one hurt by his actions relates to motivation to seek forgiveness as well as the likelihood of doing so. Valence positively correlates with both the motivation to seek forgiveness ($r = .80, p < .01$) and the likelihood of seeking forgiveness ($r = .71, p < .01$). This finding is in line with that of Bassett et al. (2006) and Exline et al. (2007), who both observed that the closeness of the relationship with the one harmed positively related to seeking forgiveness.

Hypothesis 1 – Motivation to Seek Forgiveness

The first hypothesis suggested that greater levels of seeking forgiveness self-efficacy (expectancy), instrumentality, and valence, would predict greater motivation to seek forgiveness. A linear regression was performed, and the best-fit model supports this hypothesis, with an R^2 of .68. The results of the regression analysis are presented in Table 4.

The nature and closeness of relationships predict prosocial responses toward the individual who has been put at a disadvantage in some way (Clark et al., 1986; Bassett et al., 2006; Exline et al., 2007). It seems reasonable, that valence (how much an offender values receiving forgiveness from a victim) will predict his motivation to seek forgiveness. In fact, valence had the strongest predictive value in this model ($\beta = .75, p < .01$).

An offender's self-efficacy or belief that she has the ability to seek forgiveness does have a small predictive value ($\beta = .17, p < .01$) on motivation to seek forgiveness.

The most unexpected finding was that instrumentality had not only a small, but also a negative predictive value ($\beta = -.17, p < .01$) on an offender's motivation to seek forgiveness. It is a challenge to make sense of this observation. An initial thought was that severity, which does have a moderate and negative relationship with an offender's assessment of the probability of receiving forgiveness, might suggest an explanation. As discussed later, however, multiple regression analysis revealed that severity has no predictive value in the motivation to seek forgiveness.

Hypothesis 2 – Likelihood of Seeking Forgiveness

The second hypothesis is similar to the first, but propose that the greater the levels of seeking forgiveness self-efficacy, instrumentality, and valence predict a greater the likelihood that the offender will seek forgiveness. The results do not support this hypothesis. Multiple-regression analysis reveals that two of the three factors, seeking forgiveness self-efficacy ($\beta = .16, p < .05$) and valence ($\beta = .62, p < .01$), predict the likelihood of seeking forgiveness. Contrary to expectations, instrumentality had no predictive value in this hypothesis.

Self-efficacy and valence together explain slightly less than half of the variance of an offender's likelihood of seeking forgiveness ($R^2 = .44$). It seemed reasonable to consider whether another factor, offense severity, improved the prediction of how likely it was that an offender would seek forgiveness.

The Effect of Offense Severity

Multiple regression analysis was used to examining the effect that the severity of an offense on other factors. In fact, offenders who perceived that their actions caused greater harm

to another were more likely to value receiving forgiveness. A medium positive effect was observed in the relationship between the perceived severity of offense and valence, the value of receiving forgiveness ($r = .39, p < .01$). Likewise, when offense severity increased there was a corresponding moderate increase in motivation to seek forgiveness ($r = .40, p < .01$), and the likelihood of seeking forgiveness ($r = .36, p < .01$).

As Ohbuchi et al. (1989) observed, the severity of one's offense moderates the level of aggression in response from the victim. Victims are more likely to respond with aggression when the offense is severe. It was not surprising, then, to observe a negative relationship between the severity of offense and the instrumentality, or probability, of receiving forgiveness ($r = -.28, p < .01$). As offenses increased in severity, offenders had fewer expectations that forgiveness would be granted if they sought it.

Given the significant interaction between severity and other factors, it was worthwhile to examine any effect it might have on the models for motivation to seek forgiveness and likelihood of seeking forgiveness. The results revealed that severity did not predict motivation to seek forgiveness. On the other hand, introducing severity into the model for likelihood of seeking forgiveness did negligibly improve the fit, with an R^2 of .46 ($p < .05$). The factors, then, that predict the likelihood of seeking forgiveness are seeking forgiveness self-efficacy ($\beta = .17, p < .05$), valence ($\beta = .56, p < .01$), and severity ($\beta = .15, p < .05$).

