

## Psychological Empowerment and Empathy as Correlates of Forgiveness

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**ABSTRACT:** The study explores Psychological Empowerment and Empathy as Correlates of Forgiveness. The two variables are regarded to have influence on the decision one makes to forgive another. The study aimed at examining the relationships between psychological empowerment and forgiveness, empathy and forgiveness and to identify which one of the two, Psychological Empowerment or Empathy, is the more powerful predictor of forgiveness. The study took a survey design with a sample of 350 drawn from a population of university students using a self-administered questionnaire with four sections: Personal information, Psychological empowerment scale, Toronto Empathy questionnaire, and the Heartland Forgiveness Scale (HFS). Data analysis employed Pearson's product moment correlation and regression analysis to test hypotheses. The results show significant relationships between psychological empowerment and forgiveness as well as empathy and forgiveness. Empathy was found to be the more powerful predictor of forgiveness.

**KEY WORDS:** *Psychological empowerment, empathy, forgiveness.*

### I. BACKGROUND

Forgiveness is an intrapersonal process in which victims' thoughts, feelings, and motivations towards offenders shift from being negative to at least neutral and, at most, positive (Worthington, 2001). Scholars regard forgiveness as disempowering and encourages recidivism. However according to Mooney et al (2019), forgiving can also be empowering. A wrongdoing experience places emotional weight on the other person. When people forgive, they cast aside that weight and feel a sense of relief, whereby the consequences of the wrongdoing do not enslave them (Worthington, 2001). Forgiving helps one regain a sense of control over their circumstances while enhancing emotional well-being (Strelan *et al.* 2017). Forgiveness involves one taking steps to address a wrongdoing rather than avoiding the stressors leading to increased power. (Keltner *et al.*, 2003). Studies by Mooney et al (2019), suggest that when one responds assertively to a wrongdoing, they are able to effectively restore personal power that had been undermined.

Rappaport (1981) regards empowerment as aiming at enhancing the possibilities for people to control their own lives. Psychological empowerment thereby includes beliefs about one's competence and efficacy as well as one's involvement in activities for exerting control in the social environment. Rappaport (1984) suggests that Empowerment is a sense of control over one's life in personality, cognition, and motivation. It may be seen as both a feeling of perceived control and the critical awareness of knowing when to confront powerful others and when to avoid them. It is this perceived control that provides a driving force towards taking a decision to forgive another.

According to Weick & Lammers (2017), empowerment is a sense of self-control over one's thoughts, feeling and behavior, which may result in resisting the influence from others in a given situation. Power gives individuals the sense that they have control over their lives and that they are able to act in a relatively unconstrained manner (Mooney et al 2019). Power encourages one to act in ways they prefer without fear of criticism by others. Furthermore, the experiencing of power is likely to trigger approach-related responses, thereby increasing positive effect (Bombari, Schmid Mast, & Bachmann, 2017). Empowerment refers to the process by which the disempowered person restores or develops a sense of power. Power is naturally fulfilling and emancipating. Power provides the individual with a sense of control over their lives and that they have the capacity to act in a relatively unrestrained manner (Strelan et al 2020). Increased power leads to feelings of freedom and increased rewards and thus prompts approach-related tendencies. Reduction in power is more likely to increase threat, punishment, and social constraint and in the process activate inhibition-related

tendencies (Keltner *et al.* 2003). Power motivates one into action while enhancing self-esteem which is associated with higher levels of positive affect and well-being (Wood *et al.*, 1994).

Empathy refers to the process whereby one person tries to understand accurately, emotionally and without prejudice, the subjectivity of another person. The social psychological determinative model of forgiveness suggests that the most important of psychological variables is affective empathy (McCullough *et al.*, 1998). Generally, the ability to forgive is strongly associated with the ability of experiencing empathy with another person (Konstam, Chernoff and Deveney, 2001). Forgiveness does not occur in those individuals with lower empathetic ability. People with antisocial personality disorder cannot establish the empathy necessary to forgive. Studies support the empathy-forgiveness connection and have revealed that empathy plays an important role in the forgiveness process (McCullough, Worthington and Rachal (1997).

## II. PROBLEM STATEMENT

Forgiving, in which one shifts their attitude toward the transgressor from negative to positive can be a challenging experience. Casting this emotional weight away requires a certain amount of empowerment giving the individual a sense of self-control over thoughts, feelings and behavior can be difficult to achieve by many people. This will require the suspension of the principle of reciprocity which postulates that we give as we get, making revenge satisfactory. The ability to achieve accurate empathy for a transgressor, especially at an emotional level can be very difficult for many people. Naturally transgressors evoke negative emotions in us that make it difficult to forgive.

## III. HYPOTHESES:

The study had the following hypotheses:

1. Empathy is significantly related to forgiveness.
2. Psychological empowerment is significantly related to forgiveness.
3. Empathy is a stronger predictor of forgiveness than Psychological empowerment.

