

## TO WHAT EXTENT DO PERSONAL CONCEPTUALIZATIONS OF FORGIVENESS DETERMINE FORGIVINGNESS AMONG PORTUGUESE WOMEN?

Félix Neto, Conceição Pinto, Marta Pinto Costa, and Cristina Fonseca  
University of Oporto, Portugal

### ABSTRACT

The relationships between conceptualizations of forgiveness and general propensity to forgive were assessed. A total of 180 women aged 18-90 participated in the study. They were presented with three questionnaires: the conceptualizations of forgiveness questionnaire, the forgivingness questionnaire, and a demographic questionnaire. Four conceptualization factors were identified: Change of Heart, More-Than-Dyadic Process, Encourages Repentance, and Immoral Behavior. These conceptualizations explained a substantial part of the variance of forgivingness.

*Keywords:* conceptualizations, forgiveness, resentment.

Forgiveness has been studied under a variety of perspectives, notably cognitive (e.g., Ahmed, Azar & Mullet, 2007), personal (e.g., Neto, 2007), social (McCullough, Worthington & Rachal, 1997; Neto, Pinto, & Mullet, 2007), and cultural (e.g., Takaku, Weiner & Ohbushi, 2001). Although less studied (Worthington, 2005), lay people's conceptualizations of forgiveness have, nevertheless, been examined through diverse methodological approaches: conceptual questions endorsement, spontaneous definitions, and prototype analysis (Friesen & Fletcher, 2007). This study was aimed at exploring Portuguese females' conceptualizations about forgiveness, their general propensity to forgive, and the relationships between conceptualizations and propensity.

### CONCEPTUALIZATIONS OF FORGIVENESS

Forgiveness has been defined as the "forswearing of negative affect and judgment by viewing the wrongdoer with compassion and love, in the face of a wrongdoer's considerable injustice" (Enright *et al.*, 1991, p. 123). Several studies have dealt with lay conceptualizations of forgiveness. Denton and Martin (1998) conducted a survey among clinical social workers. Factor analysis of the responses showed several factors: forgiveness as a release of negative feelings, forgiving is not condoning, forgiveness requires two persons, forgiveness is a slow process that does not guarantee forgetting or rec-

conciliation. Kanz (2000) instructed students to answer conceptual forgiveness questions. A majority of participants agreed with the idea that it is possible to forgive someone without that person being aware of it, forgiveness is not a weakness, forgiving does not excuse (or justify) the offender's hurtful behavior, and anger decreases when forgiveness takes place. Younger, Piferi, Jobe and Lawler (2004) showed that four major themes emerged from students' spontaneous definitions of forgiveness: letting go of negative feelings, acceptance and getting over it, going back to the relationship, and forgetting/not forgetting about the incident. Kearns and Fincham (2004) utilized a prototype approach to examine lay conceptions. Truthful, sincerity, open-minded, caring, giving someone a second chance, learning from mistakes, doing the right thing, finding a solution to a problem, an act of love, accepting someone's apologies, understanding that everyone makes mistakes, and making you feel good afterwards were considered as the more central attributes of forgiveness. Friesen and Fletcher (2007) replicated these results on a sample from New-Zealand.

Mullet, Girard, and Bakhshi (2004) examined the extent to which lay people from a large community sample agree with conceptualizations of forgiveness encountered in the literature (Enright & Fitzgibbons, 2000; McCullough, Pargament & Thorensen, 2000). Through exploratory and confirmatory factor analyses, four robust conceptualization factors that were largely similar to the ones found in Denton and Martin's (1998) study were identified: Change of heart (e.g., "To forgive someone who has done you wrong necessarily means to start feeling affection toward him again"), Broad process that is not limited to the victim-offender dyad (e.g., "You can forgive the person responsible for an institution which has done you wrong (the state, the church, an association)"), Encourages moral behavior (e.g., "To forgive someone who has done you wrong necessarily means to lead her to accept her wrongs"), and Immoral behavior (e.g., "To forgive someone who has done you wrong necessarily means to approve of what he has done to you"). This four factor structure has proven to have cross-cultural value. The same factors have been evidenced in a sample of Congolese adults (Kadima Kadiangandu, Gauché, Vinsonneau, & Mullet, 2007), in a sample of Latin American adults (Bagnulo, Muñoz Sastre, & Mullet, 2009), and in a sample of Hindus (Tripathy & Mullet, 2009).

#### TO WHAT EXTENT ARE CONCEPTUALIZATIONS OF FORGIVENESS AND FORGIVINGNESS ASSOCIATED?

Conceptualizations of forgiveness and capacity to forgive in general (forgivingness) are separate constructs: Conceptualizations of forgiveness refer to the nature of forgiveness; that is, the way it can be understood and defined whereas the general capacity to forgive naturally refers to the practice of forgiveness. Three distinct aspects of forgivingness have been recently put forward (Mullet et al., 2003): (a) Lasting resentment; that is, the difficulty at escaping the unforgiveness state, by avenging or forgiving or choosing another path, (b) Sensitivity to the circumstances of the offence, that is, responding to the offender's apologies or to the pressures of others to forgive or not forgive, and (c) Unconditional forgiveness. This three-factor structure has been shown to be cross-culturally robust (Mullet et al., 2003; Paz, Neto, & Mullet, 2007, 2008; Suwartono, Prawasti, & Mullet, 2007; Tripathy & Mullet, 2009).

