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Priming virtue: Forgiveness and justice elicit divergent moral judgments among religious individuals

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Forgiveness and justice are related virtues but they may exert divergent effects on moral judgments. Participants were primed with either forgiveness or retributive justice and made moral judgments of individuals. Experiment 1 demonstrated that religious participants recalling an experience of forgiveness reported more favorable attitudes toward moral transgressors than did those recalling an experience of retributive justice. Experiment 2 replicated the priming effect on moral judgments using a subtle prime of either forgiveness or justice (word search) and a different dependent measure. Experiment 3 employed a more religiously diverse sample and revealed the moderating role of religious commitment. These results suggest that salience of forgiveness leads to more favorable evaluations of moral transgressors compared to retributive justice for religious individuals.

Keywords: forgiveness; justice; moral judgments; priming

Introduction

Virtues and moral judgments are of central interest to positive psychology. People frequently go to great lengths to appear more moral than they actually are (Batson, Kobryniewicz, Dinnerstein, Kampf, & Wilson, 1997; Batson, Thompson, Seufferling, Whitney, & Strongman, 1999). Despite our strivings for morality, we often make decisions that others perceive as immoral and witness others engaging in behavior that we perceive as immoral. To what extent do reminders of particular virtues or character strengths affect our moral judgments of others? In three experiments, we examined how making virtues salient influences how individuals interpret and subsequently judge others' moral behavior. Specifically, we tested the hypothesis that reminders of two distinct virtues – forgiveness or justice – elicit divergent effects on moral judgments.

The contextual effects of priming virtue

Moral behavior can be defined as socially-approved behavior according to a system of values that evaluates behavior along some continuum ranging from good to evil. Moral behavior also can be called virtuous or be thought of as emanating from character strength

(another value-laden term that presumes what is socially desirable). Virtue (which, in the context of morality, we prefer to character strength) is thus at the core of positive psychology (Peterson, 2006; Snyder, Lopez, & Pedrotti, 2011). The spectrum of virtuous behavior is broad, though a unifying theme of all moral behavior, such as virtue, is the restriction of selfish outcomes for the benefit of a group or society based on consensually-validated norms (Haidt, 2007; Haidt & Kesebir, 2010).

Emphasizing a specific virtue of one's moral system should prioritize related values when making moral decisions via spreading activation (Greenwald et al., 2002). People make moral judgments by drawing on their most salient experiences. Thus, what is considered virtuous depends on the context. Behavior at both ends of a continuum might sometimes be considered virtuous. For example, saving money can be perceived as thrifty or selfish; similarly, risk-taking can be viewed as courageous or reckless and foolhardy. In the same vein, both forgiving an offense and seeking justice can both be considered virtuous (although there are extreme situations when it might be contra-indicated; McNulty & Fincham, 2012). Forgiveness and justice are related but complementary virtues (McCullough, 2008). Forgiveness is a warmth-based virtue motivated by other-oriented emotions of caring and concern,

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whereas justice is a conscientiousness-based virtue involving inhibition or restraint of self-oriented emotions (Berry, Worthington, Wade, Witvliet, & Kiefer, 2005; Worthington & Berry, 2005).

Contextual factors can create a mental momentum which prioritizes virtues in a situation (Haidt, 2001), resulting in salient virtues affecting subsequent moral judgments. As empathy is a key feature in granting forgiveness (McCullough, Worthington, & Rachal, 1997; McCullough et al., 1998) and priming forgiveness leads to subsequent prosocial cognition and behavior (Karremans, Van Lange, & Holland, 2005), it stands to reason that making forgiveness salient may lead to more lenient moral judgments, whereas making justice salient may lead to harsher moral judgments. Previous research has demonstrated that reminders of prior moral behaviors affect one's moral identity and behavior (Jordan, Mullen, & Murnighan, 2011); however, we are not aware of any research that has examined how reminders of virtues – including one's previous moral behavior – affect judgments of *others'* morality. This provides a solid rationale for testing the hypothesis that making forgiveness versus retributive justice cognitively salient will elicit divergent subsequent moral judgments.

Forgiveness and retributive justice as moral responses

Forgiveness and retributive justice are intricately linked to each other (Exline, Worthington, Hill, & McCullough, 2003; Karremans et al., 2005) and are related to moral offenses. In fact, some previous research has demonstrated similar, if not parallel, effects of priming these constructs (Strelan, Feather, & McKee, 2008). Both responses can involve regulation of the individuals' emotions, motivations, and behaviors for the good of others. However, they differ functionally in terms of related emotional experiences and outcomes.

