

Forgiveness in Younger, Middle-Aged and Older Adults: Age and Gender Matters

Pearl Ghaemmaghami · Mathias Allemand · Mike Martin

Published online: 8 September 2011
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Abstract The present study investigated age and gender differences in forgiveness of real-life transgressions. Emerging and young, middle-aged, and older adults recalled the most recent and serious interpersonal transgression and then completed the Transgression-Related Interpersonal Motivations Inventory (TRIM-18), which measured their avoidance, revenge, and benevolence motivation toward an offender and indicated to what extent they are generally concerned with the subject of forgiveness. The results revealed a trend among middle-aged adults to express more avoidance than younger adults. Moreover, young men had a greater motivation to seek revenge than middle-aged and older men. No such age differences were apparent for women. Additionally, forgiveness was a more manifest subject in everyday life for middle-aged adults and women. These findings emphasize the importance of age and gender when investigating forgiveness.

Keywords Forgiveness · Interpersonal transgressions · Lifespan · Age differences · Gender differences

Introduction

Interpersonal conflicts are a normal feature of human life, which must be dealt with across the entire lifespan. Conflicts may range from simple divergence in preferences to deep hurts and severe transgressions. In many cases, they result in feelings of injury, resentment, anger, and attributions of blame. People may respond to interpersonal transgressions in different ways. That is, they may avoid the transgressor or want to seek revenge. However, an alternative response to interpersonal transgressions and the negative emotional consequences engendered by them is forgiveness (cf. Worthington 2005). The capacity to react constructively when faced with interpersonal conflicts seems to evolve across the lifespan and might be associated with successful aging (Bono and McCullough 2004; Mullet and Girard 2000). In addition, the tendency for men and women to differ in their reactions to interpersonal conflicts (e.g., El-Sheikh et al. 2000; Nolen-Hoeksema and Jackson 2001) suggests there might be gender differences in forgiveness. Consequently, the main purpose of the present study is to examine age and gender differences in forgiveness of real-life interpersonal transgressions.

A Motivational Perspective on Forgiveness

To date, the literature contains a wide range of forgiveness definitions (cf. Worthington 2005). One prominent definition has been provided by McCullough and colleagues (e.g., McCullough et al. 2003; McCullough et al. 1998). They have offered a motivational perspective on interpersonal transgressions and the way people deal with the negative consequences caused by these transgressions. They assume that transgression-related interpersonal motivations (TRIMs) vary along three dimensions. After

P. Ghaemmaghami (✉)
Department of Psychology, Clinical Psychology and
Psychotherapy, University of Zurich, Binzmühlestrasse 14,
Box 26, 8050 Zurich, Switzerland
e-mail: p.ghaemmaghami@psychologie.uzh.ch

M. Allemand (✉) · M. Martin
Department of Psychology, Gerontopsychology, University
of Zurich, Binzmühlestrasse 14, Box 24,
8050 Zurich, Switzerland
e-mail: m.allemand@psychologie.uzh.ch

experiencing an interpersonal transgression, people may react with (1) an increased motivation to avoid their transgressor, (2) an increased motivation to get revenge, and/or (3) less motivation to show benevolence toward the person who caused them pain. According to McCullough and colleagues, these possible TRIMs are also the three motivational dimensions on which interpersonal forgiveness takes place. They conceptualize forgiveness as pro-social changes in an injured person's transgression-related interpersonal motivation toward a transgressor. That is, when people forgive, they become less motivated by feelings of avoidance and revenge, and more motivated by feelings of benevolence toward the transgressor (e.g., Fincham 2000; McCullough et al. 2003). These motivational changes are assumed to be related to relational and individual benefits. Indeed, previous research has shown that forgiveness is associated with improved interpersonal relationships between the forgiver and the transgressor (Karremans and Van Lange 2004; Tsang et al. 2006). In addition to its apparent relational benefits, forgiveness is also positively associated with physical (Carson et al. 2005; Lawler et al. 2005) and psychological well-being (Karremans et al. 2003; Toussaint and Webb 2005).