Very few works have directly assessed the relationship between forgiveness and lay conceptualizations of forgiveness. This is unfortunate given that several authors have insisted on the fact that the views held on forgiveness strongly impact the ability to forgive personal offenses (e.g., Harris, Lusk, Norman, Standard, Bruning, Evans, & Thoresen, 2006). The only work to date has been conducted by Ballester, Munoz Sastre and Mullet (2009) on a French sample. In this study, a positive association was found between unconditional forgiveness and the beliefs that (a) forgiveness corresponds to a change of heart, and (b) forgiveness is a broad process that is not limited to the victim-offender dyad. A positive association between the view that forgiveness is immoral and propensity to lasting resentment was also found. These associations were evidenced beyond the associations usually found with educational level, religious involvement, and personality variables. Unconditional forgiveness appeared as the

construct that was most associated with conceptualizations factors (acquired positive conceptions about forgiveness).

#### THE PRESENT STUDY

The present study had two purposes. The first one was to examine whether the four factor structure of conceptualizations of forgiveness that was identified by Mullet et al. (2004) was present in a Portuguese sample. The second purpose was to examine whether the relationships between conceptualizations of forgiveness and forgivingness that were evidenced by Ballester et al. (2009) were present in this sample.

#### METHOD

##### *Participants*

The total number of participants was 180 females. The participants' ages ranged from 18 to 90. Eighteen percent of the participants had completed primary education, and 82% had completed secondary education. Twenty one percent of the participants declared that they did not believe in God, 39% believed in God but did not attend church on a regular basis, and 40% believed in God and were regular attendees.

All participants were unpaid volunteers. They were recruited and tested by one of three research assistants, who were psychology students trained in the administration of questionnaires. The research assistants contacted possible participants at the universities and on the street (usually close to commercial centers), explained the study, asked them to participate, and, if they agreed, arranged where and when to administer the questionnaire. The response rate was 90%.

##### *Material*

Three self-report questionnaires were used (see Table 1). The first one was the Conceptualizations of Forgiveness questionnaire (Mullet, Girard & Bakhshi, 2004). The second one was the Forgivingness Questionnaire (Mullet, Barros, Frongia, Usai, Neto & Riviere-Shaffighi, 2003) that comprises three scales: Lasting resentment, Sensitivity to Circumstances, and Unconditional forgiveness. The third one assessed demographic characteristics.

##### *Procedure*

Each participant answered individually in a quiet room at home or at the university (the more frequent procedure). Usually the participant immediately accompanied the experimenter to the chosen site. Two versions of the questionnaires were used. They differed only regarding the items' order (direct or inverse order), in order to counterbalance possible order effects. The experimenter explained to each participant what was expected of him/her. Each participant was asked to read a certain number of sentences expressing a feeling or a belief about forgiveness, and rate their degree of agreement with the content of each sentence using a 11-point agreement scale (1-11). The experimenter was, in most cases, present when the participants filled in the questionnaires. It took approximately 20 minutes to complete the questionnaires.

##### *Results*

Each participant's rating was converted to a numerical value expressing the distance (0-10) between the point on the response scale and the left anchor, which served as the origin. These numerical values were then subjected to graphical and statistical analyses. A first confirmatory factor analysis was

# TO WHAT EXTENT DO PERSONAL CONCEPTUALIZATIONS OF FORGIVENESS DETERMINE FORGIVINGNESS AMONG PORTUGUESE WOMEN?

conducted on the conceptualizations data. The model tested was the correlated four-factor model proposed by Mullet *et al.* (2004). No correlation between error terms was allowed. All path coefficients were significant, and the values of the fit indices were satisfactory, GFI = .92,  $\chi^2(98) = 204.41$ ,  $p < .01$ ,  $\chi^2/df = 2.20$ , RMR = .06, RMSEA = .06 [.05-.07].

Table 1 shows the descriptive statistics of all the variables involved in the study. The internal consistency of the forgivingness factors and of conceptualizations factors in general were satisfactory. Only a minority of participants agreed with the idea that forgiving supposes a change of heart (regaining affection or sympathy towards the offender). More participants, however, agreed with the ideas that the forger can be someone other than the offended (but with a close relationship to the offended) and that the forgiven can be as unknown offender or an abstract institution. Very few participants agreed with the idea that forgiveness is immoral. A majority of participants agreed with the idea that forgiveness can encourage the offender's repentance.

Table 1. Descriptive Statistics

	N items	Range	M	SD	Alpha
Age		18-90	38.47	24.37	
Religious Involvement	2	1-3	2.20	0.76	
Lasting Resentment	5	0-10	2.23	1.89	.84
Sensitivity to Circumstances	7	0-10	5.58	2.08	.69
Unconditional Forgiveness	5	0-10	3.82	2.46	.87
Change of Heart	5	0-10	4.35	2.22	.72
Broad Process	5	0-10	5.92	2.02	.67
Immoral Behavior	5	0-10	1.35	1.67	.82
Encourages Moral Behavior	5	0-10	6.05	2.11	.75

Note: Religious involvement has been assessed in the following way: Not believer = 1, believer = 2, and believer and regular attendee = 3.

