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Is forgiveness a derivative of resentment?

Abstract

It is difficult to overstate the role of resentment and forgiveness in people's real lives. These phenomena influence all our interpersonal relationships, especially the closest ones. At the same time, much about them remains unclear. This study aims to identify the characteristics of these phenomena, their similarities and differences, as well as their connection to subjective well-being, which is one of the most widely used indicators of happiness. The findings suggest a certain degree of overlap between the concepts of resentment and forgiveness, but also point to significant differences between them. In particular, forgiveness implies a much stronger desire to forgive the offender, as well as a belief in the offender's remorse, a belief in their good intentions, and a belief that the offense was unintentional. The results of the correlational study showed the expected negative association between resentment and subjective well-being, and a positive association with unhappiness. However, no link was found between resentment and physical or mental health issues, nor were any positive associations found between forgiveness and well-being. These findings, as well as the new methodology for assessing resentment and forgiveness, require further investigation.

Keywords: resentment (unforgiveness), forgiveness, dispositional forgiveness, emotional forgiveness, subjective well-being

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G Breslavs, O Paramonova
Baltic International Academy, Latvia

Correspondence: Gershons Breslavs, Associate Profesor, Psychology Department, Baltic International Academy (Baltijas Starptautiskā Akadēmija), V. Seiles ielā 4, Rīga, LV 1003, Latvia, Tel +371 67100610

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Abbreviations: RAFS, resentment and forgiveness scale; BSW, berne questionnaire of subjective well-being

Introduction

It is unlikely that anyone would doubt that resentment and forgiveness are very important aspects of our emotional life. Both of these phenomena stem from an initial wrongdoing committed against a person by those who are important to them. The emotional impact of such a transgression is entirely subjective-what one person may perceive as a deep offense, another might not find worthy of any condemnation. In the latter case, there is neither cause for offense nor need for forgiveness.

Thus, there are quite serious grounds for asserting that it is precisely the assessment of a particular action (or inaction) as unacceptable in a specific context that serves as the starting point and decisive factor for both phenomena. In turn, such an assessment is linked to a person's level of expectations, motivation, and the expectations or demands they place on others. If we are dissatisfied with some aspect of our relationship with a particular person, we are very quick to "see" in their actions (or inaction) a deliberate and malicious scheme directed against us or others. If, on top of that, the "culprit" refuses to admit guilt or even acknowledge the offense, the resentment can become entrenched. As we know, some resentments can disappear on their own (as if they were fading away), while others are resolved through forgiveness. This suggests that the characteristics of resentment may also determine the nature of forgiveness.

Some researchers distinguish between two distinct domains or stages of forgiveness-negative and positive-both of which are clearly secondary in nature.[1–3] The first of these involves overcoming resentment, reducing anger and impulses toward retaliation and avoidance.[4] This may be accompanied by a successful avoidance of a negative self-image, which reduces the motivation to avoid communication with the offender and, in turn, breaks down the barriers that hinder such communication.[1] This implies a transition to the second (positive) stage of forgiveness, which may include improved self-esteem and the restoration of the relationship with the offender.

One of the most important prerequisites for the process of forgiveness is the offender's acknowledgment of guilt. Thus, apologies can mediate the relationship between forgiveness and life satisfaction.[5] Particularly important for forgiveness are not only expressions of remorse, but also attempts to make amends or compensate for the harm caused.[6,7] In the absence of such actions on the part of the offender, the most important condition for forgiveness remains the process of cognitively reassessing the severity of the offender's wrongdoing.

According to attribution theory,[8] we are much more tolerant of other people's misdeeds when we interpret them as accidental, unintentional, or resulting from adverse external circumstances-that is, as actions that are to some extent beyond their control. According to Heider, external and internal (personal) factors in the interpretation of a misdeed are antagonistic-the greater the role we attribute to external circumstances in determining the misdeed, the less responsibility we place on the perpetrator, and vice versa.

Another mitigating factor in assessing the severity of a transgression may be a belief in the offender's good intentions-that is, the perception of how consistent the offender's tendency toward prosocial behavior is.[9] The latter implies a certain degree of empathy toward others. Clearly, these factors interact, for the interpretation of the offense as accidental and uncontrollable may be based precisely on the perception of the stability of the offender's prosocial orientation.

