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Apology, Forgiveness, and Reconciliation: An Ecological World View Framework

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ABSTRACT - Orientations towards apology, forgiveness, and reconciliation were investigated from an ecological world-view approach in 543 men and women. Participants completed the Apology, Forgiveness, and Reconciliation Scale, the Personal and Institutional Rights to Aggression Scale, the Revised Conflict Tactic Scales, an attachment measure and several demographic items. Scores on most childhood aggression scales were positively associated with beliefs interfering with apology, forgiveness, and reconciliation. Regression analyses revealed that the best predictive equation for beliefs facilitating apology and forgiveness included age, secure attachment, religiosity, (in)tolerance for governmental aggression, and advocacy of non-violence. The best predictive equation for beliefs interfering with an orientation towards apology and forgiveness included fearful attachment style, religiosity, tolerance for governmental aggression, and (non)advocacy of non-violence. Future research may benefit from considering both orientations in support of and orientations against beliefs about the utility of apology, forgiveness and reconciliation within the context of conflict resolution.

Although psychologists have long studied problems such as war and other forms of human aggression, the field has recently begun attending to more positive issues such as conflict resolution, peace, apology, forgiveness, and reconciliation. In our view, in the process of developing a world view concerning the nature of human relationships, individuals develop a general orientation towards apology, forgiveness, and reconciliation: the more positive the orientation, the greater the likelihood of viewing apology, forgiveness, and reconciliation as valuable, desirable, and achievable following perceived transgressions. Conversely, the more negative the orientation, the greater the doubts concerning the value and desirability of apology, forgiveness, and reconciliation, and the stronger the barriers towards striving for them. Cognitive components of this orientation may serve to either facilitate or impede each individual's efforts to seek and encourage apology, forgiveness, and reconciliation by themselves, their social networks, their religious communities, and their government. In this paper, we present an ecological conceptual framework for predicting investment in an integrated apology/forgiveness/reconciliation construct, as well as the results of a study designed to investigate portions of this model. Specifically, we examined the role of childhood

aggression, adult attachment style, religious conservatism, religiosity, country of origin (United States versus non-U.S.), and views toward governmental aggression and peace as predictors of a world view that encompasses perspectives on apology, forgiveness, and reconciliation.

Apology, forgiveness, and reconciliation have been addressed and studied within multiple levels of the complex human ecological systems in which people function. For example, reconciliation in response to conflict has been investigated within the contexts of the home (Makinen & Johnson, 2006), the school (Ahmed & Braithwaite, 2006), the workplace (Aquino, Tripp, & Bies, 2006), and the nation (Staub, 2006), as well as in international relations (Bar-Tal & Veretzberger, 1997). Apologies, which traditionally have been considered an action between individuals, are increasingly being viewed more broadly. For example, Cunningham (1999) has provided examples of apologies by individuals, professional and commercial organizations, religious organizations, spiritual leaders, governments, and heads of state to wronged individuals, descendants of wronged individuals, and wronged collectives, communities, and ethnic groups.

A useful framework for considering contributions to worldviews from a multi-level perspective is ecological theory, as formulated by Bronfenbrenner (e.g., 1979) and refined by Belsky (1993). The *microsystem*, according to Bronfenbrenner, consists of the relations between developing individuals and their immediate settings (e.g., home, family), which in turn are located within the context of an *exosystem* that includes the neighborhood and community agencies. Finally, the *macrosystem* in which these other systems are embedded consists of broad cultural factors, including views about the roles of individuals and families in society. Belsky (1993), in his adaptation of Bronfenbrenner's model, identified three contexts in which etiological bases of child maltreatment have been found: 1) the *developmental context*, including characteristics of both the parent (e.g., personal experience of violence, insecure attachment style) and the child (e.g., age, gender) that may be risk factors for child maltreatment; 2) the *immediate interactional context* of maltreatment (e.g., parental punitiveness), and 3) the *broader context* (including a general tolerance for violence in the United States). In our application of the Bronfenbrenner/Belsky ecological model to the understanding of world views in general and the apology/forgiveness/reconciliation orientation specifically, we place individuals (e.g., relevant aspects of their current behavior, cognitions, and/or affects) solidly in the center of the developmental, exosystem, and macrosystem contexts that influence them and that they in turn influence. In our view, factors contributing to an orientation towards apology, forgiveness, and reconciliation can be found at each ecological level as well as within the current worldview of individuals developing within these contexts. Thus, the present study was designed to explore predictors of views towards apology, forgiveness, and reconciliation from three ecological levels and within the context of a worldview relating to governmental aggression and peace.