Table 2 shows the correlations between all the variables involved in the study. Lasting resentment appeared significantly correlated with every conceptualizations factors. Sensitivity to circumstances was associated with change of heart. Finally, unconditional forgiveness appeared significantly correlated with every conceptualizations factors, except with immoral behavior.

Table 2

Correlations Between Forgivingness Factors, and Demographic Variables and Conceptualizations Factors.

Domain	Variable	Forgivingness		
		LR	SC	UF
Demographic Characteristics	Age	-.04	-.14	.14
	Education	.02	.14	-.35***
	Religious involvement	-.31***	.03	.26**
Conceptualizations	Encourages Repentance	-.18*	.12	.37***
	Immoral Behavior	.50***	-.12	-.14
	Broad Process	-.34***	.09	.58***
	Change of Heart	-.17*	.15*	.49***

\*= $p < .05$ , \*\*= $p < .01$ , \*\*\*= $p < .001$

Table 3 shows the results of a series of three stepwise regression analysis, one with each of the forgivingness scores as the criteria and all the other variables as predictors. In each case, a substantial part of the variance of the criterion was explained. In each case, the conceptualizations variables explained more variance than the demographic variables, except for sensitivity to circumstances.

Table 3  
Results of the Stepwise Regression Analyses

Criterion	Predictor	Step	R	R <sup>2</sup>	R <sup>2</sup> ch.	t	p	Beta
Lasting Resentment	Immoral Behavior	1	.50	.25	.25	6.23	.001	.43
	Religious Involvement	2	.55	.30	.05	-2.64	.001	-.18
	Broad Process	3	.57	.33	.03	-2.61	.01	-.18
Sensitivity to Circumstances	Age	1	.21	.05	.05	-2.91	.001	-.22
Unconditional Forgiveness	Encourages Repentance	2	.28	.08	.04	2.51	.05	.18
	Broad Process	1	.58	.34	.34	6.99	.001	.44
Forgiveness	Change of Heart	2	.65	.42	.08	4.75	.001	.29
	Education	3	.67	.46	.03	-2.84	.01	-.17

## DISCUSSION

This study examined the relationship between conceptualizations of forgiveness and forgivingness. As expected, the four-factor structure of conceptualizations of forgiveness that had been evidenced in various cultures — Change of Heart, Broad, More-Than-Dyadic Process, Encourages Repentance, and Immoral Behavior — was also found among Portuguese female participants. As in Mullet *et al.* (2004), and in Ballester *et al.* (2009), the participants strongly disagreed with the view that forgiveness is immoral. By contrast, they strongly agree with the view that forgiveness can be a broad process that may encompass groups and institutions.

As expected, participants' conceptualizations were strongly associated with their capacity to forgive. As in Ballester *et al.* (2009), (a) Immoral behavior was the major predictor of lasting resentment, (b) Encourages repentance was the major predictor of sensitivity to circumstances and (c) Broad process was the major predictor of unconditional forgiveness.

Several differences with the findings by Ballester *et al.* (2000) deserve, however, to be commented. First, a strong negative relationship between religious involvement and lasting resentment was observed, much stronger than the one shown in Ballester *et al.*'s study. This is possibly due to the fact that, overall, the participants in the present study were more religious than the ones in the study by Ballester *et al.* (2.20 versus 1.77). It is also possible that the relationship between religiosity and lasting resentment is higher among females than among males. Second, a strong negative relationship between educational level and unconditional forgiveness was found. Such a relationship had never been found in other studies.

Overall, the main findings in the present study corroborate the ones shown in Ballester *et al.*'s study. The relationships between conceptualizations of forgiveness and general practice of forgiveness are robust ones, which probably transcend cultures. In Portugal, as well as in France, whether our patients consider (or not) that forgiveness (a) may be an efficient way to decrease resentment (change of heart), (b) is nothing more than an immoral behavior, or (c) is only meaningful in the classic strictly dyadic offender-victim situation, is likely to influence very differently their responses to the therapist's efforts.

The present study has several limitations. The first limitation resides in the way the sample was constituted. Participants were volunteers, and although special efforts were made to contact people from

different age, and educational levels, we are unsure about the representativeness of our sample. The second limitation resides in the fact that what we have measured in the present study are self-reported practices, not actual forgiveness behaviors. The third limitation resides in the four-factor model of conceptualizations that has been used. Future studies are needed to explore whether additional conceptualizations factors are present, and whether these factors also strongly impact people's forgiveness practices.

Correspondence relating to this paper should be addressed to Félix Neto, Faculdade de Psicologia e de Ciências da Educação, Universidade do Porto, Rua Dr. Manuel Pereira da Silva, 4200-392 Porto, Portugal e-mail (fneto@fpce.up.pt). This work was supported by the Portuguese Science and Technology Foundation (grant no. PTDC/PSI/55336/2006).

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