

Promoting Forgiveness Through Psychological Distance

Social Psychological and
Personality Science
2016, Vol. 7(8) 875-883
© The Author(s) 2016
Reprints and permission:
sagepub.com/journalsPermissions.nav
DOI: 10.1177/1948550616662122
spps.sagepub.com



Sana Rizvi¹ and D. Ramona Bobocel¹

Abstract

We examined whether psychological distance from interpersonal transgressions can promote victim forgiveness via high-level construal. Participants responded to conflict vignettes. In Experiment 1, we found a positive effect of temporal distance on forgiveness, mediated by construal level. In Experiment 2, we found a positive effect of physical distance on construal level (2a) and a positive effect of construal level on forgiveness (2b). In Experiment 3, we found that construal level promotes forgiveness via reduced perceptions of transgression severity. Together, our experiments demonstrate that increasing victims' psychological distance from interpersonal transgressions promotes forgiveness due to high-level construal. Implications for construal level theory and for research on forgiveness are discussed.

Keywords

forgiveness, psychological distance, construal-level theory

Interpersonal transgressions are a pervasive part of everyday interactions. Historically, research focused on retaliatory responses, but recently scholars have examined alternative responses, such as forgiveness (see McCullough, 2001). Although it can be adaptive to withhold forgiveness in some circumstances (McNulty, 2010, 2011), research suggests that there are many benefits of granting forgiveness, both for the victim and offender, and for relationship repair (McCullough, 2001). Given these benefits, researchers have investigated the social psychological determinants of forgiveness (see Fehr, Gelfand, & Nag, 2010). We expand this literature by examining the effect of *psychological distance* on forgiveness. We conducted three experiments to examine whether psychologically distancing interpersonal transgressions from the victim's point of self promotes forgiveness via high-level construal.

Theoretical Rationale and Hypotheses

Researchers have examined numerous predictors of forgiveness (Fehr et al., 2010). For example, forgiveness is positively associated with dispositional characteristics of the victim such as agreeableness (McCullough & Hoyt, 2002) and self-esteem (Eaton, Struthers, & Santelli, 2006). Additionally, forgiveness is influenced by contextual factors. For example, victims are more forgiving of offenses that are perceived as less severe (Boon & Sulsky, 1997) and when victims demonstrate empathy for the offender (McCullough, Worthington, & Rachal, 1997). Recently, researchers have examined the role of time on forgiveness, revealing that victims are more motivated to forgive with the objective passage of time (McCullough, Fincham, &

Tsang, 2003; McCullough, Luna, Berry, Tabak, & Bono, 2010), or when victims are induced to perceive a transgression as having occurred in the distant versus recent past (Cheung & Olson, 2013; Wohl & McGarth, 2007). Although the effect of time appears to be robust, the psychological mechanisms are unclear (McCullough et al., 2010). We suggest that it can be interpreted from the perspective of construal-level theory (CLT; Trope & Liberman, 2003, 2010), which incorporates the concept of temporal distance within a broader framework for understanding the effects of psychological distance on people's mental construal of targets (events, activities, and people) and downstream reactions.

According to CLT, psychological distance refers to the subjective experience that a target is close to, or far from, the self. Targets can be removed from the self via physical space, time, social difference, and hypotheticality (Bar-Anan, Liberman, Trope, & Algom, 2007). Psychologically near targets are mentally represented by low-level construals, whereas psychologically distant targets are represented by high-level construals (Jia, Hirt, & Karpen, 2009). Low-level construals are specific and contextualized representations that include subordinate and incidental features of the target. They involve narrow and individuating processing, where people think on the surface and

¹University of Waterloo, Waterloo, Ontario, Canada

Corresponding Author:

Sana Rizvi, University of Waterloo, 200 University Avenue West, Waterloo, Ontario, Canada N2L 3G1.
Email: sana.rizvi2@gmail.com

focus on concrete details (Darwent, Fujita, & Warslak, 2010). In contrast, high-level construals are schematic and decontextualized representations that include superordinate, but omit incidental, features of the target. They are associated with broad and global processing (Liberman & Forster, 2009), in which people extract the gist or the primary facets of information about an event, which provides deeper meaning (Smith & Trope, 2006). There is much empirical support for the basic tenets of CLT, and the theory has shed light on a number of important intrapersonal and interpersonal processes (Soderberg, Callahan, Kochersberger, Amit, & Ledgerwood, 2015; Trope & Liberman, 2010). In the same vein, we believe that CLT has important implications for the study of interpersonal forgiveness and may also help to explain the effect of time on forgiveness.

Our reasoning builds on prior research by Magee, Milliken, and Lurie (2010) who analyzed the content of individuals' verbatim reactions to the events of September 11, 2001, at New York's Trade Center, from five media sources (e.g., Cable News Network). The researchers found that individuals with greater position power (which induces social distance) described the events more abstractly and less negatively. The authors argued that negative events are perceived as less negative in psychologically distant (versus near) conditions because concrete details of the event are less accessible.

Similarly, we suggest that psychologically distancing interpersonal transgressions from the victim's point of self should induce a higher, more abstract construal level. Accordingly, victims should perceive the event as less negative because concrete details of the event are less accessible (Liberman, Trope, & Stephan, 2007). With fewer details and less negativity at higher levels of construal, victims are likely to perceive the transgressions as less severe. As noted earlier, victims are more forgiving of transgressions that are perceived as less severe (Boon & Sulsky, 1997), therefore, construal level may promote forgiveness via reduced transgression severity.