Forgiveness is defined as an intrapersonal process whereby an individual replaces negative emotions toward an offender with positive, prosocial emotions, such as empathy (McCullough, 2001; Strelan & Covic, 2006; Worthington, 2005). The virtue of forgiveness involves the individual restriction of selfish impulses toward revenge and avoidance for the sake of the relationship with the offender and the stability of the group (McCullough, 2008). As such, forgiveness usually helps to sustain and improve marriage and family relationships (Maio, Thomas, Fincham, & Carnelley, 2008; McNulty, 2008; McNulty & Fincham, 2012; Rusbult, Hannon, Stocker, & Finkel, 2005). Moreover, forgiveness can improve health and overall well-being (Fehr, Gelfand, & Nag, 2010; Toussaint & Webb, 2005; Worthington, 2005), though there are some drawbacks to forgiving, such as the potential for future exploitation (Luchies, Finkel, Kumashiro,

& McNulty, 2010; McNulty & Fincham, 2012). Forgiveness can restore moral equilibrium by replacing negative emotions created towards offenders with positive emotions, which (for the current research) may translate to more positive evaluations in the form of more lenient moral judgments, compared to justice.

Justice, on the other hand, is a moral process that seeks to restore equanimity and fairness through retributive or restorative measures (Hill, Exline, & Cohen, 2005). Whereas restorative justice involves resolving conflicts fairly and may include repairing relationships (Armour & Umbreit, 2005), retributive justice involves seeking to regain a sense of balance of dignity and power by ensuring that the offender pays the price for the offense and 'gets what he or she deserves.' Retributive justice can serve a deterrent function in society, as individuals can learn there is a cost to violating a moral boundary in a relationship. Previous research has found a strong connection between restorative justice primes that emphasize equity and forgiveness, with both seen as prosocial values (Karremans & Van Lange, 2005). However, priming retributive justice may elicit different moral judgments than priming restorative justice, as the focus of seeking retributive justice may be on preventing future exploitation rather than on reconciling a damaged relationship (McCullough, 2008).

Although both forgiveness and retributive justice have garnered attention as viable and important moral responses to an offense (Exline et al., 2003; Karremans & Van Lange, 2005), the tension between the concepts is starting to be explored (Armour & Umbreit, 2005; Karremans & Van Lange, 2005; Strelan et al., 2008). Forgiving another person may change the victim's view of the transgressor (Thompson et al., 2005), as well as potential future transgressors. That is, the victim reframes his or her perception of the offender in the process of transforming his or her emotional state. Forgiveness modifies offender perceptions and results in 'cognitive spillover' and increased prosocial orientation (Karremans et al., 2005), and this suggests that priming may affect the behavior of individuals in subsequent interactions with and judgments of others, including potential moral offenders. We propose that the effects of making a particular virtue salient depend, in part, on the centrality of that virtue to an individual. That is, those for whom the virtues of forgiveness and justice are central should be the most affected by the cognitive activation of virtue-related concepts as they have the richest, most elaborated associative networks.

Forgiveness and retributive justice among religious individuals

Forgiveness and justice are central features in many world religions. Indeed, the three major monotheistic

religions – Christianity, Judaism, and Islam – promote forgiveness and justice not only as aspirations of religious followers, but also as qualities of God (Rye et al., 2000). Hebrew, Christian, and Islamic texts often implore adherents to practice forgiveness (Maamri, Nevin, & Worthington, 2010; McCullough & Worthington, 1999). For example, Hebrew Scriptures indicate that God requires followers to act justly and mercifully (Micah 6:8) and Christian Scriptures detail Jesus' command to forgive others (Matthew 6:14–15). Furthermore, many people – especially religious people – sanctify forgiveness (Davis, Hook, Van Tongeren, & Worthington, 2012) by imbuing it with sacred meaning. Therefore, forgiveness and justice seem to be particularly relevant responses to an offense among religious individuals.

Religious communities have different beliefs and norms regarding when one should forgive (Cohen, Malka, Rozin, & Cheras, 2010). For example, many Christians believe that one should forgive others unconditionally, even if the offender will not apologize or offer restitution. In prior research, religion and spirituality have been positively related to whether someone generally tends to forgive others (i.e. trait forgivingness). A number of explanations – theoretical and empirical – have been proposed to explain this discrepancy (e.g. social desirability bias, method factors, rationalization, value discrepancy; Barnes & Brown, 2010; McCullough & Worthington, 1999; Tsang, McCullough, & Hoyt, 2005; Worthington et al., 2010).

Tsang et al. (2005) proposed that most religions emphasize both forgiveness and justice, with contextual factors often determining which virtue is emphasized in a given situation. They provided correlational evidence for this hypothesis, showing that describing God using justice adjectives was associated with greater unforgiveness, whereas describing God with merciful adjectives was associated with greater forgiveness. It is possible to interpret their methodology as priming either justice or forgiveness in participants' cognitive hierarchy of virtues. The primed virtue, then, is hypothesized to gain cognitive salience.