However, the question whether interpersonal forgiveness, as operationalized by TRIMs, varies with age remains largely unanswered. Given the significance of the negative consequences of interpersonal transgressions for social and psychological well-being (Cano and O'Leary 2000; Day and Maltby 2005; Kendler et al. 2003), it is important to understand how people of different ages respond to interpersonal transgressions in order to keep themselves from getting upset or to maintain goodwill in interpersonal relationships (Sorokin and Rook 2006). This might become increasingly important as people age, because well-being might more strongly depend on maintaining satisfying long-time social relationships versus initiating new social relationships (Carstensen et al. 1999). Moreover, given that men and women differ in their reactions to interpersonal conflicts the question arises to what extent they differ in the forgiveness of real-life interpersonal transgressions as they age.

Age Differences in Forgiveness

Age differences in forgiveness might be expected for several reasons (for a review, see Allemand and Steiner 2010). For example, theory and research on socio-emotional development across the lifespan suggest that older adults engage more often in strategies that optimize positive social experiences and minimize negative ones by avoiding conflicts, whereas younger adults behave more confrontationally when they are upset (e.g., Birditt et al. 2005; Carstensen et al. 1999; Luong et al. 2011). Forgiveness and particularly low levels of revenge and

avoidance motivations and high levels of benevolence motivation thus might reflect advantageous strategies in response to negative interpersonal events that facilitate positive relationships. Indeed, prior research findings on age differences in forgiveness show an average increase in the willingness to forgive in older age groups compared with their younger counterparts (Allemand 2008; Allemand and Steiner 2010; Girard and Mullet 1997; Mullet and Girard 2000; Subkoviak et al. 1995; Toussaint et al. 2001). However, most studies have mainly focused on age differences in dispositional forgiveness (i.e., forgivingness), either by using hypothetical scenarios that had to be rated by participants (e.g., Darby and Schlenker 1982; Girard and Mullet 1997) or by assessing people's general attitudes toward forgiveness (e.g., Mullet et al. 1998; Toussaint et al. 2001). Very few studies have investigated age differences in forgiveness of real-life transgressions (Romero and Mitchell 2008; Subkoviak et al. 1995; Younger et al. 2004). One of these studies, though, was limited solely to the investigation of Roman Catholic women (Romero and Mitchell 2008). In another study (Subkoviak et al. 1995), the examined types of real-life transgressions were limited to either a romantic transgression (male–female friendship) or a transgression that occurred within the family setting (with spouse or child). Other transgression types beyond that (e.g., hurtful experiences within non-romantic friendships at college or at work) were not included in the investigation of age differences. However, as the concept of forgiveness and its implications may vary across different types of relationships (Kearns and Fincham 2004) and possibly also across the lifespan, researchers have recommended to widen the range of transgressions to a variety of real-life situations in examining forgiveness (cf. Mullet and Girard 2000; Worthington 2005). Another indication for possible age differences in forgiveness comes from the literature on anger regulation. For example, in a cross-sectional sample of adults aged 18 to 88, Phillips et al. (2006) found that older adults less often displayed anger outwardly than younger adults. Moreover, older adults reported having fewer thoughts of revenge and angry memories, and at the same time more control strategies to deal with anger. In conclusion, even though age differences seem to be apparent concerning dispositional forgiveness and anger regulation, the knowledge of age differences in real-life transgressions remains limited.

Gender Differences in Forgiveness

Gender differences in forgiveness might be expected for several reasons (for a review, see Miller et al. 2008). For example, based on the stress and coping literature, one would expect gender differences in the way men and women experience human conflicts, appraise them and

cope with them (Lazarus 1999). Moreover, gender differences in forgiveness are also likely influenced by sociological factors or religion (Miller et al. 2008). Nevertheless, previous research has demonstrated inconsistent results across studies and several studies did not find any gender differences at all (e.g., Berry et al. 2001; Girard and Mullet 1997; Maltby et al. 2007; Subkoviak et al. 1995; Toussaint and Webb 2005; Worthington et al. 2000). In contrast, a recent meta-analytic review indicates that women are, on average, more forgiving than men (Miller et al. 2008). These gender differences seem to be uninfluenced by moderators such as dispositional forgiveness versus forgiveness of real-life transgressions or hypothetical transgressions. The authors also found that men were less forgiving than women when unforgiveness was operationalized through vengeance measures (Miller et al. 2008).