To test our reasoning, we conducted two experiments to examine the hypothesis that psychological distance from an interpersonal transgression promotes forgiveness via high-level construal. A third experiment examined whether the effect of construal level on forgiveness is mediated by reduced perceptions of transgression severity.

It is noteworthy that our predictions for the effects of psychological distance on forgiveness appear to contradict recent research on morality. Eyal and Liberman (2012) suggested that because of their general and decontextualized nature, moral values and principles are high-level constructs and therefore more likely to be activated when a person considers remote versus proximal events. In their research, Eyal, Liberman, and Trope (2008) asked participants to judge actions where a widely accepted moral rule was either violated (e.g., siblings having sexual intercourse) or upheld (e.g., a young couple adopting a disabled child). The authors manipulated either the temporal distance (e.g., near vs. distant future) or the social distance (e.g., imagine from own vs. third-party perspective) of the situations. Eyal and colleagues (2008) found that actions

in temporally and socially distant (vs. near) situations were judged as more offensive if the actions violated moral principles and as more virtuous if they upheld moral principles. Following from these findings, it is conceivable that psychological distance would reduce forgiveness within the context of transgressions that clearly violate moral norms. In this case, people's reactions should be guided by their moral values and principles; and given that moral violations are judged more harshly at higher levels of construal, it is reasonable to expect that perceivers will also be less forgiving, and possibly more punitive, toward the offenders.

Nevertheless, there is theoretical reason to believe that psychological distance will promote forgiveness in the context of interpersonal transgressions, in which people violate relational norms. Researchers have long argued that forgiveness is a moral virtue in the context of interpersonal relationships (Enright & the Human Development Study Group, 1994; McCullough, Sandage, & Worthington, 1997). Thus, in this context, forgiveness may be the moral principle activated at higher levels of construal. Moreover, research indicates that forgiveness is associated with the cognitive representation of interpersonal relationships and, therefore, arises effortlessly (Karremans & Aarts, 2007). Given that forgiveness is part of the social relationship schema and that psychologically distant events rely on schematic information, it is possible that psychological distance will foster forgiveness in the context of interpersonal transgressions. This is perhaps why prior research has demonstrated that temporal distance promotes victim forgiveness of interpersonal transgressions.

Overview of the Experiments

In Experiment 1, we used a measurement-of-mediation design (Spencer, Zanna, & Fong, 2005) to examine whether high-level construal is a mediator for the effect of psychological distance on forgiveness for interpersonal transgressions. Measurement-of-mediation designs measure the mediator variable after the manipulation of the independent variable to demonstrate that the independent variable affects the mediator variable, which in turn predicts the dependent variable. Thus, we manipulated temporal distance of a transgression and assessed construal level and forgiveness.

In Experiment 2, we examined whether a causal chain exists between psychological distance, construal level, and forgiveness. As argued by Spencer and colleagues (2005), another way to garner support for a proposed psychological process is to demonstrate a causal chain between the independent variable (A), the proposed process variable (B), and the outcome variable (C), with two experiments. In the first, the independent variable is manipulated and the proposed psychological process is assessed, thus establishing the A-B causal relation. In the second experiment, the psychological process is manipulated, and the outcome variable is assessed, thus establishing the B-C causal relation. Together, these two experiments "provide strong evidence for the theoretically proposed psychological process even though they do not test for mediation

statistically” (Spencer et al., 2005, p. 846). In Experiment 2a, we manipulated the physical distance of a transgression and assessed construal level. In Experiment 2b, we manipulated construal level and assessed forgiveness. Our goal in operationalizing psychological distance in two different ways, namely, temporal distance (Experiment 1) and physical distance (Experiment 2a and b), was to show generalizability of our effects across different distance dimensions, supporting the underlying role of psychological distance. In Experiment 3, we begin to examine the process by which construal level fosters forgiveness. Again using a mediation-by-measurement design, we manipulated construal level and measured perceptions of transgression severity and forgiveness.

Experiment 1

Method

Participants and Design

One hundred and twelve individuals¹ were recruited from CrowdFlower, an online crowdsourcing platform soliciting research participants. Participants were required to (1) reside in the North America, (2) be over 18 years, and (3) work full-time.² Fifteen people did not meet the selection criteria, and 18 individuals completed the survey twice (duplicate Internet Protocol). These data were not analyzed, resulting in a sample of 79 (47 females; 20–71 years old). Participants earned US\$0.50. Participants were randomly assigned to one of two conditions: temporally near or temporally distant.

Procedure

We told participants that we were examining people’s thoughts about workplace issues. They read an interpersonal transgression (adapted from Struthers, Dupuis, & Eaton, 2005) from the victim’s perspective, which was framed as occurring either 1 month (temporally near) or 2 years ago (temporally distant). In the transgression, a coworker of the participant took more credit for a joint project. Participants then responded to the measures and were debriefed.³

Measures

Construal level. We used the short version of the 25-item Behavioral Identification Form (BIF) which assesses the level at which individuals represent actions (Vallacher & Wegner, 1989). The short BIF (Alter, Oppenheimer, & Zemla, 2010) comprises 13 items where participants describe actions (e.g., reading) by choosing one of two options. One option presents a concrete (low level) representation (e.g., following lines of print); the other presents an abstract (high level) representation (e.g., gaining knowledge). The BIF is commonly used to demonstrate the effect of psychological distance manipulations on construal level (Fujita, Trope, Liberman, & Levin-Sagi, 2006). If our manipulation of temporal distance results in

high-level construal, then participants should report a greater number of abstract action identifications.