However, just as often, only one of these factors may be of significant importance. In particular, the perpetrator's admission of guilt and attempts to remedy the damage caused may lead to a reassessment of the degree of intent and/or the nature of the offense, but may also uphold the initial assessment. Repentance alone may be sufficient for forgiveness. Conversely, forgiveness without repentance is associated with a level of subjective well-being indistinguishable from that associated with the absence of forgiveness.[10]

At the same time, it remains unclear what serves as the trigger for the process of forgiveness in the absence of remorse. This is all the more so given that some researchers propose distinguishing between emotional and decisional forgiveness.[11,12] In and of itself, this

distinction remains unclear, for even emotional forgiveness implies "a decision to try to act differently toward the offender and, not seeking payback, treating the person as a valuable and valued person".[13]

In both cases, a decision-making process takes place, but in the case of emotional forgiveness, it involves more of a renunciation of revenge and a severing of ties-which corresponds to the negative phase of forgiveness-while decisional forgiveness entails a more or less reasoned justification of the offender. Thus, it can be argued that the strength of the motivation to maintain a relationship with the offender initially serves only to limit acts of distancing and retaliation, and subsequently contributes to the emergence of justifying arguments in the form of acknowledging the offender's good intentions and the accidental nature of the offense.

However, the onset of the negative phase of forgiveness does not coincide with the onset of the reaction to the offense. It is therefore equally important to examine the initial reaction to the offense, which manifests itself in a complex of emotional and cognitive processes,[14,15] that culminate in resentment. Thus, resentment can be viewed as an intermediate "residual effect" of communicative stress. This stress can be overcome through forgiveness,[16] but other options are also possible, such as shifting one's focus to more meaningful goals or reevaluating the offense itself.

This leads to the hypothesis that the phenomenology of resentment and forgiveness shares both similarities and differences. In both cases, the offense serves as a stressor that triggers negative emotions and corresponding cognitive processes. Subsequently, in the case of resentment, one can expect a consolidation of negative evaluations and emotions, whereas in the case of forgiveness, one can expect a reassessment of the offender's transgression or the degree of their responsibility for it.

Some researchers in the field of resentment suggest that three main components can be identified within the concept of resentment: emotional-ruminative unforgiveness, cognitive-evaluative unforgiveness, and offender reconstrual.[17] The cognitive-evaluative component involves the believer's conviction that it is impossible to forgive the offender, along with the corresponding arguments, while the emotional component involves the re-experiencing of negative emotions and distressing thoughts regarding the offense committed.

At the same time, it seems that this kind of conviction should also manifest itself through a range of more specific perceptions, emotions, and evaluations, such as the sense of unmet expectations and disappointment. This suggests that it is unlikely that the cognitive and emotional components of resentment can be clearly distinguished. Since this is not about overcoming communication-related stress, any reflection on the offender's actions and their evaluation is inevitably accompanied by negative emotions, ranging from regret and disappointment to outrage and a desire for revenge.

Study 1

In the first phase of the study on resentment and forgiveness, it was necessary to collect a sufficient amount of phenomenological data and conduct both qualitative and quantitative analyses of that data. Categorical analysis[18] was used for this purpose, as this type of analysis allows for the use of statistical tests during the quantitative analysis phase. However, rather than a two-stage process, a one-stage categorization process was used, which streamlines and simplifies the process of attributing content to autobiographical stories of resentment and forgiveness, thereby minimizing the subjective component of the qualitative analysis. Previous studies on resentment and forgiveness were used to develop the relevant categories.[4,10,17,19–21]

An analysis of the phenomena associated with resentment and forgiveness described in these studies identified 14 emotional, motivational, and cognitive categories:

1) feeling having been cheated (fraud),
2) disappointment with the offender,
3) indignation over the transgression,
4) desire to end relationship,
5) desire to take revenge for the offense,
6) astonishment,
7) understanding of the transgression's accidentality,
8) decrease of self-esteem,
9) decrease in contacts with the offender,
10) belief in good intentions of the offender,
11) belief in offender's remorse,
12) feeling on transgression's importance,
13) ruminations on the reasons of the transgression,
14) desire to retain the relationship.

In the first, phenomenological phase of our study 93 participants - second-, third-, and fourth-year full-time and part-time undergraduates of the psychology program (75 women and 18 men 20-52 years old; Av. Age – M = 34.5, SD = 8.45) wrote two autobiographical stories about fairly lengthy episodes involving:

1) Resentment and
2) Forgiveness.

Most part-time students enrolled in the psychology program after having already completed a university degree in another field.

In the next stage of the study, a categorical analysis of these narratives was conducted. All sentences were divided into content units-representing more or less independent units of specific, individualized information[18] - by separating each such unit from the others. These units were then sequentially numbered, and those relevant to the topic were assigned to the 14 specified categories.