## IV. METHODOLOGY

The study took a survey design. The sample of 350 was drawn from a population of university students of 3 randomly selected Universities in Uganda using a self-administered questionnaire with four sections: section A- Personal information, Section B- Psychological empowerment scale Nyende, P. (2014). Section C- the Toronto Empathy questionnaire (Spreng *et al.* 2009), a 16 item likert scale. Section D- Heartland Forgiveness Scale (HFS), an 18-item self-report likert scale that measures a person's dispositional forgiveness (Thompson *et al.*, 2005).

Quantitative data collected was coded and entered into SPSS computer program. Cross checking was done on items to identify data entry errors in the quantitative data by running frequencies for each item. Data analysis employed Pearson's product moment correlation to test hypothesis 1 and 2 and Regression analysis to test hypothesis 3.

## V. RESULTS

Table 1: Table to show correlation between Psychological Empowerment and Forgiveness

### Correlations

		Empathy	Forgiveness
<b>Empathy</b>	Pearson Correlation	1	.630**
	Sig. (2-tailed)		.000
	N	350	350
<b>Forgiveness</b>	Pearson Correlation	.630**	1
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.000	
	N	350	350

\*\* . Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

The correlation results in table 1 show a significant relationship between Empathy and Forgiveness. The Pearson correlation coefficient  $r=0.630$  and the sig (2-tailed) value  $p = 0.000$  which is less than 0.01, hence showing a significant positive relationship between the two variables. Therefore, hypothesis 1 is retained.

Table 2: Table to show correlation between Empathy and Forgiveness

		Psychological Empowerment	Forgiveness
Psychological Empowerment	Pearson Correlation	1	.134**
	Sig. (2-tailed)		.009
	N	350	350
Forgiveness	Pearson Correlation	.134**	1
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.009	
	N		

\*\* . Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

The correlation results in table 2 show a significant relationship between Psychological Empowerment and Forgiveness. The Pearson correlation coefficient  $r=0.134$  and the sig (2-tailed) value  $p = 0.009$  which is less than 0.01, hence showing a significant positive relationship between the two variables. Therefore, hypothesis 2 is retained.

Table 3: Table to show regression analysis on predictive power of Empathy and Psychological Empowerment on Forgiveness.

### Regression

#### Coefficients

Model		Unstandardized Coefficients		Standardized Coefficients	t	Sig.
		B	Std. Error	Beta		
1	(Constant)	28.533	2.028		14.069	.000
	Empathy	.104	.042	.170	2.507	.014
	Psychological Empowerment	.063	.029	.148	2.176	.032

a. Dependent Variable: Forgiveness

The results in the table 3 above show that empathy ( $p=0.014$ ) is a greater predictor of forgiveness than psychological empowerment ( $p=0.032$ ). Therefore, hypothesis 3 is retained.

## VI. DISCUSSION:

When people are empowered they feel in control of their lives and their environment and are likely to make decisions and take action with free will that they prefer without fear. Given the enhanced confidence that comes along with being empowered one is concerned less with criticism from others and is also prepared to handle the consequences of their actions. When one experiences transgression from another, they respond with an attempt to restore personal power that was endangered by the action of the other person (Strelan et al 2019). While forgiving can be empowering because it allows one to move on after the transgression, empowerment can in turn motivate forgiving as well, as shown by the result.

Empathy refers to the process whereby one person tries to understand another person emotionally and without prejudice. Forgiveness involves pardoning an offense or mistake committed by someone else and it is initiated by emotion. Empathy is a necessary emotional experience for the instigation of forgiveness. If you put yourself in another person's situation and try to understand their circumstances, you are more likely to gravitate towards forgiveness. Developing empathy is a necessary step in forgiveness. Although in case the offense is overwhelming, it will be hard for the offended person to connect with the transgressor in order to empathize because the experience will not allow that kind of emotional connection to occur.

The findings of the study show that people who score low on empathy are less likely to forgive.

From the results, reduced empathy or a lack of it will prevent the instigation to forgive. A high empathy is crucial to the initiation of forgiveness and conversely, the absence of it or when it is in low occurrence does inhibit forgiveness. This is in agreement with assertions by McCullough, Worthington and Rachal (1997) as

well as confirming findings by Ulus (2015), and concur with Lin and Yingjie (2020), who found, in their study, a significant positive relationship between empathy and forgiveness among adolescents.

Empathy is a greater predictor of forgiveness than psychological empowerment. Experiencing of empathy is necessary to forgive another who has transgressed. If one is positively attached to the transgressor or the two have a shared history, chances are that empathy will increase just as the likelihood of forgiveness will increase. Given that empathy is an emotion while psychological empowerment is characterized by cognitive aspect like a sense of perceived control, the emotion may have greater impact on the decision one makes regarding forgiving a transgressor, hence giving empathy a stronger influence on forgiveness than psychological empowerment.

## VII. CONCLUSION

The study concludes that the more empowered we are the more likely it is that we will forgive the transgressor. Empathy has been shown to have an even a stronger influence on forgiveness. This suggests that both empowerment and empathy are essential elements of peacebuilding. Psychotherapeutic interventions at an individual level and community level peacebuilding initiatives need to put emphasis on empowerment of victims of transgression as well as cultivate empathic understanding to reduce the need to revenge thus encouraging forgiveness.

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