We sought to test this explanation more directly with experimental methods. Primes related to forgiveness and retributive-justice might be particularly potent for religious individuals because they may be intricately tied to their (religious) identity. In fact, Rokeach's (1973) classic research on values found that religious people tended to rate both forgiveness and justice higher than did those who did not endorse a religious identity. Thus, we hypothesized that, for religious people, priming forgiveness would result in more lenient moral judgments of potential transgressors relative to priming retributive justice. We believe this is true because of the centrality of these virtues in the moral systems of religious people.

Overview of current research

Our central hypothesis is that priming forgiveness should lead to more lenient moral judgments relative to priming retributive justice. We tested this central proposition in three experiments. In Experiment 1, religious participants recalled and visualized a time of forgiveness or retributive justice following an offense and then made moral judgments about actors and their actions in three vignettes describing questionable moral behavior. In Experiment 2, we explored the effects of subtly activating forgiveness and justice on moral judgments through the use of a disguised priming procedure. In Experiment 3, we extended our examination to a secular sample in order to examine the moderating effect of religious commitment.

Experiment 1

Method

Participants

Undergraduate students ($N=120$; 79 females, 37 males, two did not report sex) from a small, private religious university in the Rocky Mountain region volunteered to participate in the study for the opportunity for extra credit in psychology courses. All students in the university were required to sign a statement confirming that they endorsed evangelical Christian beliefs as a university admission prerequisite.

Materials and procedure

The experimenter informed participants that the study had two parts. First, participants were randomly assigned to complete one of two priming inductions (described as visualization tasks): forgiveness or retribution-based justice. More specifically, participants recalled an incident in which they either forgave or engaged in retribution-based justice towards an individual who offended them, under the guise of a visualization task. They wrote a brief description of the event and how they specifically forgave or enacted justice (i.e. by 'giving them what they deserved') towards the offender. Next, they spent 2–3 minutes visualizing the event and the emotions it aroused within them and then completed a number of items related to the offense. They reported the offense hurtfulness (1 = *very little hurt* to 7 = *large amount of hurt*). To check the efficacy of the prime, they also indicated their initial degree of forgiveness toward offender (1 = *no forgiveness* to 7 = *complete forgiveness*) and motivations toward revenge on or avoidance of the offender (i.e. Transgression-Related Interpersonal Motivations: TRIM; McCullough et al., 1998; $\alpha=0.94$). We sought to ensure that the priming induction would be sufficient to evoke the emotions

and motivations typically engendered by episodes of forgiveness or justice.

Next, participants were instructed that they would participate in a ‘jury study.’ They read three scenarios that might be perceived as morally ambiguous or immoral: (a) a protester instigates an altercation with a woman seeking an abortion at a clinic, (b) a police chief using extreme force to reduce crime across the city, and (c) a failed suicide attempt by a would-be religious martyr (see Appendix). We chose these scenarios because they are (a) intricately tied to the virtues of forgiveness and justice where a *wrong may have been perceived* by the participant, (b) written such that there were no clear ‘right’ or ‘wrong’ answers, (c) characterized by high ecological validity in that they were similar to what participants may encounter in real life, and (d) representative of the five principal moral foundations examined in recent research (Graham, Haidt, & Nosek, 2009). That is, we chose scenarios that would be relevant to individuals of varying ideologies. Graham et al. found that liberals favor the moral foundations of harm and fairness, whereas conservatives favor purity, hierarchy, and loyalty. The moral judgment tasks utilized in this study draw from all of these domains, by focusing on abortion (relevant to harm, fairness, and purity), corruption and abuse of power (relevant to harm, fairness, and hierarchy), and a failed suicide act (related to harm, fairness, and loyalty).

Participants then rated each scenario (7-point rating scale) on (a) the actor’s (i.e. protestor, police chief, would-be martyr) morality, (b) the actor’s degree of guilt, (c) the degree of injustice done (d) likelihood that they would forgive the actor, and (e) recommended punishment for the actor. A composite moral judgment score ($\alpha = 0.74$) was created by averaging the rating of the 15 items (negative judgments were reverse scored). Upon completion, participants were debriefed and thanked.

Results

Hurtfulness of the recalled offense

Participants in the forgiveness condition ($M = 6.04$, $SD = 1.02$) reported greater hurtfulness of the offense compared to those in the retributive-justice condition ($M = 5.42$, $SD = 1.99$), $F(1, 115) = 4.40$, $p = 0.038$, partial $\eta^2 = 0.04$. To eliminate the possibility that the effect of priming forgiveness or retributive justice is due to hurtfulness, we covaried out the hurtfulness of the offense via ANCOVAs in subsequent analyses.