Further indication for the existence of gender differences in forgiveness can be found in the field of aggression, anger, and revenge. For example, Sukhodolsky et al. (2001) found that men have a greater tendency to harbor thoughts of revenge when recalling past anger-provoking experiences than women. Moreover, since gender differences in aggression seem to change across the lifespan with a peak for physical and verbal aggression among young men (Archer 2004; Cashdan 1998), age might interact with gender particularly with regard to revenge motivation. In fact, it is possible that gender effects are more pronounced in emerging and young adulthood with higher levels of revenge motivation for men but not for women, and then, this gender effect disappears in midlife and older adulthood. In contrast to this assumption, literature on anger regulation has found little evidence of gender effects on anger regulation and no evidence of an age by gender interaction (Phillips et al. 2006).

The Present Study

The aim of the present study was to examine age and gender differences in forgiveness of real-life transgressions in emerging and younger, middle-aged, and older adults. To do so, we first explored the experienced interpersonal transgressions by means of qualitative data analyses. Because no taxonomy for interpersonal transgressions exists to date, these analyses were of exploratory nature and were intended to describe different types of transgressions by age and gender in detail. Next, we investigated age and gender variations in TRIMs. First, based on theory and research suggesting that older adults tend to engage in strategies that maximizes positive social experiences and minimize negative ones (Carstensen et al. 1999; Luong et al. 2011; Phillips et al. 2006) and previous work demonstrating age differences in dispositional forgiveness (e.g., Allemand and Steiner 2010; Bono and

McCullough 2004), we expected age differences in the forgiveness of real-life transgressions. More specifically, we assumed that older adults demonstrate a lower motivation to avoid a person who offended them, a lower motivation to express revenge toward that person and a higher motivation to show benevolence than middle-aged and emerging and younger adults (Hypothesis 1). It should be noted that although older adults tend to avoid conflicts (e.g., Birditt et al. 2005), we expected lower avoidance motivation for older adults as compared to younger adults. The former refers to avoidance *before* interpersonal conflicts, whereas the latter refers to avoidance *after* a negative social event such as a transgression. In line with the claim that older adults pursue goals that focus on optimizing positive relationships and younger adults pursue goals that focus on gaining information and knowledge for the future (Carstensen et al. 1999), we expected lower avoidance motivation for older adults. Second, based on the work in the field of aggression, anger, and revenge (El-Sheikh et al. 2000; Sukhodolsky et al. 2001) and on previous research on forgiveness (e.g., Miller et al. 2008), we expected gender differences in forgiveness of real-life transgressions. Specifically, we assumed that women demonstrate lower avoidance and revenge motivations and a higher benevolence motivation compared with men (Hypothesis 2). Third, we expected an age by gender interaction effect with respect to revenge motivation. More specifically, we assumed that gender differences in revenge motivation are more pronounced in emerging and younger adults than in middle-aged and older adults (Hypothesis 3). This hypothesis was primarily driven by research showing an age by gender interaction with respect to aggression (e.g., Archer 2004; but see Phillips et al. 2006). Finally, we extended previous research on age and gender differences by examining the salience of the subject of forgiveness in everyday life. However, we refrained from formulating specific hypotheses for the salience of forgiveness across age and gender, as these analyses were of exploratory nature. It is important to note from the outset that we did not measure *changes* in the TRIMs but motivations as reported at a single measurement occasion controlling for potential confounding variables. Examining changes in the TRIMs would require two or more measurement occasions. Therefore, the results of age and gender differences in forgiveness should be considered with this in mind.