Forgiveness. Forgiveness motivation was assessed using the benevolence subscale (e.g., “Even though his/her actions hurt me, I have goodwill for him or her”) of the Transgression-related Interpersonal Motivations Inventory (McCullough, Root, & Cohen, 2006). Six items were rated on a 5-point scale ranging from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 5 (*strongly agree*) and showed high internal consistency ($\alpha = .95$). Thus, we created a composite by averaging the items.

Temporal distance. To check our manipulation, we assessed participants’ subjective experience of distance; they indicated when they felt the event took place, on a 10-point scale ranging from 1 (*very recently*) to 10 (*a long time ago*).

Results and Discussion

Preliminary analyses. No effect of participant gender or age was found in this or subsequent studies. Therefore, these variables are not included.

An independent samples *t*-test revealed that participants felt that the event took place a longer time ago in the temporally distant ($M = 5.61$, $SD = 2.76$) versus near condition ($M = 3.66$, $SD = 2.25$), $t(77) = 3.44$, $p = .001$, 95% confidence interval (CI)⁴ [0.82, 3.08], $d = 0.78$. The temporal distance manipulation successfully induced the subjective experience of distance.

Main analyses

Forgiveness. An independent samples *t*-test revealed that participants were more motivated to forgive their coworker in the temporally distant ($M = 3.46$, $SD = 0.77$) versus near condition ($M = 3.03$, $SD = 0.98$), $t(77) = 2.19$, $p = .032$, 95% CI [0.04, 0.83], $d = 0.50$.

Construal level. An independent samples *t*-test revealed that participants reported a greater number of abstract action identifications in the temporally distant ($M = 9.29$, $SD = 2.64$) versus near condition ($M = 7.18$, $SD = 3.73$), $t(77) = 2.92$, $p = .005$, 95% CI [0.67, 3.55], $d = 0.67$.⁵

Mediation analysis. The SPSS (Version 23) script (PROCESS—Model 4; Hayes, 2013) was used to test for mediation. The number of bootstraps was set at 5,000 with 95% CI (percentile bootstrap CI method was selected). If the CI of the indirect effect does not include zero, then the null hypothesis of nonsignificance is rejected (Hayes, 2013).

Temporal distance was significantly positively related to both abstract action identifications, $a = 1.05$, $SE = .36$, $t(77) = 2.92$, $p = .005$, 95% CI = [0.33, 1.77], $d = 0.67$, and forgiveness, $c = 0.21$, $SE = .10$, $t(77) = 2.19$, $p = .032$, 95% CI [0.02, 0.41], $d = 0.50$. When both temporal distance and abstract action identifications were included as predictors, abstract action identifications was significantly positively related to forgiveness, $b = 0.15$, $SE = .03$, $t(76) = 5.98$, $p < .001$, 95% CI

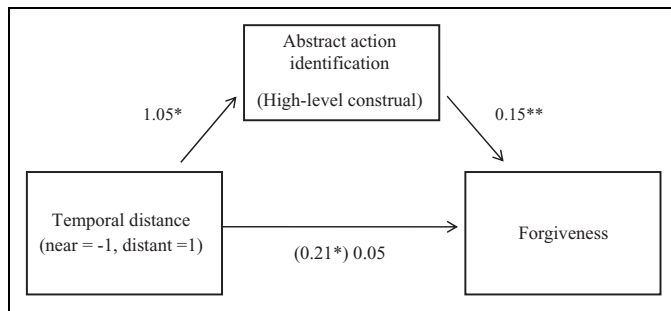


Figure 1. Unstandardized coefficients for the relation between temporal distance and forgiveness as mediated by high-level construal. Note that the unstandardized coefficient between temporal distance and forgiveness, controlling for high-level construal, is outside the parentheses. The bootstrapped unstandardized indirect effect was 0.16, and the 95% confidence interval ranged from 0.04 and 0.31. $N = 79$ (near $n = 38$; distant $n = 41$). * $p < .05$. ** $p < .01$.

[0.10, 0.21], $d = 1.37$, whereas temporal distance was not, $c' = 0.05$, $SE = .09$, $t(76) = 0.62$, $p = .54$, 95% CI [-0.12, 0.23], $d = 0.14$. The indirect effect through abstract action identifications was significant, $ab = 0.16$, $SE = .07$, 95% CI [0.04, 0.31]. Figure 1 illustrates the results. Experiment 1 provides support for the idea that temporal distance promotes victim forgiveness via high-level construal.

Experiment 2a

To garner converging support for the role of high-level construal as a mediator, we conducted two experiments to establish a causal chain between psychological distance, construal level, and forgiveness (Spencer et al., 2005). We used a different dimension of psychological distance, namely, physical distance, to show generalizability. Thus, in Experiment 2a, we manipulated the physical distance of an interpersonal transgression and assessed construal level. Although the association between physical distance and construal level is well established in the literature (Fujita, Henderson, et al., 2006), we are the first to examine this relation in the context of interpersonal transgressions.

Method

Participants and design. One hundred and four (83 females; 17–49 years old) undergraduate psychology students participated in groups of four (in the lab) for course credit. Participants were randomly assigned to one of two conditions: physically near ($n = 51$) or physically distant ($n = 53$).