Manipulation check

We tested whether the priming manipulations resulted in different levels of forgiveness, vengefulness, or avoidance. Even when controlling for the hurtfulness

of the offense (using ANCOVAs), participants in the forgiveness priming condition reported significantly more forgiveness toward their original offender than did those in the retributive-justice condition, $F(1, 114) = 5.14$, $p = 0.03$, partial $\eta^2 = 0.04$. Also, individuals experiencing the forgiveness prime reported significantly less avoidance and revenge motivations toward the offender, $F(1, 114) = 7.40$, $p < 0.01$, partial $\eta^2 = 0.06$. The cognition, emotions, and motivations are all congruent with previous definitions and conceptualizations of forgiveness and justice (Worthington, 2005, 2006). These findings provide evidence that the primes were effective.

Moral judgments

We assessed the effects of priming forgiveness versus justice on judgments of potential moral transgressors, assessed by the composite judgment scores, while controlling for the hurtfulness of the offense. An ANCOVA (controlling for hurtfulness) revealed that participants who recalled an episode of forgiveness ($M = 3.05$, $SD = 0.60$) gave significantly more positive (i.e. lenient) evaluations of the moral transgressors than those who recalled an episode of retribution-based justice ($M = 2.79$, $SD = 0.75$), $F(1, 113) = 3.79$, $p = 0.05$, partial $\eta^2 = 0.03$. Priming forgiveness resulted in more lenient subsequent moral judgments, compared to priming justice.

Discussion

In Experiment 1, we established that priming forgiveness elicited more lenient moral judgments compared to priming retribution-based justice among religious individuals. Participants who were randomly assigned to recall an episode of forgiveness subsequently rated potential moral transgressors and their actions more favorably compared to those who recalled an episode of justice. The effect remained significant even after controlling for hurtfulness of their recalled offense. These results provide initial support for the notion that the cognitive activation of forgiveness is related to more lenient moral judgments than is activating justice.

It remained possible, however, that the overt primes elicited direct cognition that cued how participants might be expected to respond to the three scenarios used as the dependent variable. Therefore, in Experiment 2, we sought to replicate and extend the effects of Experiment 1 using a more subtle priming technique and a different test of moral judgments.

Experiment 2

Experiment 1 was designed to minimize the possibility of demand characteristics (two ostensibly separate

studies involving a visualization task and a jury project). Nevertheless, we designed Experiment 2 to more definitively rule out the possibility of expectancy effects (i.e. participants believing that they were expected to judge favorably). Participants were subtly primed with forgiveness or retributive justice stimuli via a spelling-and-grammar-checking task. We also used a different and established dependent measure: participants rated their condemnation of potential transgressors. We hypothesized that participants primed with forgiveness would report less condemnation of potential moral transgressors than would those primed with justice.

Method

Participants

Undergraduate students ($N = 85$; 50 females, 32 males, three did not report sex) from the same private, religious university in the Rocky Mountain region utilized in Experiment 1 participated as volunteers, for the opportunity for extra credit in psychology courses.

Materials and procedure

First, participants completed packets containing materials described as two reading tasks. Participants were randomly assigned to either a forgiveness or justice prime via a reading correction task, wherein they were asked to identify and correct any grammatical or spelling errors in a written essay. Previous work has demonstrated that subtle word primes (e.g. word searches) are comparable to overt primes in activating constructs, such as judgments of moral transgressions, without eliciting changes in affect (e.g. Maxfield et al., 2007). The essay content focused on differential American values of forgiveness or justice. Those in the forgiveness condition read an essay lauding America for being a land of opportunity and second chances, whereas those in the justice condition read an essay focusing on the American legal system. Participants spent seven to ten minutes working on the spelling-and-grammar correction task.

Second, participants completed the Moral Judgment Test (MJT), developed by Lind (1999), which presents two morally ambiguous situations: (a) a physician-assisted suicide for a patient with incurable cancer, and (b) employees breaking into their office building to obtain transcripts to prove their employers were illicitly recording their conversations and using them to make firing decisions. Participants rated six arguments against each of the moral actors' (doctor, employees) behaviors on a 9-point scale ($-4 = \textit{strongly reject}$ to $+4 = \textit{strongly accept}$). The mean scores of the items that condemn the behavior across both scenarios were calculated and served as the dependent variable.

Upon completion of the experiment, participants were debriefed.

Results

We hypothesized that subtly priming forgiveness would lead to significantly less punitive moral judgments than would subtly priming justice. As predicted, there was a significant effect of the priming condition on participants' condemnation of the transgressors' behavior, $t(81) = -2.25$, $p = 0.03$, $d = 0.50$. Participants primed with forgiveness indicated less agreement ($M = -0.01$, $SD = 0.85$) with arguments that condemned the morally ambiguous behavior than did participants primed with justice, ($M = 0.42$, $SD = 0.89$).