Methods

Participants and Procedure

Seventy-seven emerging and younger adults aged 16–39 years ($M = 21.4$, $SD = 5.2$; 38 women and 39 men), 68

middle-aged adults aged 40–59 years ($M = 51.2$, $SD = 5.7$; 32 women and 36 men), and 69 older adults aged 60–90 years ($M = 70.3$, $SD = 8.4$; 34 women and 35 men) from the German-speaking part of Switzerland voluntarily participated in the study. The three age groups of this convenience sample were based on divisions used in life-span development literature that identify young, middle, and older adulthood as important age categories in the lifespan (Heckhausen et al. 1989). Participants were recruited from leisure clubs, high schools, vocational schools, university campuses, and further education institutions in order to ensure that the demographic variables would not differ greatly across the different age groups. Older adults were a community dwelling sample. Educational level was not associated with age group ($\chi^2(2) = 3.02$, $p > 0.10$). Similarity in perceived health across age groups was ensured by asking participants to rate their physical health relative to an average person of their age on a 5-point Likert-type scale ranging from 1 (*poor*) to 5 (*excellent*; Idler and Kasl 1991, 1995). No statistically significant differences for perceived health among the three age groups emerged ($F(2, 211) = 0.64$, $p > 0.10$, $\eta_p^2 = 0.01$). Participants were also asked to rate their current mood and general feelings toward life on a 5-point Likert-type scale ranging from 1 (*very negative*) to 5 (*very positive*). No statistically significant age differences were found with respect to current mood ($F(2, 211) = 0.72$, $p > 0.10$, $\eta_p^2 = 0.01$) and general feelings toward life ($F(2, 211) = 2.33$, $p > 0.10$, $\eta_p^2 = 0.02$). After agreeing to participate, respondents completed a demographic information sheet.

Qualitative Data Analyses

The transgression recall procedure (McCullough et al., 1998; see also Allemand et al. 2007) was adapted to assess real-life interpersonal transgressions. Participants were instructed to recall the most recent and serious interpersonal transgression and to briefly describe it. In order to describe and categorize the different types of transgressions by age and gender, we used qualitative data analyses. More specifically, in order to categorize the types of interpersonal transgressions, the method of clustering qualitative data as described by Miles and Huberman (1994) was applied. Transgressions were compared and grouped into categories, according to similarity in the use of wording and content. The clustering process was conducted with minimal interpretation of the written answers in order to diminish the influence of theoretical bias. The categories were subsequently labeled, reviewed by another researcher, and rated independently by two raters. The interrater reliability was estimated using Cohen's Kappa (κ). The coefficients indicated substantial agreement between the raters ($\kappa = 0.70 - 0.72$). Finally, the raters

consulted on the divergences and a consensus on the final coding was reached. Table 1 lists the obtained categories.

Questions related to the type of relationship between the injured person and the transgressor, to pre-transgression closeness, to perceived transgression severity, and to transgression recency followed. Finally, participants completed a self-report questionnaire measuring their TRIMs, which is described in further detail in the next paragraph.

Measures

Forgiveness

The Transgression-Related Interpersonal Motivations Inventory (TRIM-18; McCullough et al. 1998, 2003) was used to assess forgiveness. The seven-item Avoidance subscale measures the motivation to avoid the transgressor (e.g., "I live as if he/she doesn't exist, isn't around"). The five-item Revenge subscale measures the motivation to seek revenge (e.g., "I'll make him/her pay"). The six-item Benevolence subscale measures benevolence motivation toward the transgressor (e.g., "Despite what he/she did, I want us to have a positive relationship again"). Previous studies have shown that the subscales have high internal consistencies, moderate test-retest stability, and evidence of construct validity (McCullough and Hoyt 2002; McCullough et al. 1998, 2003). Although the items of the TRIM-18 are generally rated on a 5-point Likert-type scale, we used a 9-point Likert-type scale ranging from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 9 (*strongly agree*) in order to have a more sensitive measure of participants' TRIMs. Recently, McCullough et al. (2006) conducted an explanatory factor analysis (EFA) with oblique rotation of the 18 items, which revealed two factors. The first factor contained the avoidance and benevolence items (negatively loaded) and was named Avoidance versus Benevolence motivation. The revenge items loaded on the second factor. This factor was named Revenge motivation. Due to the fact that no findings have been published concerning the factor structure of the TRIM-18 in a German-speaking sample, we performed an EFA. In contrast to McCullough et al. (2006), three factors with eigenvalues greater than one were extracted that explained 57.78% of the total item variance. On closer inspection, the items loaded on the theoretically derived TRIM-factor structure (i.e., avoidance, revenge, and benevolence). The items had relatively low cross-loadings. The avoidance factor was positively correlated with the revenge factor ($r = 0.35$, $p < 0.001$) and negatively with the benevolence factor ($r = -0.64$, $p < 0.001$). The revenge and benevolence factors were negatively interrelated ($r = -0.44$, $p < 0.001$). In the present study, the internal consistencies were: $\alpha = 0.91$ (avoidance), $\alpha = 0.82$ (revenge), and $\alpha = 0.86$ (benevolence).