Procedure. Participants read a situation adapted from one of the transgression scenarios created by Berry, Worthington, Parrott, O'Connor, and Wade (2001) to assess forgiveness of interpersonal transgressions. The situation was different than in Experiment 1 to show generalizability. Here, a classmate plagiarized the participant's work. The classmate was either physically near to participants, in [*Waterloo, Canada*], or physically

distant from them, in [*Sydney, Australia*] (adapted by Fujita et al., 2006).

Measures

Construal level. Construal level was assessed using the 25-item version of BIF (Vallacher & Wegner, 1989).

Physical distance. To check our manipulation, we assessed participants' subjective experience of distance; they rated how far geographically they perceived their classmate on a 7-point scale (1 = *very close*, 7 = *very far*).

Results and Discussion

Preliminary analysis. An independent samples t -test revealed that participants perceived their classmate to be farther away in the physically distant ($M = 6.30$, $SD = 0.95$) versus near condition ($M = 1.96$, $SD = 1.10$), $t(102) = 21.60$, $p < .001$, 95% CI [3.94, 4.74], $d = 4.28$. Thus, our manipulation successfully induced the subjective experience of distance.

Main analysis. We found that participants reported a greater number of abstract action identifications in the physically distant ($M = 16.13$, $SD = 4.06$) versus near condition ($M = 9.33$, $SD = 4.85$), $t(102) = 7.76$, $p < .001$, 95% CI [5.06, 8.54], $d = 1.54$. Experiment 2a demonstrates that physically distancing a transgression induces a higher construal level.

Experiment 2b

To complete the causal chain design, Experiment 2b examined the effect of construal level on forgiveness. Construal level was induced with a commonly used manipulation (Freitas, Gollwitzer, & Trope, 2004). To argue for a psychological process with the experimental-causal-chain design, one must make a case that the proposed process as it is measured, and as it is manipulated, are the same construct (Spencer et al., 2005). In our case, researchers have used the BIF (Experiment 2a) and the why/how manipulation (Experiment 2b) interchangeably to measure and to manipulate construal level (Rim, Hansen, & Trope, 2013).

Method

Participants and design. Fifty-five (41 females; 18–25 years old) undergraduate psychology students participated in groups of four (in the lab) for course credit. Participants were randomly assigned to one of two conditions: low-level ($n = 29$) or high-level construal ($n = 26$).

Procedure. Participants completed a written exercise that contained the manipulation (Freitas et al., 2004). In the low-level construal condition, participants deliberated on *how* they would engage in the activity of improving and maintaining their physical health. In the high-level construal condition, participants deliberated on *why* they would engage in the activity.

Participants then read the transgression used in Experiment 2a (omitting physical location information).

Measure

Forgiveness. Participants responded to one item on a 5-point scale ranging from 1 (*definitely not forgive*) to 5 (*definitely forgive*): “To what extent would you forgive the person who borrowed your paper?” Although single-item measures can be problematic, this face-valid item is used widely (Boon & Sulsky, 1997).

Results and Discussion

An independent samples *t*-test revealed that participants were more motivated to forgive in the high-level ($M = 3.65$, $SD = 1.36$) versus low-level construal condition ($M = 1.55$, $SD = 0.57$), $t(53) = 7.64$, $p < .001$, 95% CI [1.55, 2.65], $d = 2.10$.⁶ Experiment 2b indicates that inducing a high-level construal in victims promotes forgiveness.

Experiment 3

Together, Experiments 1 and 2 a-b suggest that psychologically distancing interpersonal transgressions fosters victim forgiveness via high-level construal.⁷ In Experiment 3, we examined the role of perceived transgression severity. As outlined earlier, we reasoned that participants will perceive the transgression as less severe at higher levels of construal because concrete details will be less accessible and the negativity of the event will be reduced. Thus, we manipulated construal level and measured perceptions of severity and forgiveness.

Method

Participants and Design

One hundred and fifty-one individuals (residing in North America and over 18 years old) were recruited from Crowd-Flower. Four individuals did not complete the manipulation, and 20 completed the survey twice. These data were not analyzed, and the final sample was 127 (54 females; between 19 and 72 years old). Participants earned US\$0.50. Participants were randomly assigned to either low-level or high-level construal conditions.

Procedure

Participants were presented with 36 common objects/activities (e.g., soda; Henderson, 2013). Individuals in the low-level construal condition generated examples of these objects/activities (e.g., coke), while those in the high-level construal condition generated categories for the same objects/activities (e.g., food). Past research has demonstrated that having people think about categories (vs. exemplars) induces high-level (vs. low-level) construal (Fujita et al., 2006). Participants then read the same

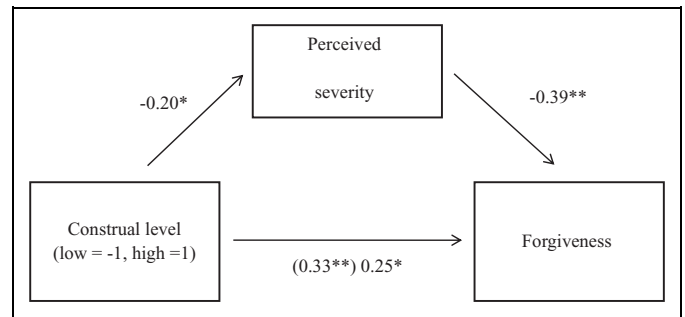


Figure 2. Unstandardized regression coefficients for the relation between construal level and forgiveness as partially mediated by perceptions of severity. Note that the unstandardized regression coefficient between construal level and forgiveness, controlling for perceptions of severity, is outside of the parentheses. The bootstrapped unstandardized indirect effect was 0.08, and the 95% confidence interval ranged from 0.01 and 0.18. $N = 127$ (low $n = 65$; high $n = 62$). * $p < .05$. ** $p < .01$.

transgression as in Experiment 1 (omitting temporal information).

