

Rumination, Time and Forgiveness: Are Changes in Thinking over Time Associated
with the Development of Forgiveness?

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SUMMARY

Forgiveness is a process of transformation occurring within victims whereby their motivations shift from avoidance of the offender and revenge seeking towards more prosocial motivations (McCullough, 2001). In order to make the shift, victims need to process the incident. Commonly, however, ‘rumination’ or thinking about an offence has been found to have a negative relationship with forgiveness (McCullough, Bono, & Root, 2007). Notwithstanding these findings, it makes sense that forgiveness requires a working through of the experience and thus an engagement at a cognitive level with the events that took place. However, research has also demonstrated that rumination declines over time and, further to this, the decline is associated with increases in forgiveness (McCullough, Bellah, Kilpatrick, & Johnson, 2001). The present paper proposes that it is the quality and timing of rumination which is important in the development of forgiveness.

Using the principles of Construal Level Theory, it is posited that when victims are temporally closer to the offence, their thinking tends to have more concrete properties and is focused on the details of the event which impedes forgiveness. However, with greater temporal distance and, therefore, more psychological distance from the incident, their thinking develops an abstract quality. The abstract nature of their thinking allows for a broader and more holistic view of the experience. The suggestion is that forgiveness becomes possible when victims view the incident through an abstract lens.

Consistent with this proposition, four empirical studies showed that the development of abstract thinking and the reduction of concrete thinking, over time, had

implications for the development of a victim's forgiveness of a wrongdoer. In Study 1, participants recalled a recent offence and the effects of concrete and abstract thinking were examined. Time was manipulated in Study 2, such that some participants rated their thinking about an offence immediately while another group waited to rate their thoughts. Study 3, was a prospective study, requiring participants to note when they experienced an interpersonal transgression and then complete a survey across five time points. Thinking was manipulated in Study 4, such that participants were instructed to think about a recent offence either in concrete terms or from an abstract viewpoint. Thinking abstractly about the offence was indirectly positively related to forgiveness via the reaffirmation of shared values with the offender. All four studies demonstrated that concrete thinking became more negatively related and abstract thinking more positively related to forgiveness over time. Importantly, it is the pattern of change in both types of thinking over time that is considered to be important for forgiveness.

The present paper makes an important and distinct contribution to the literature by proposing that is the type of thinking occurring in the aftermath of an interpersonal offence that is a determinant of forgiveness. Of note, it demonstrates that there is indeed more to rumination than negative thinking.

Declaration

I certify that this thesis does not incorporate without acknowledgement any material previously submitted for a degree or diploma in any university; and that to the best of my knowledge and belief it does not contain any material previously published or written by another person except where due reference is made in the text.

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