Table 1 Types of interpersonal transgressions by age and gender

Experienced transgression	Age group			Gender		Total
	Young	Middle-aged	Elderly	Men	Women	
Physical violence, injury to physical integrity	2.6% (2) ^a	10.4% (7)	1.4 (1)	3.7 (4)	5.8 (6)	4.7 (10)
Divorce, separation, being left by one's partner, infidelity	22.1% (17)	16.4% (11)	10.1% (7)	14.7% (16)	18.3% (19)	16.4 (35)
Dispute, discrepancies, disparagement, and humiliation within a romantic relationship	11.7% (9)	6.0% (4)	8.7% (6)	6.4% (7)	11.5% (12)	8.9% (19)
Termination of contact	3.9% (3)	1.5% (1)	4.3% (3)	2.8% (3)	3.8% (4)	3.3% (7)
Social exclusion, workplace or school bullying, discrimination and racism	9.1% (7)	9.0% (6)	8.7% (6)	11% (12)	6.7% (7)	8.9% (19)
Dismissal, forced to leave home	3.9% (3)	6.0% (4)	7.2% (5)	11% (12)	0% (0)	5.6% (12)
Insult, hurtful remarks, annoyance	6.5% (5)	9.0% (6)	5.8% (4)	6.4% (7)	7.7% (8)	7.0% (15)
Backbiting, defamation, spreading untruths	3.9% (3)	6.0% (4)	2.9% (2)	5.5% (6)	2.9% (3)	4.2% (9)
Reproaches, imputations, false claims	6.5% (5)	14.9% (10)	10.1% (7)	10.1% (11)	10.6% (11)	10.3% (22)
Deception, being lied to, important information being withheld, being exploited, unkept promises and agreements	11.7% (9)	1.5% (1)	8.7% (6)	7.3% (8)	7.7% (8)	7.5% (16)
Being rejected, experiencing indifferences/a talent, an achievement, a competence, a profession being slighted	3.9% (3)	6.0% (4)	8.7% (6)	7.3% (8)	4.8% (5)	6.1% (13)
Being treated unfairly, unjustly, being harassed/ experiencing unjust distribution of money	9.1% (7)	9.0% (6)	13.0% (9)	10.1% (11)	10.6% (11)	10.3% (22)
Other	2.6% (2)	4.5% (3)	4.3% (3)	0.9% (1)	6.7% (7)	3.8% (8)
No hurtful experience	2.6% (2)	0.0% (0)	5.8% (4)	2.8% (3)	2.9% (3)	2.8% (6)
Total	100% (77)	100% (67)	100% (69)	100% (109)	100% (104)	100% (213)

^a Sample sizes (*n*) are depicted in brackets

Salience of Forgiveness

Participants were asked whether they were generally concerned with the subject of forgiveness in everyday life on a Likert-type scale ranging from 1 (*never*) to 6 (*always*).

Potential Control Variables

Types of Relationship between the Injured Person and the Transgressor

To indicate the type of relationship involved, participants used the following categories: (1) partner, (2) family or relative, (3) friend, acquaintance, or neighbor, (4) person at work or school, and (5) other person.

