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LAY CONCEPTUALIZATIONS OF FORGIVENESS AMONG
PORTUGUESE ADULTS: A PROVERB ENDORSEMENT
APPROACH

Abstract: Lay conceptualizations about forgiveness were examined using a proverb endorsement approach. Three hundred and three participants living in Portugal were presented with 40 proverbs related to forgiveness, and instructed to assess the degree to which they agree with their content. Through exploratory and confirmatory factor analyses, four conceptualization factors were found: Positive aspects of forgiveness, Negative aspects of forgiveness, Forgetting is not forgiving, and Forgiveness as moral revenge. Several of these factors had already been found in previous studies but the Forgetting is not forgiving factor nicely complements the series of four conceptualization factors that comprise the Conceptualization of forgiveness model.

Keywords: proverbs, forgiveness, resentment, lay conceptualizations, Portugal.

Forgiveness has been studied under a variety of perspectives, notably cognitive (e.g., Ahmed, Azar & Mullet, 2007), personal (e.g., Neto, 2007), social (e.g., McCullough, Worthington & Rachal, 1997), and cultural (e.g., Takaku, Weiner & Ohbushi, 2001; Neto, Pinto, & Mullet, 2007). Although less studied (Worthington, 2005), lay people's conceptualizations of forgiveness have, nevertheless, been examined through diverse methodological approaches: conceptual questions endorsement (e.g., Mullet, Girard & Bakhshi, 2004), spontaneous definitions (e.g., Kanz, 2000), and prototype analysis (e.g., Friesen & Fletcher, 2007).

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, and forgiveness is a slow process that does not guarantee forgetting or reconciliation. 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. Truthfulness, sincerity, open-mindedness, 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.

A Four-Factor Model of Conceptualizations

Mullet, Girard, and Bakhshi (2004) examined the extent to which lay people 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, 2010).

Relationships Between Conceptualizations and General Propensity to Forgive

Ballester, Muñoz Sastre and Mullet (2009) assessed the relationships between conceptualizations of forgiveness and general propensity to forgive. Forgiveness has been shown to be a multidimensional construct involving three factors (Mullet et al., 2003): lasting resentment (an emotional component), sensitivity to forgive (a cognitive component), and unconditional forgiveness (a transcendental component). 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 already 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 examined lay conceptualizations about forgiveness using a proverb endorsement approach. In all time, proverbs provide a means to communicate what has often been too difficult for people to express in their own words (Mieder, 1993). Proverbs encode norms, injunctions, attitudes, and beliefs regarding practically all aspects of social life (Furnham, 1987; Haas, 2002; Mieder, 1993); that is, proverbs necessarily encode conceptualizations about such issues as disputes, forgiveness, revenge and reconciliation. Many proverbs that are specifically about forgiveness exist in the Portuguese literature, and most of these proverbs are repeatedly used in daily life (Costa, 1999). Some of them emphasize the positive aspects of forgiveness (e.g., Forgive and you will be forgiven; Perdoa, e serás perdoado), the ones that have seemingly been captured by the Encourages moral behavior factor. Other proverbs, by contrast, empha-

size the negative aspects of forgiveness (e.g., Forgiveness makes the thief; O perdão faz o ladrão); the ones that have seemingly been captured by the Immoral behavior factor.

There are also proverbs regarding aspects of forgiveness that don't seem to have been rendered in the four-dimension model suggested by Mullet, Girard and Bakhshi (2004). Several of them (e.g., People forgive, but to forget is another discourse; Perdoar, a gente perdoa, esquecer é outra conversa) express the view that forgiving and forgetting are not synonymous, a view that was reported in some of the spontaneous definitions gathered by Younger et al. (2004, see also Denton & Martin, 1999). Still other proverbs express the view that forgiveness is, under certain conditions, the best of revenge (e.g., Forgiveness is the noblest revenge; Perdão é a mais nobre vingança).