Measures

Perceptions of severity. We assessed severity with three items on 5-point scale ranging from 1 (*not at all*) to 5 (*very much*): “How severe would you rate the event?” “How serious would you rate the event?” and “How harsh would you rate the event?” (adapted from McCullough et al., 1998). These items demonstrated high internal consistency ($\alpha = .93$), thus a composite was created.

Forgiveness. Participants’ motivation to forgive was assessed as in Experiment 1. The scale showed high internal consistency ($\alpha = .94$), thus a composite was created.

Results and Discussion

Main analyses

Forgiveness. An independent samples *t*-test revealed that participants were more motivated to forgive their coworker in the high-level ($M = 3.82$, $SD = 0.70$) versus low-level construal condition ($M = 3.17$, $SD = 1.15$), $t(125) = 3.83$, $p < .001$, 95% CI [0.31, 0.99], $d = 0.69$.⁸

Perceptions of severity. An independent samples *t*-test revealed that participants perceived the transgression to be significantly less severe in the high level ($M = 2.97$, $SD = 1.17$) versus low-level construal condition ($M = 3.36$, $SD = 1.00$), $t(125) = 2.03$, $p = .045$, 95% CI [0.01, 0.77], $d = 0.36$.

Mediation analysis. Mediation was analyzed as in Experiment 1 (see Figure 2). Construal level was significantly negatively related to perceptions of severity, $a = -0.20$, $SE = .10$, $t(125) = -2.03$, $p = .045$, 95% CI = [-0.39, -0.01], $d = -0.36$, and positively related to forgiveness, $c = 0.33$, $SE = .09$, $t(125) = 3.83$, $p < .001$, 95% CI [0.16, 0.49], $d = 0.69$. When both construal level and perceptions of severity were

included as predictors, construal level was significantly positively related to forgiveness, $c' = 0.25$, $SE = .08$, $t(124) = 3.21$, $p = .002$, 95% CI [0.10, 0.40], $d = 0.58$, and perceptions of severity was significantly negatively related to forgiveness, $b = -0.39$, $SE = .07$, $t(124) = -5.46$, $p < .001$, 95% CI [-0.53, -0.25], $d = -0.98$. The indirect effect through perceptions of severity was significant, $ab = 0.08$, $SE = .05$, 95% CI [0.01, 0.18]. Experiment 3 suggests that inducing a high-level construal promotes forgiveness in part by reducing perceived severity of the transgression.

General Discussion

Our research provides a novel integration of the literatures on CLT and forgiveness. In Experiment 1, we demonstrated a positive effect of temporal distance on forgiveness via high-level construal. Experiment 2a and b suggests that physically distancing a transgression from the victim promotes forgiveness via high-level construal. Together, Experiments 1 and 2a-b suggest that psychological distance from interpersonal transgressions induces a high-level construal, which in turn fosters victim forgiveness. Finally, the findings in Experiment 3 are consistent with the idea that participants perceived the transgression as less severe at high versus low-level construal, which in turn promoted forgiveness.

Theoretical Implications

Forgiveness. As noted earlier, past research has demonstrated a positive effect of time on forgiveness, but the psychological mechanism is not well understood (McCullough et al., 2010). We suggest that construal level can explain the effect. Our findings suggest as a transgression is distanced in time, victims construe it at a higher level, which in turn promotes forgiveness. Findings from an unpublished dissertation (Coughlin, 2015) are consistent with this idea.

More broadly, our research highlights the role of higher order cognitive factors in forgiveness. Whereas historically the literature has emphasized dispositional and situational predictors (Fehr et al., 2010), more recently scholars have begun to focus on the cognitive underpinnings. For example, Pronk and colleagues (2010) found that executive functioning facilitates forgiveness by reducing rumination. Our research contributes to this line of research by demonstrating the importance of construal level in the study of forgiveness.

In the present research, we examined only one process through which construal level fosters forgiveness. Drawing on Magee et al.'s (2010) findings, we predicted that participants would perceive the transgression as less severe at high-level construal (vs. low-level construal) due to reduced accessibility of concrete details and less negativity at higher levels of construal. In turn, lower perceptions of severity were associated with forgiveness, which partially explained the effect of construal level on forgiveness. Given that we measured severity at the same time as forgiveness, future research is needed to draw firm conclusions regarding causality. Although we

focused on the role of transgression severity, construal level may promote forgiveness via additional processes. For example, high-level construals are associated with greater interpersonal sensitivity via global processing (Schmid Mast, Jonas, & Hall, 2009). Given that interpersonal sensitivity entails moving beyond one's perspective, victims may experience empathy for the offender at higher levels of construal, which prior forgiveness research has shown to predict forgiveness (McCullough, Worthington, & Rachal, 1997).