Pre-transgression Closeness

To retrospectively indicate how participants perceived their pre-transgression closeness to the transgressor, they completed a single item (“How close were you to the person who hurt you *before* the transgression?”; cf. Tsang et al. 2006) on a Likert-type scale ranging from 1 (*not close at all*) to 9 (*very close*).

Perceived Transgression Severity

In order to retrospectively indicate how severe participants perceived their transgressions to be, they completed a single item (“How painful was the transgression to you at the time it occurred?”; cf. McCullough et al. 2003) on a Likert-type scale ranging from 1 (*not painful at all*) to 9 (*worst pain I ever felt*).

Transgression Recency

The following categories were used for participants to indicate approximately the time since the transgression had occurred: (1) Less than 1 day beforehand, (2) days beforehand, (3) weeks beforehand, (4) months beforehand, (5) years beforehand, and (5) more than 10 years beforehand.

Data Analyses

Two-way analyses of covariances (ANCOVAs) were performed to examine age and gender differences in the TRIMs. Avoidance, revenge, and benevolence motivation each served separately as the dependent variable. Age group (1 = younger, 2 = middle-aged, 3 = older adults) and gender (0 = men, 1 = women) represented the independent variables. Control variables were included as covariates. Note that the degrees of freedom reported in the following sections vary due to missing variables.

Results

Characteristics of the Interpersonal Transgressions

Of the fourteen obtained categories of interpersonal transgressions, the most frequent mentioned were: divorce, separation, being left by one’s partner, infidelity (16.4%), reproaches, imputations, false claims (10.3%), and being treated unfairly, unjustly, being harassed/experiencing unjust distribution of money (10.3%) (see Table 1). The present data also point toward age differences in experienced transgressions. For example, young and middle-aged adults most frequently mentioned having experienced transgressions in connection with the termination of a romantic relationship. Older adults also described such transgressions frequently; however, they most often indicated transgressions regarding unfair and unjust treatment. While men reported transgressions regarding social exclusion and workplace or school bullying, women seemed to be more affected by the dispute and humiliation within a romantic relationship.

Age and Gender Differences in Forgiveness

Selecting Control Variables

Most participants reported that the transgressions had been committed by a person at work or school (28%), or by a romantic partner (25%), by a family member or relative (19%), friend, acquaintance, or neighbor (18%), or other person (7%). No significant age difference in the type of relationship between the injured person and the transgressor emerged, but a significant gender difference did ($\chi^2(4) = 10.00, p < 0.05$). Men reported being hurt by a person at work or school more frequently than women ($\chi^2(1) = 8.10, p < 0.01$). The mean pre-transgression closeness was 5.8 ($SD = 2.9$). No significant age, but significant and small gender differences in pre-transgression closeness emerged ($F(1, 209) = 6.13, p < 0.05, \eta_p^2 = 0.03$). Men reported transgressions with less pre-transgression closeness more frequently than did women ($p < 0.05$). Therefore, pre-transgression closeness was controlled for in testing our hypotheses. On average, participants perceived the transgression as quite painful ($M = 7.53, SD = 1.80$). No significant age and gender differences in perceived transgression severity evinced. Regarding transgression recency, 37.3% of the participants had experienced the transgression years before, 26.8% more than 10 years before, 20.6% months previously, 9.1% weeks before, 3.7% days before 2.3% less than a day before. A significant age effect was found ($\chi^2(2) = 33.01, p < 0.001$), in which middle-aged and older adult participants tended to refer to transgressions that had taken place

further back in time than emerging and young adult participants. But there was no significant effect of gender on transgression recency. Transgression recency was uncorrelated with perceived transgression severity ($r_s = 0.09$, $p > 0.10$). Since transgression recency was related to age, it was controlled for in testing the hypotheses.

Avoidance Motivation

A marginally significant main effect of age was found for avoidance motivation ($F(2,197) = 2.83$, $p = 0.06$, $\eta_p^2 = 0.03$) (see Fig. 1). Pairwise comparisons on the estimated marginal means using the Bonferroni *post hoc* test revealed a trend toward a significant mean difference between emerging and younger and middle-aged adults ($p < 0.08$) indicating higher avoidance motivation for middle-aged adults (see Table 2). Neither a significant main effect of gender on avoidance motivation nor a significant age by gender interaction was found.