Discussion

These results suggest that even subtle cognitive activation of forgiveness-related and retributive justice-related constructs changed moral judgments among religious participants. Consistent with the findings of Experiment 1, priming forgiveness evoked less harsh (or more lenient) judgments of potential moral transgressors. Priming forgiveness elicited significantly lower condemnation of a potential transgressor's morally ambiguous behavior compared to priming justice. Experiment 2 further explicates the effect of priming virtues on moral judgments by revealing that subtly activating forgiveness can lead to viewing a moral actor as less culpable relative to subtly activating retributive justice. Moreover, Experiment 2 replicated the effects of Experiment 1 using a different and established measure of moral judgments.

Experiment 3

The first two experiments provide evidence that priming forgiveness elicits less harsh moral judgments than priming retributive justice; however, both studies employed predominately conservative Christian samples: student participants had to affirm Christian theological statements on the conservative end of the theological spectrum as a requisite for admission to their university. We suspected that the primes we used might have been stronger in highly religious individuals for two reasons. First, forgiveness and justice are particularly cherished virtues in religion (McCullough & Worthington, 1999; Rokeach, 1973) in that forgiveness and justice are both seen as attributes of God (i.e. sanctified) and required of faithful followers. In fact, religious texts sometimes mention both explicitly together (e.g. Micah 6:8; Zechariah 7:9). Religious adherents likely have incorporated these values deeply into self-schemas (McIntosh, 1995). Consequently, we suspected that they were more likely to be affected by subtle or obvious reminders of these virtues, given that

they are of central importance to highly committed religious individuals.

Second, religion is theorized to enhance self-control by streamlining implicit processes that affect moral behavior (Koole, McCullough, Kuhl, & Roelofsma, 2010; McCullough & Willoughby, 2009). The cognitive activation of a virtue may be particularly effective in shaping subsequent moral judgments for those who are highly committed to a religion. Accordingly, religious commitment may moderate the relationship between priming virtue and subsequent moral judgments, leading to a stronger effect in the highly religious than in the less religious.

In the first two experiments, (virtually) all of the participants were religious; thus we were unable to determine whether these effects are generalizable to a broader (secular) population, or whether the effects are only present among those highly committed to a particular religion. The purpose of Experiment 3 was to explore whether the effects of priming forgiveness and retributive justice on moral judgments would be moderated by trait level differences in religious commitment among participants at a secular university. We implemented the same procedure as Experiment 1 to test the hypothesis that religious commitment would moderate the relationship between priming condition and moral judgments. Namely, as religious commitment increases, this should enhance the difference in moral judgments between the two priming conditions.

Method

Participants

Introductory psychology students ($N=105$; 78 females, 19 males, eight did not report sex) attending a large, public, mid-Atlantic university participated in the study for partial course credit. Participants had diverse religious affiliations (32.7% Protestants, 17.3% Catholics, 1.9% Muslim, 1% Jewish, 25% not religious/agnostics/atheists, and 23.1% reported another religion or did not report a religious affiliation).

Materials and procedure

The procedure was similar to Experiment 1, with an important addition: participants first completed the Religious Commitment Inventory-10 (RCI-10; Worthington et al., 2003; $\alpha=0.91$ in the present experiment), a 10-item self-report measure of cognitions, emotions, and behaviors related to the importance of and commitment to one's religion outside of formal worship experiences. Participants respond on a 5-point scale (1 = *not at all true of me* to 5 = *totally true of me*) to statements depicting religious commitment (e.g. 'My religious beliefs lie behind my whole approach to life'). They subsequently completed the

prime and visualization task, indicated their initial degree of forgiveness, and completed the TRIM-A/R ($\alpha=0.90$). Finally, as in Experiment 1, they then read the three morally questionable scenarios and rated each actor and the actors' behavior. As before, we averaged the composite evaluation ($\alpha=0.75$), which served as our primary dependent variable of moral judgment.

Results

Manipulation check

As in Experiment 1, we covaried out the effect of hurtfulness of the offense and ran a series of ANCOVAs to test the efficacy of the priming manipulation. Even when removing the variance associated with hurtfulness, participants in the forgiveness-prime condition reported more forgiveness toward their original offender, $F(1, 101)=6.77$, $p=0.01$, partial $\eta^2=0.06$. As expected, participants also reported less avoidance and revenge motivations toward the offender, $F(1, 101)=18.97$, $p<0.0005$, partial $\eta^2=0.16$, relative to participants in the retributive-justice prime condition. These effects are consistent with those found in Experiment 1. Once again, the forgiveness prime was effective in evoking cognitions, emotions, and motivations related to forgiveness.

Moderating role of religious commitment

We predicted that religious commitment would moderate the relationship between priming condition and moral judgments, such that there would be a greater discrepancy between conditions as religious commitment increased. We tested this interaction using regression (Aiken & West, 1991) by dummy-coding our priming condition variable and centering religious commitment. In addition, we controlled for the hurtfulness of the offense, as we did in Experiment 1. We entered hurtfulness (also centered), into the first step, the dummy coded prime variable and centered religious commitment were entered into the second step, and the interaction was entered into the third step.