Results

The results of the distribution of all content units across the two stories:

1) stories about resentment-blue bars;
2) stories about forgiveness-red bars (Figure 1).

According to these data, only the sixth category "astonishment" is represented in roughly equal measure in these stories; all other categories show significant differences between the two stories. The chi-square test for associations $\chi^2 = 904.01$ ($p \leq .001$) reveals an overall difference in the nature of the emotions experienced in the two stories, based on the relationship between episodes of resentment and forgiveness and the 14 identified categories.

Four categories' numbers were significantly higher (according to the number of content units) in forgiveness:

1) faith in transgression's accidentality,

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2) belief in good intentions of the offender,

3) belief in offender's remorse,

4) desire to retain the relationship.

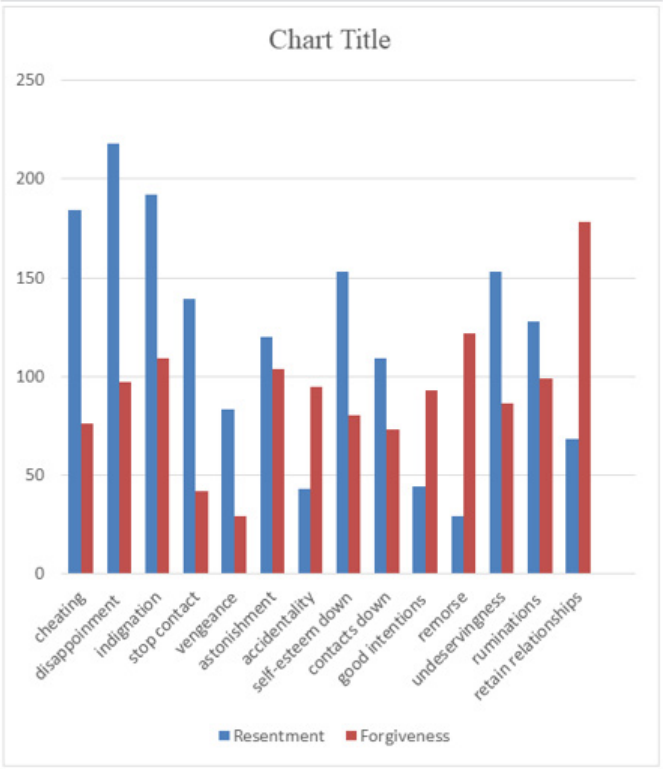

Figure 1 Distribution of content units across the designated categories of stories about resentment (blue) and forgiveness (red).

These findings suggest that forgiveness is more typically characterized by four specific phenomena: the motivation to maintain a relationship with the offender, and three types of cognitive attributions regarding the offense, all aimed at reducing the offender's responsibility and guilt. At the same time, we see that the outrage caused by the offense and the disappointment felt are almost as intense when forgiveness is granted as the belief in the offender's remorse and good intentions. It can be assumed that these findings, along with the relatively high level of surprise, may indicate an initial communicative stress when confronted with the offense.

Study 2

The second study examined the relationship between resentment and forgiveness and subjective well-being. According to numerous studies, forgiveness contributes to this well-being, whereas resentment tends to hinder it.[5,22–25] Accordingly, the hypothesis of this study posited a negative association between resentment and its components and subjective well-being, and a positive association between forgiveness and well-being. An analysis of existing methods in this field showed that, as a rule, these methods are highly specialized, focusing solely on the study of forgiveness or its,[21,26–34] or solely on the study of resentment.[17,35]

Based on previous research data and methods for forgiveness and resentment, we developed a 65-item two-factor scale **RAFS** (Resentment and Forgiveness scale) with a unidimensional subscale for dispositional forgiveness and a three-factor subscale comprising the following subscales as *emotional-ruminative* unforgiveness, *cognitive-evaluative* unforgiveness, and *offender reconstrual*.[17]

The subscale of forgiveness includes 13 items (such as " I am willing to forgive someone who feels guilty about their transgression", " Being late is forgivable in informal social situations"). *Emotional-ruminative* unforgiveness on resentment subscale includes 23 items (such as " The emotional wounds from past offenses have not yet healed", " I can't stop thinking about how unfairly my supervisors have treated me"), *cognitive-evaluative* unforgiveness includes 8 items (such as " It is impossible to forgive someone who deliberately posts intimate information about me or my loved ones online.", " It's impossible to forget the mess the guests made in my house"), *offender reconstrual* includes 6 items (as " I remember everyone who has ever betrayed me", " I doubt I would be friends with someone who is prone to racism and xenophobia").