Revenge Motivation

A significant main effect of age was found for revenge motivation ($F(2,199) = 5.62$, $p < 0.01$, $\eta_p^2 = 0.05$) (see Table 2). The effect size was small to medium. Bonferroni *post hoc* tests disclosed significant mean differences between emerging and younger and middle-aged adults ($p < 0.05$) and between emerging and younger and older adults ($p < 0.05$). No significant mean differences were revealed between middle-aged and older adults. Moreover, a significant main effect of gender was found ($F(1,199) = 11.25$, $p < 0.001$, $\eta_p^2 = 0.05$), indicating higher revenge motivation for men (see Table 2). The effect size was small to medium. Finally, a significant small-sized age by gender interaction emerged ($F(2,199) = 3.06$, $p < 0.05$, $\eta_p^2 = 0.03$) showing

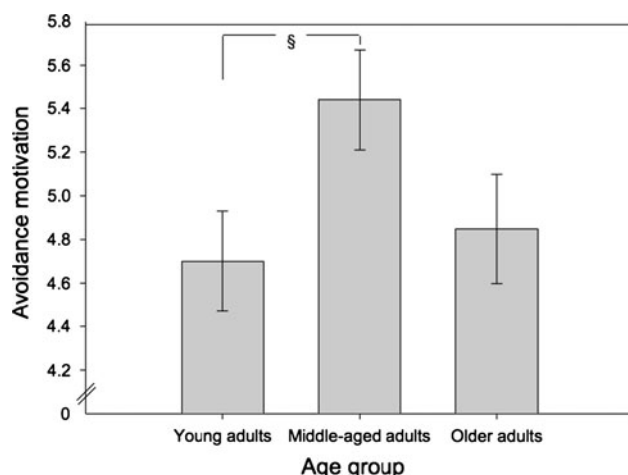


Fig. 1 Age differences in avoidance motivation (estimated marginal means). Error bars indicate standard errors. $^{\$}p < 0.08$

that gender differences were more pronounced in younger adults as compared to middle-aged and older adults (see Fig. 2). Bonferroni *post hoc* tests revealed that emerging and younger men differed significantly from middle-aged men ($p < 0.05$) and older men ($p < 0.01$), as well as from emerging and younger women ($p < 0.01$), middle-aged women ($p < 0.001$) and older women ($p < 0.001$). There were no such age differences among the women. Separate one-way ANCOVAs for each age group showed that the gender effect of revenge motivation was large in terms of effect size in the group of young adults ($F(1, 70) = 9.53$, $p < 0.01$, $\eta_p^2 = 0.12$), but it was marginally significant in middle-aged adults ($F(1, 64) = 3.46$, $p < 0.08$, $\eta_p^2 = 0.05$), and not significant in older adults ($F(1, 61) = 0.64$, $p > 0.10$, $\eta_p^2 = 0.01$). Separate gender-related one-way ANCOVAs showed that the age effect of revenge motivation was large for men ($F(2,102) = 6.35$, $p < 0.01$, $\eta_p^2 = 0.11$), but not significant for women ($F(2,95) = 0.68$, $p > 0.10$, $\eta_p^2 = 0.01$).

Benevolence Motivation

No significant main effects of age and gender were found for benevolence motivation. The age by gender interaction was not significant either.

To summarize, age and gender differences in TRIMs were revealed in particular for revenge. Closer investigation showed that the age group differences in revenge motivation were manifest for men but not for women. Moreover, age differences for avoidance motivation marginally failed to reach statistical significance. Subsequent analyses indicated a trend effect for middle-aged adults to have a greater avoidance motivation than emerging and younger adults. No age and gender differences were found for benevolence motivation.