CLT. The present research also has implications for research on psychological distance and construal level. As noted earlier, Eyal et al. (2008) demonstrated that people judge actions that violate moral norms as more offensive in distant versus near conditions, whereas we found that distance promotes victim forgiveness of interpersonal transgressions. Thus, the effect of psychological distance on reactions to offenders is unlikely to be uniform but rather will be moderated by other factors. For example, our transgressions were arguably less morally evocative compared to those examined by Eyal et al. In addition, our transgressions involved people who are socially connected. As noted earlier, such contextual factors may alter the values, principles, and schemas that are evoked at higher versus lower levels of construal, thereby moderating whether psychological distance reduces or promotes benevolent responses toward the offender. An important avenue for future research will be to examine factors that alter the effect of psychological distance and construal level on people's responses to offenders.

Limitations and Future Research

There are several key limitations. First, as noted earlier, because we were interested in the effect of psychological distance on forgiveness, we operationalized psychological distance in two different ways, temporal distance (in Experiment 1) and physical distance (in Experiment 2a). Thus, Experiment 2a conceptually replicates the effect on construal level observed in Experiment 1. Although this is an important strength, it is also a limitation because it meant using different independent variables across Experiments 1 and 2a. Given our goal to demonstrate the mediating effect of psychological distance on forgiveness via construal level, it would have been preferable to use the same independent variable in both experiments.

Second, participants responded to hypothetical transgressions, thus it is unclear whether they would respond similarly to actual transgressions. Although this feature reduces external validity, the use of vignettes is common in the study of forgiveness because it enables researchers to maximize internal validity (Aquino, Tripp, & Bies, 2006; Karremans & Smith, 2010). By presenting participants with vignettes, we were able to control characteristics of the offense and other contextual factors that would have otherwise limited our ability to draw causal inference. Nevertheless, future research is needed to examine whether our findings generalize to real transgressions.

Third, construal level was manipulated (Experiments 2b and 3) or measured (Experiments 1 and 2a) in terms of a general mindset rather than being specific to the scenarios in question. Although this is consistent with past CLT research (Trope & Liberman, 2010), future research may benefit from having participants engage in manipulations that are specific to the transgressions to further examine the processes by which construal level affects forgiveness.

Fourth, we did not investigate potential boundary conditions of the effect of psychological distance on forgiveness. For example, we did not indicate in our vignettes whether there was a history of offense. Thus, it is not clear whether the effect of psychological distance on forgiveness will hold in situations in which the offender has transgressed against the victim repeatedly. According to CLT, people are more likely to make dispositional attributions for actions in psychologically distant versus near conditions (Trope & Liberman, 2010). Thus, in the context of repeated transgressions, distance may decrease victims' motivation to forgive because they are more likely to blame the offender, which may attenuate forgiveness. Importantly, in this context, withholding forgiveness may be in victims' best interest (see McNulty, 2010).

Conclusion

We demonstrate that psychological distance from interpersonal transgressions can promote victim forgiveness due to high-level construal. Overall, our research highlights the role of cognitive processes in the study of forgiveness. In particular, it suggests that how people mentally represent an interpersonal transgression can affect how they respond to it.

Acknowledgments

We thank research assistants Caylie Seyler, Melissa Lancaster, Frank Mu, and Yoon Cho. We would also like to thank Mark Zanna and Igor Grossman for constructive comments on an earlier version of this article.

Declaration of Conflicting Interests

The author(s) declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

Funding

The author(s) disclosed receipt of the following financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article: This research was funded by a research grant from the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada awarded to D. Ramona Bobocel.

Supplemental Material

The online supplements are available at <http://spps.sagepub.com/supplemental>.

Notes

1. We did not conduct a priori power analyses, although in hindsight this was an oversight. Guided by past research, we set the total

sample size in each experiment to a minimum of 100. The exception is Experiment 2b, which was conducted first and had been set to a minimum of 50. The experiments were conducted in close succession in the following order: Experiments 2b, 2a, 1, and 3.

2. We recruited full-time employees to enhance the likelihood that participants could imagine the workplace vignette in Experiment 1. In Experiment 3, we recognized that this selection criteria were overly conservative; therefore, we recruited employees with any work experience.
3. The same cover story was used in all experiments. Participants read the vignettes, responded to the measure(s), and were debriefed. Nothing was stated in any of the vignettes regarding reparative behavior on the part of the transgressor. We report all focal measures collected in each experiment. Vignette details and benevolence subscale (Transgression-related Interpersonal Motivations Inventory) items are provided in the Supplemental Online Materials.
4. For *t*-tests, confidence intervals (CIs) are provided for the difference between the means; for the mediation analyses, CIs are provided for the path coefficients.
5. Levene's test indicated unequal variances ($F = 5.02, p = .03$), but the effect remains significant after adjustment, $t(66.09) = 2.88, p = .005, 95\% \text{ CI } [0.65, 3.57], d = 0.71$.
6. Levene's test indicated unequal variances ($F = 12.13, p = .001$), but the effect remains significant after adjustment, $t(32.89) = 7.35, p < .001, 95\% \text{ CI } [1.52, 2.68], d = 2.56$.
7. In Experiment 2a, the manipulation of physical distance may have inadvertently altered how participants perceived key elements of the situation, thereby creating alternative explanations. We conducted another study (2c) where we replicated the findings of Experiment 2a and ruled out the possible confounds; see Supplemental Online Materials.
8. Levene's test indicated unequal variances ($F = 12.50, p = .001$), but the effect remains significant after adjustment, $t(106.98) = 3.87, p < .001, 95\% \text{ CI } [0.32, 0.98], d = 0.75$.