All subscales of the RAFS questionnaire demonstrate fairly good reliability in terms of internal consistency. Cronbach's Alpha is 0.88 for the General scale RAFS, including 0.70 for *Inclination to forgiveness* (13 items) and 0.91 for *Inclination to resentment* (52 items) (Table 1).

Table 1 Data on the resentment and forgiveness scale (RAFS) and subscales' reliability

	Cronbach's alpha	Number of items
General scale	0.88	65
Inclination to forgiveness	0.7	13
Inclination to resentment	0.91	52
Emotional subscale of resentment	0.87	23
Cognitive subscale of resentment	0.78	8
Reappraisal of wrongdoer	0.7	6

The aim of this study was to examine the relationship between resentment and forgiveness and subjective well-being. Consistent with previous research, it was expected that different types of relationships would emerge not only for forgiveness and resentment as a whole, but also for specific components of resentment.[36,17] At the same time, since resentment is a relatively new field of study,[37] the initial methods for diagnosing it are still in their infancy. This means that research on resentment must inevitably be supplemented by a methodological objective: testing new methods for studying resentment.

The main hypothesis posited the existence of various links between subjective well-being and a tendency to hold a resentment or a tendency to forgive; the former is likely to be negative, while the latter is likely to be positive.[38,39] To measure subjective well-being more effectively, the 39-item BSW (Berne Questionnaire of Subjective Well-Being) was used, which covers various aspects of positive and negative well-being.[40,41] This method, originally developed for adolescents but later adapted for adults, exhibits fairly good psychometric properties: internal consistency coefficients Cronbach's α ranged from 0.69 till 0.87, and the confirmatory factor analysis results are consistent with expectations.[42]

The 39-item measure of well-being with 5-point scale includes two high order variables – Satisfaction and Ill-being and six specific variables: Positive Attitude toward Life (such as "I enjoy life more than most people do"); Problems (as "How often in the past few weeks did you worry because... you had problems with other people?"), Somatic Complaints *(as "In the past few weeks have you ....* had stomach ache? ... suffered from heart beating or heart pains?"); Self-Esteem

(as "I am capable of doing things just as well as most other people"; Depressive Mood (as "I have lost interest in other people and do not concern myself with them"); Joy in Life (as "*In the past few weeks have you* ... been pleased because you had achieved something?").

The study included 35 Latvian women and 15 men aged 30 to 37 (mean age for women = 33.1; mean age for men = 34.1). All participants were surveyed online via email and social network using Microsoft Word to present these inventories. The presentation time was monitored, and all completed forms were returned on the day they were sent out. The data for the remaining 12 participants-who either submitted their completed forms in the days that followed or filled them out incorrectly or incompletely-were removed.

The main data are presented in Figure 2. No association was found between a tendency to forgive and either positive or negative well-being. A tendency to hold resentment was found to be positively associated with negative well-being (.80) and the presence of problems (.37), and negatively associated with life satisfaction (-.45). Accordingly, all resentment components have similar significant negative correlations with well-being and its components, as well as positive correlations with ill-being and with problems (mainly with other people), but not with depressive mood and somatic complaints.

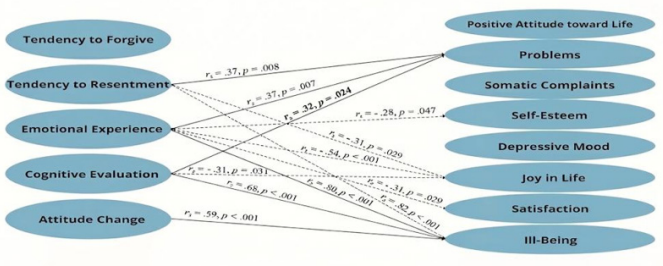

Figure 2 Main variables correlation in the RAFS and the BSW scales.

The data of internal consistency (Cronbach's Alpha) for the RAFS show sufficient reliability level of our scale and subscales of resentment and forgiveness from 0.7 till 0.91.

Discussion

The results of a phenomenological study indicate a partial similarity between the characteristics of resentment and forgiveness, which can be considered an expected outcome. As noted above, resentment is a primary reaction to a moral transgression, whereas forgiveness is a secondary reaction to such a transgression. The similarity in the reaction of surprise is quite understandable, since we usually unconsciously share the presumption of innocence. In particular, we expect more or less appropriate behavior in our interactions with people who are important to us. Consequently, a moral transgression (or something we perceive as such) causes cognitive dissonance and surprise in both cases.