Developmental contexts for apology/forgiveness/reconciliation orientations

To assess the contribution of the *developmental context*, we chose to study reported levels of parental aggression during childhood as well as attachment style, gender, and age. Although there is little previous research linking childhood experiences of parental aggression to the tendency to apologize and forgive, it is widely recognized that child

maltreatment is associated with a host of negative consequences for adult victims, including feelings of hostility and anger towards the perpetrator (e.g., Synder & Heinze, 2005), which may be incompatible with a general orientation towards apology, forgiveness, and reconciliation. Thus, we expected that, although distal, perceived experiences of parental aggression would contribute to a negative and interfering orientation toward apology, forgiveness, and reconciliation.

Research on attachment and forgiveness suggests that attachment style may play a more proximal individual developmental role in facilitating forgiveness and in relationships. For example, securely attached individuals have been found to score higher on trait and state forgiveness than insecurely attached individuals and to be more likely to be forgiving of a personal offense (e.g., Burnette, Taylor, Worthington, & Forsyth, 2007; Lawler-Row, Younger, Piferi, & Jones, 2006)—perhaps because more securely attached individuals possess less idealized views and more flexible expectations of their interactions with others, setting the groundwork for more realistic management of the inevitable conflicts occurring in normal relationships (Lawler-Row et al., 2006). We predicted that secure attachment would be positively associated with a positive apology/forgiveness/reconciliation orientation.

Also of interest within the developmental context was the extent to which gender and age might contribute to an apology/forgiveness/reconciliation orientation. Research on the role of gender in forgiveness has produced mixed results. Although most studies have reported no gender differences in the tendency to forgive (e.g., Azar, Mullet, & Vinsonneau, 1999; Sutton, McLeland, Weeks, Cogswell, & Miphouvieng, 2007), some research indicates forgiveness may vary by gender depending on type of transgression. Shackelford and colleagues (2002) found that men were less forgiving than women of a partner's sexual infidelity while women were less forgiving than men of a partner's emotional infidelity (Shackelford, Buss, & Bennett, 2002). Related research indicates that men are more tolerant of vengeful attitudes (Costa-McKinley, Woody, & Bell, 2001) and women report greater decreases in desire for revenge following an intervention designed to promote forgiveness (Wade & Goldman, 2006). Although the role of age has not been extensively considered in research on forgiveness, several studies show a positive correlation between willingness to forgive and age (Mullet, Houdbine, Laumonier, & Girard, 1998; Toussaint, Williams, Musick, & Everson, 2001).

Exosystem contributors to apology/forgiveness/reconciliation orientations

To study the contribution of the *exosystem*, we focused on religiosity and religious conservatism. Although important models for religion may be found in the home (i.e., the microsystem, or developmental context), we believe that much religious training and modeling of beliefs and practices takes place within neighborhood houses of worship. Forgiveness is embedded within most major religious doctrines and is often promoted by religious leaders (Tsang, McCullough, & Hoyt, 2005). Research reviewed by McCullough (2001) indicates that people who see themselves as religious also see themselves as more forgiving and place more value on the importance of forgiveness. Work relating religious conservatism to forgiveness is more limited, but conservative religious beliefs (e.g., that the Bible should be interpreted literally) have been associated with a greater desire for vengeance, support for corporal punishment, and approval of use

of the death penalty (Bartkowski, 1995; Costa-McKinley, et al., 2001; Grasmick, Bursik, & Blackwell, 1993); consequently such beliefs may be related to a negative apology/forgiveness/reconciliation orientation.

Macrosystem contributions to apology/forgiveness/reconciliation orientations

Country of origin (i.e., growing up in the US or not) was our proxy for the influence of the *macrosystem* on the apology/forgiveness/reconciliation orientation. Based on work suggesting that individuals from more collectivist countries are more willing to forgive than those from more individualistic countries (Suwartono, Prawasti, & Mullet, 2007), we expected that our “domestic sample” (individuals born in the United States to parents born in the United States) would show lower support for apology, forgiveness, and reconciliation in international affairs than our “international sample” (individuals born elsewhere to parents born elsewhere), particularly in light of previous findings showing greater tolerance for governmental aggression in a domestic sample than in an international sample (Malley-Morrison, et al., 2006).