References

- Alter, A. L., Oppenheimer, D. M., & Zemla, J. C. (2010). Missing the trees for the forest: Construal level account of the illusion of explanatory depth. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology, 99*, 436–451. doi:10.1037/a0020218
- Aquino, K., Tripp, T. M., & Bies, R. J. (2006). Getting even or moving on? Power, procedural justice, and types of offense as predictors of revenge, forgiveness, reconciliation, and avoidance in organizations. *Journal of Applied Psychology, 91*, 653–668. doi:10.1037/0021-9010.91.3.653
- Bar-Anan, Y., Liberman, N., Trope, Y., & Algom, D. (2007). Automatic processing of psychological distance: Evidence from a stroop task. *Journal of Experimental Psychology: General, 136*, 610–622. doi:10.1037/0096-3445.136.4.610
- Berry, J. W., Worthington, E. L., Jr., Parrott, L., O'Connor, L. E., & Wade, N. G. (2001). Dispositional forgivingness: Development and construct validity of the Transgression Narrative Test of Forgivingness (TNTF). *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin, 27*, 1277–1290. doi:10.1177/01461672012710004

- Boon, S. D., & Sulsky, L. M. (1997). Attributions of blame and forgiveness in romantic relationships: A policy-capturing study. *Journal of Social Behavior and Personality, 12*, 19–44.
- Cheung, I., & Olson, J. M. (2013). Sometimes it's easier to forgive my transgressor than your transgressor: Effects of subjective temporal distance on forgiveness for harm to self or close other. *Journal of Applied Social Psychology, 43*, 195–200. doi:10.1111/j.1559-1816.2012.00997.x
- Coughlin, A. (2015). *Rumination, time, and forgiveness: Are changes in thinking over time associated with the development of forgiveness* (Unpublished doctoral dissertation). Flinders University, Adelaide, South Australia.
- Darwent, K. M., Fujita, K., & Wakslak, C. J. (2010). On the role of abstraction in global and local processing phenomena. *Psychological Inquiry, 21*, 198–202. doi:10.1080/1047840X.2010.502094
- Eaton, J., Struthers, C. W., & Santelli, A. G. (2006). Dispositional and state forgiveness: The role of self-esteem, need for structure, and narcissism. *Personality and Individual Differences, 41*, 371–380. doi:10.1016/j.paid.2006.02.005
- Enright, R. D., & the Human Development Study Group. (1994). Piaget on the moral development of forgiveness: Identity or reciprocity? *Human Development, 37*, 63–80.
- Eyal, T., & Liberman, N. (2012). Morality and psychological distance: A construal level theory perspective. In M. Mikulincer & P. R. Shaver (Eds.), *The social psychology of morality: Exploring the causes of good and evil. Herzliya series on personality and social psychology* (pp. 185–202). Washington, DC: American Psychological Association.
- Eyal, T., Liberman, N., & Trope, Y. (2008). Judging near and distant virtue and vice. *Journal of Experimental Social Psychology, 44*, 1204–1209. doi:10.1016/j.jesp.2008.03.012
- Fehr, R., Gelfand, M. J., & Nag, M. (2010). The road to forgiveness: A meta-analytic synthesis of its situational and dispositional correlates. *Psychological Bulletin, 136*, 894–914. doi:10.1037/a0019993
- Freitas, A. L., Gollwitzer, P. M., & Trope, Y. (2004). The influence of abstract and concrete mindsets on anticipating and guiding others' self-regulatory efforts. *Journal of Experimental Social Psychology, 40*, 739–752. doi:10.1016/j.jesp.2004.04.003
- Fujita, K., Henderson, M. D., Marlone, D., Eng, J., Trope, Y., & Liberman, N. (2006). Spatial distance and mental construal of social events. *Psychological Science, 17*, 278–282. doi:10.1111/j.1467-9280.2006.01698.x
- Fujita, K., Trope, Y., Liberman, N., & Levin-Sagi, M. (2006). Construal levels and self-control. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology, 90*, 351–367. doi:10.1037/0022-3514.90.3.351
- Hayes, A. F. (2013). *Introduction to mediation, moderation, and conditional process analysis: A regression-based approach*. New York, NY: The Guildford Press.
- Henderson, M. D. (2013). When seeing the forest reduces the need for trees: The role of construal level in attraction to choice. *Journal of Experimental Social Psychology, 49*, 676–683. doi:10.1016/j.jesp.2013.03.001
- Jia, L., Hirt, E. R., & Karpen, S. C. (2009). Lessons from a Faraway land: The effect of spatial distance on creative cognition. *Journal of Experimental Social Psychology, 45*, 1127–1131. doi:10.1016/j.jesp.2009.05.015
- Karremans, J. C., & Aarts, H. (2007). The role of automaticity in determining the inclination to forgive close others. *Journal of Experimental Social Psychology, 43*, 902–917. doi:10.1016/j.jesp.2006.10.012
- Karremans, J. C., & Smith, P. K. (2010). Having the power to forgive: When the experience of power increases interpersonal forgiveness. *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin, 36*, 1010–1023. doi:10.1177/0146167210376761
- Liberman, N., & Forster, J. (2009). Distancing from experienced self: How global-versus-local perception affects estimation of psychological distance. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology, 97*, 203–216. doi:10.1037/a0015671
- Liberman, N., Trope, Y., & Stephan, E. (2007). Psychological distance. In A. W. Kruglanski & E. T. Higgins (Eds.), *Social psychology: Handbook of basic principles* (Vol. 2, pp. 353–383). New York, NY: Guilford Press.
- Magee, J. C., Milliken, F. J., & Lurie, A. R. (2010). Power and the construal of a crisis: The immediate aftermath of September 11, 2001. *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin, 36*, 354–370. doi:10.1177/0146167209360418
- McCullough, M. E. (2001). Forgiveness: Who does it and how do they do it? *Current Directions in Psychological Science, 10*, 194–197. doi:10.1111/1467-8721.00147
- McCullough, M. E., Fincham, F. D., & Tsang, J. (2003). Forgiveness, forbearance, and time: The temporal unfolding of transgression-related interpersonal motivations. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology, 84*, 540–557. doi:10.1037/0022-3514.84.3.540
- McCullough, M. E., & Hoyt, W. T. (2002). Transgression-related motivational dispositions: Personality substrates of forgiveness and their links to the Big Five. *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin, 28*, 1556–1573. doi:10.1177/014616702237583
- McCullough, M. E., Luna, L. R., Berry, J. W., Tabak, B. A., & Bono, G. (2010). On the form and function of forgiving: Modeling the time-forgiveness relationship and testing the valuable relationship hypothesis. *Emotion, 10*, 358–376. doi:10.1037/a0019349
- McCullough, M. E., Rachal, K. C., Sandage, S. J., Worthington, E. L., Jr., Brown, S. W., & Hight, T. L. (1998). Interpersonal forgiving in close relationships: II. Theoretical elaboration and measurement. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology, 75*, 1586–1603. doi:10.1037/0022-3514.75.6.1586
- McCullough, M. E., Root, L. M., & Cohen, A. D. (2006). Writing about the benefits of an interpersonal transgression facilitates forgiveness. *Journal of Consulting and Clinical Psychology, 74*, 887–897. doi:10.1037/0022-006X.74.5.887
- McCullough, M. E., Sandage, S. J., & Worthington, E. L., Jr. (1997). *To forgive is human*. Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity.
- McCullough, M. E., Worthington, E. L., Jr., & Rachal, K. C. (1997). Interpersonal forgiving in close relationships. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology, 73*, 321–336. doi:10.1037/0022-3514.73.2.321
- McNulty, J. K. (2010). Forgiveness increases the likelihood of subsequent partner transgressions in marriage. *Journal of Family Psychology, 24*, 787–790. doi:10.1037/a0021678
- McNulty, J. K. (2011). The dark side of forgiveness: The tendency to forgive predicts continued psychological and physical aggression in marriage. *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin, 37*, 770–783. doi:10.1177/0146167211407077