Reasons Cited for Seeking or Not Seeking Forgiveness

At best, the comments only suggest other factors that may affect the motivation to seek or likelihood of seeking forgiveness. That said, however, there are some tantalizing clues to what those factors might be.

Consistent with Tangney, Stuewig and Mashek's (2007) description of the moral

emotions of guilt and shame, most participants (95%) cited guilt or empathy for the one harmed as the reason they would seek forgiveness. Although indicating that they would seek forgiveness, 58% of the participants made statements that included some of the elements of shame. Generally, these participants referred to their personal distress, describing themselves as “ashamed” or feeling terrible, and expressing a desire to “feel better” as their primary motivation for seeking forgiveness. When identifying why they would not seek forgiveness, 60% of participants made shame-based statements. Many of these comments referred to fear and emphasized a desire to hide from or avoid the person harmed.

Many of the comments hinted at impression regulation. A review of the subject by Schlenker and Seigold (1992) offered the three general categories of excusing, justifying, and a very narrow interpretation of apologizing as a framework for assessing the comments. Of those comments explaining why a participant would seek forgiveness, 20% also contained an element of excusing. Many of the participants, while indicating that they would seek forgiveness, also attributed blame to the victim. Furthermore, 28% of the participants described their apologies in terms that seemed more focused on altering the victim’s impression of the offender than on conveying regret for the offense.

When describing why they would not seek forgiveness, 37% of participants provided an excuse. Participants commonly blamed the victim for the offense, or attributed the offense to “losing track of time,” “falling asleep,” or “being drunk.” Nearly half of the participants (49%) who identified why they would not seek forgiveness justified or minimized the offense in some way. A quarter (25%) indicated they would not seek forgiveness because they did not believe they would receive it.

The importance of relationships was clear in explanations of why a participant would

seek forgiveness. Nearly three quarters (72%) referred to the relationship either as the primary reason for seeking forgiveness, or used terms like “friend,” rather than the impersonal “the person,” in their explanations. This is notable, since in only one of the scenarios was the offense committed against a friend. In the other four, the victim was identified as someone who was either not known at all, or was not well known.

Participants also mentioned relationships when explaining why they would not seek forgiveness. In these cases, however, the relationship was mentioned in minimizing or dismissive terms. Participants were quick to note that the victim was not a friend, not well known, and, in many cases, not important.

Discussion

The findings of this study suggest that the factors of seeking forgiveness self-efficacy, instrumentality, and valence predict motivation to seek forgiveness. Likelihood of seeking forgiveness, on the other hand, is predicted by self-efficacy, valence, and severity of the offense. The current study, however, does contain limitations and present opportunities for further study.

Limitations of This Study

Only college students participated in this study, and this may limit the generalizability of the findings. Kohlberg et al (2001) theorize that moral judgment develops in stages. Building on that work, Speicher (1994) observed that parental moral judgment predicted moral reasoning among adolescents. However, education limited the stage of moral judgment achieved as an adult. It is possible, then, that both the participants’ ages and exposure to higher education may have a bearing on these results.

Enright (1996) identifies several processes that are a part of receiving forgiveness from another. The process begins as the offender experiences the feelings of guilt or shame that result

from harming another. The offender may later apologize to the victim. Reconciliation may result from seeking forgiveness, but then again, may not. The comments provided by participants suggest that they may define the process of seeking forgiveness differently, with many focusing solely on their feelings, others including the dimension of an apology, and yet others expressing that reconciliation was essential. These differing interpretations of what it means to seek forgiveness may have affected assessments of at least one factor, seeking forgiveness self-efficacy. In short, an offender's perception of her ability to seek forgiveness may be idiosyncratic.

Although both hypotheses proposed that seeking forgiveness self-efficacy, instrumentality, and valence would predict both motivation and likelihood of seeking forgiveness, motivation and likelihood are not the same construct. It is not surprising that the independent variables explain motivation and likelihood to varying degrees. Any future studies in this area should operationalize motivation and likelihood of seeking forgiveness as distinctly different constructs.