As predicted, the interaction between priming condition and religious commitment on moral judgments was significant, $\beta=0.37$, $SE=0.02$, $t=2.14$, $p=0.04$ (Figure 1). Pairwise comparisons ($+/-1$ SD) revealed that among individuals high in religious commitment ($+1$ SD), priming forgiveness resulted in significantly more lenient moral judgments than did priming retributive justice, $\beta=0.29$, $SE=0.19$, $t=1.95$, $p=0.05$. Those low in religious commitment (-1 SD) were not significantly affected by the priming condition, $\beta=-0.17$, $SE=0.19$, $t=-1.12$, $p=0.24$. Moreover, simple slope analyses revealed that whereas religious commitment was unrelated to moral

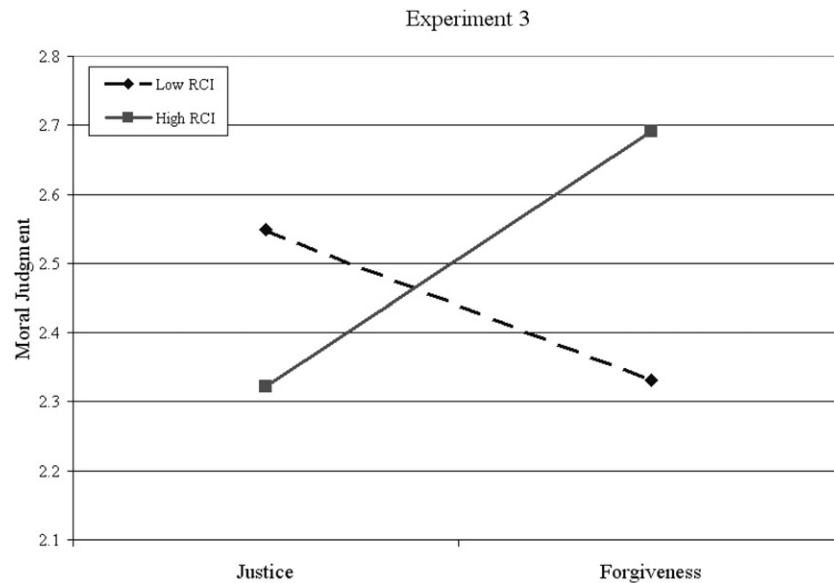


Figure 1. Interaction between trait forgivingness and priming condition in Experiment 3. When primed with forgiveness, individuals high in religious commitment report significantly more lenient moral judgments than those low in religious commitment and than when primed with retributive-justice.

judgments in the retributive-justice prime condition, $\beta = -0.17$, $SE = 0.01$, $t = -1.02$, $p = 0.31$, higher religious commitment was associated with more lenient moral judgments in the forgiveness prime condition, $\beta = 0.28$, $SE = 0.01$, $t = 2.29$, $p = 0.02$.

Discussion

Experiment 3 provided additional support, and an important qualification, for the results obtained in the first two experiments. Using a more religiously diverse sample (from a public university), we found that priming forgiveness led to more lenient moral judgments than priming retributive justice, but only among those high in religious commitment. For individuals who were highly committed to their religion, the forgiveness prime elicited more lenient moral judgments of potential transgressors relative to those low in religious commitment or when priming retributive justice. Thus, as religious commitment increases, the divergent effects of priming forgiveness or justice on moral judgments become stronger. Whereas we found main effects for the priming condition when sampling from highly religious individuals in Experiments 1 and 2, these effects were qualified by an interaction with religious commitment among a more religiously diverse sample in Experiment 3, including nonreligious individuals and those who practice non-Christian religions. Individuals high in religious commitment may render more lenient moral judgments when the concept of forgiveness is more cognitively accessible than the concept of justice.

General discussion

The central aim of this research was to explore the divergent effects of priming forgiveness and retributive justice on moral judgments. The results of three experiments provide converging evidence that forgiveness is related to more lenient moral judgments, compared to retributive justice, among religious individuals. Experiment 1 demonstrated this effect using an overt prime with a religious sample, and Experiment 2 replicated this effect using a more subtle prime and different dependent measure of moral judgment. Experiment 3 demonstrated that with a more religiously-diverse sample, the divergent effects of priming forgiveness eliciting more lenient moral judgments relative to priming retributive justice became stronger as religious commitment increased.