Worldviews as a context for apology/forgiveness/reconciliation orientations

We also examined views on apology, forgiveness, and reconciliation in relation to another set of worldview ideas—specifically, beliefs about governmental aggression and peace. Koltko-Rivera (2004) argued that: 1) worldviews, often described as beliefs and assumptions about physical and social reality, may exert powerful effects on both cognition and behavior; 2) political conflict among nations may be partly explained by differences in worldview ideologies; and 3) consideration of worldviews may be particularly useful in gaining understanding of the creation and maintenance of conflict as well as in conflict resolution. If worldviews on governmental aggression and peace also encompass orientation toward apology, forgiveness, and reconciliation, one would expect significant correlations among measures of these constructs.

Given the exploratory nature of the study, we first examined correlates of views supportive of apology, forgiveness, and reconciliation in the context of conflict resolution. Based on our review of literature, we tested the hypotheses that: 1) recalled level of parental aggression observed and experienced during childhood would be significantly positively correlated with an interfering orientation toward apology, forgiveness, and reconciliation; 2) secure attachment would be positively associated with a positive (supportive and facilitating) orientation towards apology, forgiveness, and reconciliation; 3) age would be significantly positively correlated with a positive apology/forgiveness/reconciliation orientation; 3) religious conservatism would be significantly positively correlated with a negative (interfering) apology/forgiveness/reconciliation orientation; 4) religiosity would be significantly positively correlated with a positive apology/forgiveness/reconciliation orientation; 5) the “domestic sample” would show significantly lower support for apology, forgiveness, and reconciliation in international affairs than our “international sample”; and 6) worldviews characterized by support for aggression as a means for achieving international goals would be positively associated with a negative apology/forgiveness/reconciliation orientation, whereas advocacy for nonviolence in international affairs would be positively associated with a positive apology/forgiveness/reconciliation orientation. Using the

results of these analyses, we then conducted hierarchical regression analyses to assess the relative contribution of factors from different ecological levels to the apology/forgiveness/reconciliation orientations.

Method

Participants

The sample consisted of 543 participants (281 females, 262 males, and 6 not reporting gender). Participants ranged in age from 18 to 72, with an average age of 23 (SD = 7.81). The majority were college students (65.9%), born in the United States (76.3%), self-identifying as Christian (60.1%), middle or upper middle class (79.9%), and single (89.9%). The remainder of the sample was recruited by those students for their own methods class research projects; all participants gave permission for their anonymous data to be analyzed in future research projects.

Procedures

Participants completed a survey packet that included a demographics form, the Apology, Forgiveness, and Reconciliation Scale (AFRS; Ashy, 2006), the Personal and Institutional Rights to Aggression Survey (PAIRTAS; Malley-Morrison, 2006), the Revised Conflict Tactic Scale Questionnaire (CTS-2, Straus, Hamby, Finkelhor, Moore, & Runyan, 1998), and the Relationship Questionnaire (RQ; Bartholomew & Horowitz, 1991). The demographic form included items about religion and country of origin of participants and their parents (for determining “domestic” versus “international” status), as well as gender, age, socioeconomic status, education, and ethnicity.

Dependent Variables

The Apology, Forgiveness, and Reconciliation Scale (AFRS; Ashy, 2006) consisted of 29 items assessing beliefs regarding apology, forgiveness, and reconciliation. Participants responded on Likert scales ranging from 1 (completely disagree) to 7 (completely agree) on 25 items and on a Likert scale ranging from 1 (not at all) to 7 (always) on two items. The rating scale items yield two subscales--the Apology, Forgiveness, and Reconciliation Facilitating Beliefs subscale (AFR: FB) consisting of 17 items assessing a positive orientation (e.g., “Apology will eventually restore trust”), and the Apology, Forgiveness, and Reconciliation Interfering Beliefs subscale (AFR: IB) consisting of 8 items assessing a negative orientation (e.g., “Forgiving would result in ignoring an injustice”). The total AFRS had a Cronbach’s alpha of .82, the AFR:FB had a Cronbach’s alpha of .84, and the AFR:IB had a Cronbach’s alpha of .70.

Worldview Variables

The PAIRTAS (e.g., Malley-Morrison, et al., 2006) incorporates both quantitative and qualitative approaches to assessing cognitions and emotions associated with war and peace. Section I, Perspectives on Governmental Aggression and Peace, the only section analyzed for this paper, has 5-item subscales for Tolerance of Governmental Aggression (TGA) and Advocacy of Non-Violence (ANV), to which participants responded on Likert scales ranging from 1 (completely disagree) to 7 (completely agree). Sample items from the TGA scale are “Sometimes one country has the right to invade another” and

“Sometimes the government has the right to order the torture of prisoners in time of war” and sample items from the ANVS scale are “Children have the right to grow up in a world of peace” and “Individuals have the right to stage protests against war and in favor of peace.” For the purposes of the current study, only the scores on those two subscales were analyzed. Cronbach’s alpha was .63 for the TGA scale and .52 for the ANV scale.