It is mainly because the proverb domain seemed to be a complementary source of information about the way lay people conceptualize forgiveness that we decided to systematically examine it from this viewpoint. We gathered no less than 65 proverbs in the Portuguese literature and instructed people to assess the degree to which they agree with their content. Their responses were subjected to structural analyses. Our hypotheses were that (a) several dimensions of conceptualizations that have already been evidenced by Mullet, Girard, and Bakhshi (2004) should also be found through analysis of people's proverb endorsements, in particular, as indicated above, the Encourage moral behavior dimension and the Immoral behavior dimension, (b) one or more dimension(s) of conceptualization should be encountered beyond the four that had already been found by Mullet, Girard and Bakhshi (2004), in particular one dimension contrasting forgiveness and forgetfulness, and (c) these new dimensions should predict additional parts of variance of lay people's propensity to forgive (see Ballester, Munoz Sastre & Mullet, 2009).

Method

Participants

The total number of participants (Portuguese) was 303 (202 females and 101 males). The participants' ages ranged from 18 to 90. Twenty-one percent of the participants had completed

primary education, and 79% had completed secondary education. Twenty-three percent of the participants declared that they did not believe in God, 43% believed in God but did not attend church on a regular basis, and 34% 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

Four self-report questionnaires were used (see Table 1). The first one was the Forgiveness Proverbs Endorsement Questionnaire (FPEQ). From an initial list of 65 proverbs that included the words forgive, forgiving or forgiveness, a subset of 40 non-redundant proverbs was selected. They are shown in Annex 1. The second one was the Conceptualizations of Forgiveness questionnaire (Mullet, Girard & Bakhshi, 2004). The third one was the Forgiveness Questionnaire (Mullet, Barros, Frongia, Usai, Neto & Riviere-Shaffighi, 2003) that comprises three scales: Lasting resentment, Sensitivity to Circumstances, and Unconditional forgiveness. The fourth 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 an 11-point agreement scale (0-10). The experimenter was, in most cases, present when the participants filled in the ques-

tionnaires. It took approximately 30 minutes to complete the questionnaires.

Results

Exploratory and Confirmatory Factor Analyses

The sample was randomly divided into two sub-samples of 201 and 102 participants. An exploratory factor analysis was conducted on the raw data from the FPEQ, using the first sub-sample. Based on the Scree test, a four-factor solution was retained. As we intended to evidence conceptualizations factors that where, as far as possible, independent the one from the other, this solution was subjected to a VARIMAX rotation. The first factor explained 18% of the variance. It was called Positive aspects of forgiveness since it positively loaded on items expressing positive views about forgiveness (e.g., It is better to forgive than to punish; Mais vale perdoar que castigar). The second factor explained 16% of the variance. It was called Negative aspects of forgiveness since it positively loaded on items expressing negative views about forgiveness (e.g., The one who forgives the wolf does harm to the sheep; Quem perdoa ao lobo prejudica a ovelha). The third factor explained 7% of the variance. It was called Forgetting is not Forgiving since it positively loaded on items clearly expressing this idea (e.g., People forgive; but forgetting is another discourse; Perdoar, a gente perdoa, esquecer é outra conversa). Finally, the fourth factor explained 10% of the variance. It was called Forgiving as Moral Revenge since it positively loaded on items expressing this idea that forgiveness is the sweetest and noblest possible revenge (e.g., Forgiving the offenses has a sweet taste; Perdoa-se o mal que nos faz pelo bem que nos sabe).

Three items were selected for each of the four factors, the ones with the highest loading, and this four-factor model was subjected to confirmatory factor analysis, using the data from the remaining sub-sample. The GFI and CFI values were higher than .90: .92 and .98. The RMSEA value was lower than .08: .02 [.00-.06]. The RMR value was lower than .08: .07. The Chi² value was not significant ($p > .25$), and the Chi²/ df ratio was close to 1: 53/48 = 1.10. The detailed results are shown in Table 2.