- Pronk, T. M., Karremans, J. C., Overbeek, G., Vermulst, A. A., & Wigboldus, D. H. J. (2010). What it takes to forgive: When and why executive functioning facilitates forgiveness. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology, 98*, 119–131. doi:10.1037/a0017875
- Rim, S., Hansen, J., & Trope, Y. (2013). What happens why? Psychological distance and focusing on causes versus consequences of events. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology, 104*, 457–472. doi:10.1037/a0031024
- Schmid Mast, M., Jonas, K., & Hall, J. A. (2009). Give a person power and he or she will show interpersonal sensitivity: The phenomenon and its why and when. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology, 97*, 835–850. doi:10.1037/a0016234
- Smith, P. K., & Trope, Y. (2006). You focus on the forest when you're in charge of the trees: Power priming and abstract information processing. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology, 90*, 578–596. doi:10.1037/0022-3514.90.4.578
- Soderberg, C. K., Callahan, S. P., Kochersberger, A. O., Amit, E., & Ledgerwood, A. (2015). The effects of psychological distance on abstraction: Two meta-analyses. *Psychological Bulletin, 141*, 525–548. doi:10.1037/bul0000005
- Spencer, S. J., Zanna, M. P., & Fong, G. T. (2005). Establishing a causal chain: Why experiments are often more effective than mediational analyses in examining psychological processes. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology, 89*, 845–851. doi:10.1037/0022-3514.89.6.845
- Struthers, C. W., Dupuis, R., & Eaton, J. (2005). Promoting forgiveness among co-workers following a workplace transgression: The effects of social motivation training. *Canadian Journal of Behavioral Science, 37*, 299–308. doi:10.1037/h0087264
- Trope, Y., & Liberman, N. (2003). Temporal construal. *Psychological Review, 110*, 403–421. doi:10.1037/0033-295X.110.3.403
- Trope, Y., & Liberman, N. (2010). Construal level theory of psychological distance. *Psychological Review, 117*, 440–463. doi:10.1037/a0018963
- Vallacher, R. R., & Wegner, D. M. (1989). Levels of personal agency: Individual variation in action identification. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology, 57*, 660–671. doi:10.1037/0022-3514.57.4.660
- Wohl, M. J. A., & McGarth, A. L. (2007). The perception of time heals all wounds: Temporal distance affects willingness to forgive following an interpersonal transgression. *Personality and Social Psychological Bulletin, 33*, 1023–1035. doi:10.1177/0146167207301021

Author Biographies

Sana Rizvi is a doctoral student at the University of Waterloo in industrial and organizational psychology. Her research examines the cognitive processes and strategies that facilitate forgiveness.

Ramona Bobocel is a professor of psychology at the University of Waterloo. Her research examines justice and fairness-related processes, including the study of how people cope with perceived injustice.

Handling Editor: Dominique Muller