Predictor Variables

The complete Revised Conflict Tactic Scale Questionnaire (CTS-2, Straus, Hamby, Finkelhor, Moore, & Runyan, 1998) is a 78-item questionnaire; however, in the current study, due to IRB restrictions, we omitted items assessing severe abuse. Thus, somewhat shortened CTS-2 subscales provide measures of the self-reported amount of negotiation, psychological aggression, physical assault, and sexual coercion witnessed and received from parents or parent figures during the worst year of childhood in the respondents’ childhood developmental contexts (microsystems). Participants respond by selecting a number from 0 to 25 signifying the frequency with which specified behaviors had occurred (0 = never, 1 = once, 2 = twice, 4 = 3-5 times, 8 = 6-10 times, 15 = 11-20 times, and 25 = more than 20 times). These scores were summed to obtain a total score for each subscale. The CTS-2 has demonstrated good construct and discriminant validity and good reliability, with internal consistencies ranging from .79 to .95 (Straus, 1990).

The Relationship Questionnaire (RQ; Bartholomew & Horowitz, 1991) was designed to measure four young adult attachment styles: 1) secure, 2) fearful, 3) preoccupied, 4) dismissing. Participants were asked to rate on a scale from 1 (does not describe me at all) to 7 (describes me very well) the extent to which four paragraphs, each of which reflects one of the attachment styles, corresponds to their general relationship style. They then indicated which of the four paragraphs best describes them. Scharfe and Bartholomew (1994) found test-retest reliabilities ranging from .39 to .58 in males, and from .45 to .58 in females. Bartholomew and Horowitz (1991) reported that convergent validity for the RQ subscales ranges from .22 to .50.

The demographic questionnaire was the source of the other individual developmental variables, gender and age, as well as the exosystem predictor variables of religiosity and religious conservatism, and information for categorizing respondents as either domestic or international, our proxy for macrosystem cultural exposure.

Results

Correlates of apology/forgiveness/reconciliation at each ecological level

Individual/developmental correlates. On the AFR: FB scale, females ($M = 78.92$) scored higher than males ($M = 74.94$; $F(1, 541) = 9.69, p = .002$), while on the AFR: IB scale, males ($M = 19.25$) scored higher than females ($M = 17.90$; $F(1, 541) = 5.98, p = .01$). As predicted, age was positively correlated with scores on the AFR: FB scale ($r = .12, p = .007$); age was also significantly positively correlated with religiosity ($r = .10, p = .02$). As predicted, there was a statistically significant positive correlation between secure attachment and the AFR: FB scale ($r = .11, p = .009$); in addition, there were statistically significant positive correlations between the dismissive and fearful styles and the AFR: IB scale ($r = .10, p = .02$; $r = .15, p = .001$, respectively). Despite these

statistically significant (though low) correlations, one way ANOVAs revealed no significant differences among the attachment style groups on AFR: FB or AFR: IB.

Microsystem correlates. There were no significant correlations between reported levels of any physical and psychological aggression experienced or witnessed in childhood and scores on the AFR: FB scale. By contrast, as predicted, with the exception of psychological aggression from father to mother and physical aggression from mother to father and father to mother, all other scores for aggression experienced and witnessed in childhood were significantly but weakly positively correlated to AFR: IB scale scores ($r = .10, p = .02$ to $r = .13, p = .003$). In addition, reported mother to child physical aggression was positively correlated with religiosity ($r = .10, p = .02$), and religious conservatism ($r = .14, p = .001$).

Exosystem correlates. As predicted, religiosity was positively correlated with the AFR: FB scale ($r = .24, p = .001$), it was also negatively correlated with AFR: IB scale ($r = -.14, p = .001$). Religious conservatism was not significantly related to either AFR scale, but it was significantly positively correlated with both tolerance for governmental aggression TGA ($r = .15, p = .001$) and advocacy of nonviolence ($r = .17, p = .001$).

Macrosystem contributions. As predicted, international participants ($M = 17.93$) scored significantly lower on the AFR: IB scale than domestic participants ($M = 19.55; F(2, 531) = 3.18, p = .04$).

Worldview associations. As predicted, tolerance for governmental aggression was negatively correlated with AFR: FB scale ($r = -.22, p = .001$) and positively correlated with AFR: IB scale ($r = .12, p = .004$), while advocacy of nonviolence was positively correlated with AFR: FB scale ($r = .19, p = .001$) and negatively correlated with AFR: IB scale ($r = -.16, p = .001$).