Correlation and Regression Analyses

Scores for each variable and each factor were computed over the whole sample. Table 3 shows the correlation coefficients between the four conceptualization factors derived from the FPEQ and the other variables. Positive aspects of forgiveness appeared as a very broad factor that was significantly correlated with every variable, except Sensitivity to circumstances. Negative aspects of forgiveness were above all correlated with Immoral behavior and Lasting resentment. Forgetting is not forgiving appeared as independent from the other variables, except from Change of heart (but the association was weak). Finally, Moral revenge was associated with Encourages repentance.

Table 4 shows the results of a series of three stepwise regression analyses, one with each of the forgivingness scores as the criteria and all the other variables as predictors. The most interesting finding was that Forgetting is not forgiving significantly contributed to the prediction of Lasting Resentment and Sensitivity to circumstances.

Discussion

The way in which forgiveness is conceptualized in proverbs encountered in the Portuguese literature and used in daily life in Portugal has been examined using quantitative approaches, essentially exploratory and confirmatory factor analyses. The first hypothesis was that two dimensions of conceptualizations -- Encourage moral behavior, and Immoral behavior -- that have already been evidenced in previous studies using factor analyses (Bagnulo, Muñoz Sastre & Mullet, 2009; Ballester, Muñoz Sastre & Mullet, 2009; Kadima Kadiangandu et al., 2007; Mullet, Girard, & Bakhshi, 2004) should also be found through analysis of people's proverb endorsements. The data supported the hypothesis: As regards forgiveness, proverbs convey both negative and positive messages. It is, therefore, not surprising that when reviewing common conceptualizations about forgiveness, Enright and Fitzgibbons (2000) evidenced both aspects (see also Worthington, 2006). It is, however, worth noting that people endorse positive aspects (mean rating higher than 6 on a 0-10 scale) much more than they endorse negative aspects (less than 3).

The second hypothesis was that one or more dimension(s) of conceptualization should be encountered beyond the four that had already been found in earlier studies, in particular a dimension involving forgetting the offense. The data supported the hypothesis. A separate factor was evidenced, and this factor was not strongly associated with any of the previous conceptualization factors. In addition, this factor was the one with the strongest endorsement score (about 8), and it significantly contributed to the prediction of forgivingness beyond other factors; that is, the third hypothesis was also supported by the data.

Overall, people in Portugal, irrespective of age, gender and religious involvement, believe that forgiveness (a) is not forgetfulness, (b) has many positive aspects, (c) can be a broad process that is not limited to the victim-offender dyad, (d) encourages moral behavior in the offender, and (e) is even the noblest form of revenge. Complementarily, people in Portugal do not believe that forgiveness (f) is an immoral behavior, and (g) has many negative aspects. They are hesitant at thinking of forgiveness as a change of heart. When they are the victims of an offense, people in Portugal admit that they are sensitive to the many circumstances of the offense before considering forgiveness, but they don't feel themselves trapped into inescapable resentment or exaggeratedly prone to unconditionally forgive. These results are consistent with the findings by Ballester, Munoz Sastre and Mullet (2009).

Implications and Future studies

The Forgetting is not forgiving factor nicely complements the series of four conceptualization factors that comprise the Conceptualization of forgiveness model suggested by Mullet, Girard and Bakshi (2004). Table 3 showed that this factor is independent from the others. Future studies including the items from the four-factor model and the items involving the idea that forgetting is not forgiving should show that a fifth-factor model of conceptualization is a viable option.

By contrast, the Positive aspects factor appeared as a factor encompassing too many different facets of forgiveness. In the four-factor model of conceptualizations, these facets – Change of

heart, Broad process, and Encourages moral behavior -- have been shown to be separable (although loosely related) ones.

Tables

Table 1.
Descriptive Statistics

	<i>N</i> items	Range	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	Alpha
Age		18-90	38.28	24.49	
Gender (females)			67%	0.47	
Religious Involvement	2	1-3	2.12	0.76	
Lasting Resentment	5	0-10	3.80	1.70	.84
Sensitivity to Circumstances	7	0-10	5.49	1.82	.69
Unconditional Forgiveness	5	0-10	3.65	2.43	.87
Change of Heart	5	0-10	4.34	2.20	.72
Broad Process	5	0-10	5.89	2.07	.67
Immoral Behavior	5	0-10	2.55	1.83	.82
Encourages Moral Behavior	5	0-10	5.85	2.20	.75
Positive Aspects	3	0-10	6.35	2.29	.69
Negative Aspects	3	0-10	2.94	2.64	.87
Forgiveness Not Forgetfulness	3	0-10	7.71	2.43	.73
Forgiveness as Moral Revenge	3	0-10	5.06	2.67	.71

Table 2.
Results of the Confirmatory Factor Analysis.