The current research employed moral judgment tasks that were representative of a wide range of moral foundations (Graham et al., 2009), as well as drew from established moral judgment research (e.g. Lind, 1999) to demonstrate that priming different virtues elicit divergent effects on moral judgments among religious individuals. It is important to note that the effects of the current research are not simply due to using religiously-charged moral scenarios. We also sought to rule out the alternative hypothesis that these scenarios were overly religiously charged and thus would be rated differently by individuals of varying religiousness (in the absence of a prime). We examined the correlations between the moral judgment ratings and self-reported religiousness measures in Experiments 1 and 3. In Experiment 1, neither the importance of religion/spirituality nor self-reported

spirituality (both measured on one-item, 7-point scales) were significantly related to moral judgments ($r_s < 0.09$, $p_s > 0.40$). Furthermore, both indices also were unaffected by the priming condition ($t_s < 1.2$, $p_s > 0.23$). Thus, the effects were not simply due to the moral scenarios being particularly religiously charged. Similarly, in Experiment 3, the moral judgment ratings were not significantly related to self-rated religiosity/spirituality ($r = 0.08$, $p = 0.43$) or importance of religion/spirituality ($r = 0.07$, $p = 0.50$), and these indices were unaffected by the priming condition ($t_s < 1$, $p_s > 0.45$). Moreover, the moral judgment ratings were not significantly related to religious commitment ($r = 0.11$, $p = 0.27$). This suggests that these effects are not due to simply rating religious-charged moral dilemmas. In addition, further evidence is seen in Experiment 2, in which we found analogous results to those found in Experiments 1 and 3 by using a different dependent variable and different priming methodology. That is, even a subtle activation of these virtues elicits divergent moral judgments, even across varying moral dilemmas. These results provide additional support that the results are not merely an artifact of the specific type of scenario.

This program of research was motivated, in part, by Exline et al.'s (2003) call for additional psychological research to distinguish between forgiveness and justice. The findings also add to previous research examining forgiveness and justice processes in parallel (Karremans et al., 2005; Karremans & Van Lange, 2005). At first glance, forgiveness and justice appear to generate similar psychological effects, as both lead to some type of resolution for individuals who have suffered injustice because of a transgression. However, the current research demonstrates that activating these concepts leads to divergent effects on moral judgments for religiously committed individuals.

Moreover, reminders of virtues can be either obvious and explicit (Experiments 1 and 3) or subtle and understated (Experiment 2). Even simple reminders of forgiveness appear to be sufficient to reduce condemnation of moral transgressors among religious individuals compared to reminders of justice. Given the sometimes tenuous relationship between religion and judgments of potential moral transgressors, this work suggests that even slight and non-religious reminders of forgiveness (e.g. drawing attention to America's value of second chances) might evoke less condemnation, particularly among those for whom religion is central.

These findings are consistent with previous research indicating that forgiveness elicits a general prosocial orientation (Karremans et al., 2005), and offers clues to how this occurs (i.e. forgiveness elicits more lenient moral judgments relative to retributive justice). These findings are also relevant to other research that explores the downstream effects of forgiveness

(McCullough, Fincham, & Tsang, 2003; McCullough, Luna, Berry, Tabak, & Bono, 2010). The habitual activation of forgiveness may be most powerful in yielding more lenient moral judgments compared to justice, at least among those highly committed to a particular religion. Moreover, these results add to recent theorizing on the interplay between religion and self-regulatory processes such as those related to morality (Koole et al., 2010; McCullough & Willoughby, 2009).

Implications and applications

These findings have both theoretical and practical importance. Theoretically, we advance an understanding of how virtues, once made salient, can affect moral judgments. We provide evidence that reminding individuals of their previous forgiving or just actions (Experiments 1 and 3) is sufficient to alter their subsequent moral judgments, as are subtler reminders about cherished virtues in one's society (Experiment 2). Not only does this underscore the power of overt and subtle priming on subsequent decision-making processes, but it also provides evidence for a link between one's virtues and subsequent moral judgments. We suspect that further exploration of the relationship between virtues, values, and morality will prove fruitful.

Practically, there are at least three primary applications of these findings. First, the progression of thought-to-action – demonstrated by the priming effects – has been found to be critical in clinical psychology research (Butler, Chapman, Forman, & Beck, 2006). Accordingly, interventions that include recollection or visualization of previous times of forgiveness (e.g. forgiveness psychoeducational groups) or that include subtle reminders of the value of forgiveness, may concurrently work to reduce the harshness of moral judgments. Second, organizations that emphasize forgiveness or other warmth-based virtues, either explicitly (i.e. instructing employees to act kindly and with empathy) or implicitly (i.e. corporate communication or policies such as a mission statement), may make those involved with the organization less likely to judge those engaged in morally questionable behavior in a harsh manner. Conversely, emphasizing justice within an organization may deter immoral behavior among employees by increasing the harshness of moral judgments. Third, on a societal level, groups, communities, or nations that are in conflict may find that reminders of forgiveness may reduce the likelihood of interpreting other groups' behavior as immoral. Although societal or social reconciliation is complex, and we do not anticipate that simple priming will promote actual reconciliation, it is possible that explicit communication by leaders or

adoption of group policies which encourage such behaviors may a way of allaying a potentially vicious cycle of trading offenses and engaging in retaliatory actions.