Multiple regression analyses. In order to assess the independent and additive effects of factors from different ecological levels on AFR: FB and AFR: IB, we conducted separate hierarchical regression analyses for each AFR subscale. Predictors were chosen based on the results of correlational analyses presented earlier. AFR: FB scores were regressed on gender, age, and secure attachment in Step 1 and on religiosity, tolerance of governmental aggression, and advocacy of non-violence in Step 2. At Step 1, gender, age, and secure attachment style significantly predicted AFR: FB scores; both secure attachment and age remained significant predictors at step 2. Religiosity, tolerance of governmental violence, and advocacy of non-violence all significantly and independently added to the prediction of AFR: FB scores at Step 2. These variables accounted for approximately 12.5% of the variance in AFR: FB ($F = 13.68, p = .001$).

AFR: IB scores were regressed on gender and country of origin in Step 1, fearful and dismissive attachment and reported witnessed and experienced childhood aggression in Step 2, and religiosity, tolerance of governmental aggression, and advocacy of non-violence in Step 3. At Step 1, only gender significantly predicted AFR: IB, although country of origin made a marginally significant contribution. At Step 2, gender remained a significant independent predictor and fearful attachment added significantly to the equation. At Step 3, gender dropped to non-significance while fearful attachment remained a significant independent contributor to AFR: IB. Religiosity, tolerance of governmental aggression, and advocacy of non-violence all added significantly and

independently to AFR: IB in the final step. The final model accounted for 9% of the variance in AFR: IB scores ($F = 5.04, p = .001$).

Discussion

The present exploratory study provided preliminary evidence for the contribution of theoretically relevant factors from three different ecological levels, as well as from related individual worldviews, to the prediction of both positive and negative apology/forgiveness/reconciliation orientations. In regard to beliefs supportive of apology and forgiveness, age, secure attachment, religiosity, (in)tolerance for governmental aggression, and advocacy of non-violence all significantly and independently added to the prediction of scores on this subscale. Gender lost power as a predictor of facilitating beliefs when other variables were considered in the model. In regard to beliefs militating against apology and forgiveness, fearful attachment style, religiosity, tolerance for governmental aggression, and (non)advocacy of non-violence proved to be the most reliable predictors of scores on this subscale.

Contrary to expectations based on the ecological model, none of the variables assessing childhood experiences of aggression were significant predictors of the AFR: IB subscale—perhaps in part because none of the severe abuse items were included in our shortened version of the CTS-2 scale. Moreover, perhaps also related to this constraint on physical aggression scores, zero-order correlations between reported experiences of childhood aggression and the AFR: IB subscale, while statistically significant, were quite low. When considered in relation to constructs more proximal to the understanding of apology and forgiveness (e.g., religiosity or tolerance for governmental aggression), such distal contributors appear to be less powerful; however, a stronger test of the role of experiences of childhood aggression, specifically an assessment of more severe forms of abuse not measured in the current study, may reveal additional significant associations with apology/forgiveness/reconciliation orientations.

It is perhaps not surprising that religious attitudes, tolerance for aggression in the government, and promotion of non-violence would be associated both with views that facilitate the use of apology and forgiveness in conflict resolution and with views that challenge their value. On the other hand, at the bivariate level, the particular attachment style that was significantly correlated with a positive apology/forgiveness/reconciliation orientation was different from the attachment style that was significantly associated with a negative orientation. Specifically, in the full models, secure attachment contributed significantly to the prediction of facilitating beliefs while fearful attachment contributed significantly to the prediction of interfering beliefs. In addition, gender was an independent predictor of interfering beliefs but not of facilitating beliefs.

There are a number of limitations to the current study. First, the AFRS is a relatively new measure with subscales needing refinement to achieve greater internal consistency and additional construct validation. Moreover, the total variance accounted for in each full model was rather low, suggesting the need to identify additional factors that would improve the prediction of AFR: FB and AFR: IB scores.

Understanding the factors that promote or decrease apology, forgiveness, and reconciliation in the context of group relations and intergroup conflict is increasingly being recognized as an important area of study, and may be substantially different from

apologies and forgiveness within an individual's personal life (e.g., Philpot & Hornsey, 2007). Apology and forgiveness have the potential to foster reconciliation and encourage peaceful coexistence among groups and nations. However, more research is needed to better understand predictors of apology and forgiveness, especially with respect to intergroup offenses of a political nature.

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