Item (English Version)	Item (Portuguese Version)	Factors				<i>t</i>
		I	II	III	IV	
Forgive and you will be forgiven	Perdoa, e serás perdoado	.54				5.57
Do not leave the sword over the head of whom asked you for forgiveness	Não levantes espada contra quem peça perdão	.85				8.56
Better forgive than cure	Mais vale perdoar do que remediar	.45				4.50
To forgive the bad person is to tell him/her to be bad	Quem perdoa ao mau, é dizer-lhe que o seja		.88			22.32
Forgiveness makes the thief	Perdões fazem ladrões		.84			19.56
To forgive the bad people is to harm the good people	Perdoar aos maus é danar aos bons		.77			15.25
People forgive ; but to forgive is another discourse	Perdoar, a gente perdoa, esquecer é outra conversa			.99		10.65
Forgetting is not forgiving	Esquecer não é perdoar			.52		5.82
The one who forgive does not forget	Quem perdoa não esquece			.57		6.60
Forgiveness is the noblest revenge	Perdoar é a mais nobre vingança				.70	8.05
Forgive the offender and you become the winner	Perdoa ao ofensor e sairás vencedor				.67	7.73
Forgiving the offenses has a sweet taste	Perdoa-se o mal que nos faz pelo bem que nos sabe				.57	6.20
I - Positive Aspects		1.00				
II - Negative Aspects		-.23	1.00			
III - Forgetting is not Forgiving		.32	.15	1.00		
IV - Moral Revenge		.29	.36	.26	1.00	

Table 3.
Correlations Between the Four Conceptualizations Evidenced from the Proverbs, and the Other Variables

	Positive Aspects	Negative Aspects	Forgetting is not Forgiving	Moral Revenge
Age	.20*	-.08	.20*	-.16
Gender	.04	-.13	.00	.06
Religious Involvement	.31*	-.18	-.06	-.06
Change of Heart	.42*	-.07	.19*	.09
Broad Process	.59*	-.30*	-.06	.08
Immoral Behavior	-.21*	.53*	-.10	.10
Encourages Moral Behavior	.51*	-.03	-.08	.39*
Lasting Resentment	-.43*	.49*	.13	.04
Sensitivity to Circumstances	.12	-.05	.13	.01
Unconditional Forgiveness	.44*	-.26*	-.18	.15

* = $p < .001$

Table 4.
Results of the Stepwise Regression Analyses

Criterion	Predictor	Step	R	R ²	R ² ch.	F	p	Beta
Lasting Resentment	Negative Aspects	1	.49	.24	.24	95.63	.001	.27
	Positive Aspects	2	.60	.35	.11	52.91	.001	-.32
	Immoral Behavior	3	.63	.40	.04	20.66	.001	.27
	Forgetting is not Forgiving	4	.65	.42	.02	11.53	.001	.15
Sensitivity to Circumstances	Age	1	.25	.06	.06	20.92	.001	-.33
	Forgetting is not Forgiving	2	.32	.10	.04	12.06	.001	.20
	Positive Aspects	3	.36	.13	.03	9.97	.001	.17
Unconditional Forgiveness	Broad Process	1	.53	.28	.28	118.07	.001	.39
	Change of Heart	2	.60	.36	.08	37.69	.001	.24
	Encourages Repentance	3	.61	.38	.01	6.44	.002	.14

Annex A.