Suggestions for future research

We see several fruitful avenues for future research. First, we believe our findings indicate a need to investigate how different qualities of one's religious experience, beyond religious commitment, might moderate moral judgments. The inconsistent relationship between religion and forgiveness (McCullough & Worthington, 1999), in concert with the new findings from this research, could expand a growing literature (Davis et al., 2009) that addresses how religious beliefs central to one's religious identity may affect future judgments of transgressors. As religion has been associated with negative interpersonal judgments as well as positive perceptions of others, depending on the religion (e.g. Altemeyer & Hunsberger, 1992), our findings suggest that future research should address how interpersonal moral judgments may be swayed by the virtues which are most salient in one's mind, especially if endorsed by the individual's faith system.

Second, we encourage future research to explore potential simple and interactional effects of warmth-based virtues, such as empathy (Batson et al., 1991; McCullough et al., 1997, 1998), and conscientiousness-based virtues, in moral processes. We believe that it is likely that warmth-based virtues (e.g. forgiveness, compassion, love) and conscientiousness-based virtues (e.g. justice, self-control, moderation) interact in the process of making a moral decision (Berry, et al., 2005). The current findings offer encouragement for further exploration of the individual and corporate effects of these different types of virtues, especially when seen through the lenses of religiosity and religious commitment.

Third, we believe there is great value in future research focused on clarifying the processes through which forgiveness and justice might operate separately (Exline et al., 2003) or together (Karremans & Van Lange, 2005; Strelan et al., 2008). The value of such research can be seen in McCullough's work on how the forgiveness instinct evolved to restrain our natural reaction toward enacting revenge and justice, as it suggests that justice may be a default reaction (McCullough, 2008; McCullough et al., 2010). To this end, we suggest that future researchers explore the relative strength of priming forgiveness and justice through the addition of a control group. This should help to clarify the unique individual contributions that forgiveness and justice offer, while building upon the present work that demonstrates the divergent effects of priming these virtues on subsequent moral judgments.

Summary and conclusions

Perceptions of morality are shaped by myriad factors. The penchant toward a particular set of virtuous actions may play a role in how moral judgments are formed. Both forgiveness and justice are important virtues and distinct features of one's moral system, and they serve critical roles in maintaining social order. However, the current findings reveal that they exert divergent effects on moral judgments. The perceptions of the person in the role of judge may interact with the virtues that are cognitively accessible when judging the morality of others. This may prove to be instrumental in advancing research on how one's own values and virtuous behaviors affect judgments of others' morality. Awareness of the biases we all have in our relationships, in concert with the knowledge of our tendencies to respond with forgiveness or justice, may prove invaluable in making valid, useful, and appropriate judgments. Most telling, however, may be the fact that the measuring stick we use to judge the morality of others may be based, at least to some degree, on the virtue that is most readily available in our mind.

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Appendix

Moral judgment scenarios

Amy is a 30-year old woman who is well-known as an advocate against abortion. She vocally professes that she was permanently affected, both medically and psychologically, from a teenage abortion. She is known for protesting outside of abortion clinics, shouting and holding signs, as women enter the clinic. One day, a woman confronts Amy, telling her that it is a woman's right to choose how she should deal with her pregnancy and begins to swear at Amy. In anger, Amy lashes out, cursing and yelling, and pushes the woman to the ground in a scuffle. The fall badly hurts the woman – breaking her arm – and ends up killing the baby she was carrying. Amy denies that she did anything wrong since the woman was going to terminate the pregnancy anyway.

Carol is the police chief in a medium-sized city. She has been orchestrating the crackdown and elimination of gang activity, and under her administration, crime rates have dropped nearly 30%. In hopes of catching a local gang ringleader, she authorizes a series of warrants to invade several citizens' homes, one of which she hopes will lead her to crime leader. In the sequence of raids, several innocent people are injured, including children. Moreover, several of these individuals file complaints for harassment and are upset that they were traumatized by the police force's cavalier actions and gross negligence. Carol holds that this type of law enforcement method has led to the decrease of crime rates, especially gang activity, and the community should be willing to give a little if they want to see this local crime lord apprehended.

Arnaz is a highly religious individual who is convinced his righteousness will earn him a spot in heaven. In an attempt to sanctify his sins, he stages a suicide-bombing attempt in a crowded marketplace. He straps several pounds of bombs to his chest and tries to detonate them during a busy time of the day. However, his devices malfunction and his attempt fails. He is captured by authorities for his attempted crimes, though he contends that he was simply being a good, religious follower of his faith; additionally, he cannot understand why he is being held for a crime he didn't actually commit.