In the same way, the high level of outrage in stories about forgiveness can be explained as a natural reaction to a moral transgression. It is clear that the level of outrage is higher when a resentful feeling arises, but in cases of forgiveness, it is higher than the belief in the offender's good intentions, though not higher than the belief in the offender's remorse. A key factor distinguishing the emotional responses in these two stories appears to be the desire to maintain a relationship with the offender, which is linked to the belief that the offense was accidental, that the offender had good intentions, and that the offender is truly remorseful. Research data confirm that the offender's remorse increases the tendency to forgive.[43,44] All of these beliefs that are favorable to the offender can be viewed as part of an emotions-focused approach to overcoming the impact of the offense, which is linked to forgiveness.[45]

The results of the correlational study are, in some respects, entirely expected-namely, the negative association between resentment and subjective well-being and the positive association with ill-being-but differ from expectations regarding the presence of associations between resentment and certain negative aspects of ill-being (depression and somatic problems). Furthermore, the expected link between forgiveness and subjective well-being was not confirmed.

This finding can be explained by the fact that forgiveness is more strongly associated with well-being among people who consider their relationships with their offending partners to have been closer and more committed prior to the offense, as well as among those who reported that their partners had apologized and attempted to make amends.[5] At the same time, one might expect some negative changes in one's attitude toward a loved one as a result of the offense, which helps explain the lack of a connection between forgiveness and well-being. In addition, if the victim perceives intentionality of the offense such behaviors as apologies and restorative actions are experienced as less useful for forgiveness.[46]

Thus, although most researchers on forgiveness point to a positive association between forgiveness and well-being across different countries,[47,48] some researchers consider it necessary to distinguish between the roles of emotional and decisional forgiveness,[49] as well as to account for the possible mediating role of gratitude.[50]

In a certain sense, the findings indicating the absence of the expected link between forgiveness and subjective well-being can also be attributed to the specific characteristics of the university student population. Research data from several countries suggest a link between forgiveness and age, i.e., that the tendency to forgive increases with age.[51–53] At the same time, the extent of this tendency also depends on the frequency and severity of moral transgressions.[54] It is not difficult to imagine that in a university setting, this frequency and severity would be lower than outside of it, which in turn reduces the role of forgiveness in life satisfaction.

At the same time, the need for a more balanced approach to comparing the phenomena of forgiveness and resentment is highlighted.[55] This points to the importance of a more multifaceted and nuanced approach to understanding both resentment and forgiveness.

As these results show, the strong positive correlation between resentment and well-being is based more on conflicts in personal communication than on health issues. This makes sense, given that the person who has wronged us is the part of our inner circle.

Conclusion

The importance of studying the phenomena of resentment and forgiveness-which have a long-term impact on a person's life and well-being-cannot be overstated. This phenomenological and correlational study reveals new characteristics of these phenomena and suggests that they may play an ambiguous role in a person's life. In particular, numerous studies point to a direct and indirect link between forgiveness and subjective well-being, a finding that was not confirmed in our study; this can be attributed both to the limited size of the sample used and to the lack of validation of the methodology developed. At the same time, if forgiveness can be viewed as a multidimensional phenomenon, greater attention should be paid to the development of multidimensional measurement scales, as opposed to the unidimensional methodology used in this study.

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Although the data obtained in the study do not allow us to conclude that forgiveness is a derivative of resentment, there are clearly common emotional and cognitive processes, such as surprise, disappointment, or indignation, Both phenomena are triggered by the same event-a moral transgression by a significant person (or one perceived as such)-but in the case of resentment, there is a fixation on the negative aspect of this transgression, whereas in the case of forgiveness, there is a positive reevaluation of the transgression.

This study has confirmed the data indicating the negative correlation between resentment and subjective well-being (mainly in the area of communication problems) but didn't confirm the positive link between forgiveness and well-being. The RAFS questionnaire has sufficiently strong internal consistency (Cronbach α) but needs more advanced psychometric verification, especially assessing its constructive validity.

This study confirmed the findings regarding a negative association between resentment and subjective well-being (primarily in the context of communication problems), but did not confirm a positive association between forgiveness and subjective well-being. The RAFS questionnaire used in this study is sufficiently reliable, but requires further psychometric validation testing on larger samples.

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Conflicts of interest

The authors declare that there are no conflicts of interest.

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