The 40 proverbs. Means and Standard Deviations

Portuguese Proverb	English Translation	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>
Esquecer não é perdoar	Forgetting is not forgiving	7.55	2.96
Perdoar, a gente perdoa, esquecer é outra conversa.	People forgive, but forgetting in another conversation	7.10	2.93
Não levantes a espada sobre a cabeça do que te pediu perdão.	Do not leave the sword over the head of whom asked you for forgiveness	6.94	2.75
A mais bela das virtudes é perdoar.	Forgiveness is the nicest virtue	6.72	2.82
Não levantes o braço contra quem peça perdão.	Never leave the arm over a person who beg forgiveness	6.61	2.90
Quem confessa, merece perdão.	The one who confesses deserves to be forgiven	6.48	2.69
Perdoa, e serás perdoado.	Forgive and you will be forgiven.	6.46	2.90
O perdão é divino.	Forgiveness is divine	6.41	3.03
Perdoa e verás, como fizeres acharás.	Forgive, and you will see	6.39	2.80
Mais vale perdoar que castigar.	Better forgive than punish	6.26	2.92
Muito amor, muito perdão.	Much love, much forgiveness	6.24	3.03
O primeiro erro merece perdão.	The first error deserves to be forgiven	6.15	3.16
Perdoa-se, enquanto se ama.	Forgive as a function of love	6.04	2.92
Mais vale perdoar do que remediar.	Better forgive than cure	5.98	2.97
Quem não perdoa não é digno de perdão.	The one who never forgive does not deserve forgiveness	5.94	3.04
Perdoa ao ofensor e sairás vencedor.	Forgive your offender and you will be forgiven	5.83	3.27
Perdoai, e sereis perdoado.	Forgive and you will be forgiven	5.83	3.05
Quem lágrimas escuta, está perto de perdoar.	The one who see the tears is close to forgive	5.67	2.78
O perdão economiza sofrimento.	Forgiveness spares suffering	5.62	3.13
Perdoar e esquecer.	Forgiving is forgetting	5.60	3.37

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Quem perdoa não esquece.	The one who forgives does not forget	5.48	3.18
A quem erra perdoa-lhe uma vez e não três.	A person who errs may be forgiven once but not thrice	5.19	3.60
Perdoa-se o mal que faz pelo bem que sabe.	Forgiving the offenses has a sweet taste	5.12	3.19
Quem não perdoa não sabe amar.	The one who never forgive does not know love	4.67	3.25
O perdão é a melhor vingança.	Forgiveness is the best revenge	4.31	3.49
Perdão é a mais nobre vingança.	Forgiveness is the noblest revenge	4.24	3.57
Perdoa-se o ódio, nunca o desprezo.	Forgive hate but never forgive contempt	3.95	3.06
Quem perdoa ao lobo prejudica a ovelha.	The one who forgives the wolf does harm to the sheep	3.90	3.20
Perdoa toda a ofensa.	Forgive all offenses	3.79	3.25
Perdoar as injúrias é a mais nobre vingança.	Forgiving the offenses is the noblest revenge	3.71	3.10
Como é certo a ninguém perdoar o povo.	As is well known, the people never forgive	3.57	2.52
Perdoar ao mau é animá-lo a ser.	To forgive bad persons is to encourage them to behave badly	3.15	3.01
Perdões fazem ladrões.	Forgiving several times makes several thieves	3.08	3.04
Perdoar ao mau é dizer-lhe que o seja.	To forgive bad persons is to teach them to be bad	2.95	3.09
O perdão faz o ladrão.	Forgiveness makes the thief	2.92	2.92
Perdoar aos maus é danar aos bons.	Forgiving bad persons is to harm good persons	2.92	2.89
Quem perdoa ao mau, é dizer-lhe que o seja.	The one who forgives bad persons tell them to be bad	2.83	2.95
Quem a ruim perdoa a ruindade lhe aumenta.	Forgiving badness increases badness	2.80	2.77
A bondade e o perdão só fazem ingratidão.	Goodness and forgiveness only produce ingratitude	2.30	2.58
Perdoai tudo a todos e a vós nada.	Forgive everything to everybody and nothing to you	2.15	2.48

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