The negative correlation observed between instrumentality and motivation to seek forgiveness was unexpected. This negative relationship may suggest the need to add to the model in future studies. The modified survey presented participants with only positive choices in both instrumentality and valence. Participants predicted the probability of receiving forgiveness, and identified how much they valued receiving forgiveness. There is, however, the possibility of negative instrumentality and negative valence associated with seeking forgiveness.

The negative affectivity of guilt enhances both offenders' need for reparation and fear of punishment (Caprara, Barbaranelli, Pastorelli, Cermak, & Rosza, 2001). Offenders may be justified in predicting that seeking forgiveness will not cause their fear to abate. Granted,

individuals who imagine seeking forgiveness from a victim feel reduced sadness, anger, guilt, shame, but they do not observe significant improvement in their fear (Witvliet et al., 2002).

Offenders may have good cause for fear. Apologies can lead to blame, retaliation, and aggression (Zechmeister et al., 2004; Ohbuchi et al., 1989), especially if the offense was serious. Baumeister et al., (1990) observed that offenders were much more likely to describe their victims' anger as inappropriate or excessive.

Offender also have cause to anticipate future regret if they apologize for an offense. Offenders were more likely to regret an apology when one or more of three variables characterized their situation (Exline et al., 2007). When offender and victim did not have a very close relationship, the offender is more likely to regret apologizing. Offenders are more likely to view their victims at least partly responsible for the offense (Baumeister et al., 1990), and are more likely to regret an apology when this is the case. Failing to receive forgiveness from the victim predicts that the offender will regret apologizing (Exline et al.).

This study did not ask participants to predict the fear of punishment (negative instrumentality) or to identify how much they may fear punishment or rejection (negative valence). Future studies should explore these negative dimensions in addition to the questions about positive instrumentality and positive valence.

Participant comments shed some light on their reasoning about decisions to seek, or not to seek, forgiveness. By their very nature, however, it was difficult to determine the participant's intent. For example, several participants responded, "I feel bad," when explaining why they would seek forgiveness. It is impossible to determine why they felt bad. Was it guilt for the committing the offending action? A response to the distress of the victim? A loss of face? How much bearing would any of those factors have on the overall motivation to seek forgiveness or

the likelihood of doing so? The comments, then, suggest some tantalizing clues for other factors that may better predict motivation or likelihood, but, little more than that.

Suggested Areas for Future Study

While this study provided some key insights into an offender's motivation to seek forgiveness, and the likelihood of doing so, it leaves other important questions unanswered.

Although seeking forgiveness self-efficacy does predict motivation to seek forgiveness, its effect is not as strong as expected. Speicher (1994) observed the significance of parental influence on the development of moral judgment in adolescents and education in adults. Participants in this study largely fell in that area between late adolescence and early adulthood, where education becomes the key factor in determining the stage of moral development the individual will achieve as an adult. This begs the question; would an individual consider she was more able to seek forgiveness if she received instruction in doing so?

The results of this study suggest that people describe themselves as motivated or likely to seek forgiveness, in spite of the prediction there is a low probability of receiving it. What factors compel someone to seek forgiveness even when he believes it may not be forthcoming? Tangney et al., (2007) points to the increased likelihood that guilt-proneness will lead to prosocial behaviors, while those who are prone to feelings to shame are more likely to avoid those prosocial behaviors. Does his other-oriented guilt allow him to move past anticipated rejection, and still seek forgiveness? On the other hand, does her self-focused shame magnify her belief that forgiveness will be withheld, and make seeking forgiveness even more daunting?

Those who embrace Christianity, however, are familiar with the Lord's Prayer, which seeks forgiveness while the petitioner grants forgiveness to others. Sandage et al., (2000) observed that religiosity did not predict seeking forgiveness, but does religiosity relate to self-

described motivation to seek forgiveness?

This study contributes to the body of knowledge about seeking forgiveness. There is more left to learn, however, as researchers continue to probe the question of what motivates someone to seek forgiveness? What makes her more likely to seek forgiveness? What might increase the likelihood that he will seek forgiveness?

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