Salience of Forgiveness in Everyday Life

Overall, participants indicated that they were sometimes concerned with forgiveness in everyday life ($M = 3.21$, $SD = 0.98$). In order to examine age and gender effects in the salience of forgiveness, we performed two-way analyses of variance (ANOVAs) with age group and gender as the independent variables. Since the question of the salience of forgiveness did not refer to a specific transgression of the participants, but was rather directed to their general attitude of forgiveness, we did not control for potential confounding variables in this analysis. A significant and small-sized main effect of age group emerged ($F(2, 205) = 4.66$, $p < 0.01$, $\eta_p^2 = 0.04$). *Post hoc* analyses showed that middle-aged adults ($M = 3.50$, $SD = 1.03$) were significantly more concerned with forgiveness in everyday life than younger ($M = 3.12$, $SD = 0.89$) and

Table 2 Estimated marginal means and standard errors of the TRIM-18 by age and gender

TRIM-subscale	<i>M</i>	<i>SE</i>		<i>M</i>	<i>SE</i>		<i>M</i>	<i>SE</i>
<i>Avoidance</i>								
Men	5.01	0.19	Women	4.97	0.20	Total		
Young men	4.91	0.32	Young women	4.48	0.32	Young adults	4.70	0.23
Middle-aged men	5.51	0.32	Middle-aged women	5.36	0.34	Middle-aged adults	5.44	0.23
Older men	4.60	0.34	Older women	5.07	0.36	Older adults	4.84	0.25
<i>Revenge</i>								
Men	2.80	0.15	Women	2.06	0.16	Total		
Young men	3.71	0.26	Young women	2.23	0.26	Young adults	2.97	0.19
Middle-aged men	2.42	0.26	Middle-aged women	1.90	0.28	Middle-aged adults	2.16	0.19
Older men	2.26	0.27	Older women	2.03	0.29	Older adults	2.15	0.20
<i>Benevolence</i>								
Men	4.71	0.20	Women	5.05	0.20	Total		
Young men	4.27	0.34	Young women	4.94	0.34	Young adults	4.61	0.24
Middle-aged men	4.78	0.34	Middle-aged women	5.14	0.36	Middle-aged adults	4.96	0.25
Older men	5.07	0.35	Older women	5.05	0.37	Older adults	5.06	0.26

TRIM Transgression-Related Interpersonal Motivation (TRIM) 18-Inventory. The effects of pre-transgression closeness and transgression recency were controlled in the ANCOVAs

older adults ($M = 3.03$, $SD = 0.98$). Young and older participants did not differ with respect to the salience of forgiveness in everyday life. In addition, a significant and small to medium-sized main effect of gender emerged ($F(1, 205) = 10.39$, $p = 0.001$, $\eta_p^2 = 0.05$), showing that forgiveness is more often an issue in everyday life for women ($M = 3.43$, $SD = 1.00$) than for men ($M = 3.00$, $SD = 0.92$). The age by gender interaction was not significant. To summarize, the results suggest that, on average, forgiveness was a more manifest subject for middle-aged adults and women in our sample.

Discussion

To the best of our knowledge, this is the first study examining age and gender differences in the forgiveness of real-life transgressions with a special focus on age and gender interactions. Four results stand out: First, age group differences were manifest in revenge motivation for men, but not for women. Second, there was a tendency for age group differences to reach statistical significance in avoidance motivation. Subsequent analysis pointed toward a trend for middle-aged adults to exhibit greater avoidance motivation than emerging and younger adults. Third, no age and gender differences were found for benevolence motivation. Finally, forgiveness seemed to be a more manifest subject in everyday life for middle-aged adults and women.

Most previous studies on age differences in forgiveness have focused on dispositional aspects and little is known

about age differences in real-life settings. Findings of the few existing studies are limited to certain transgression types such as romantic transgressions or certain samples. The study at hand, therefore, aimed at investigating a broader range of real-life interpersonal transgressions in a more diverse sample of the population. The reported transgressions were clustered into fourteen categories ranging from “physical violence, injury to physical integrity” to “no hurtful experience.” In line with previous studies (McCullough et al. 2006; Orcutt 2006), the most frequently mentioned interpersonal transgressions referred to the termination of a romantic relationship and infidelity.

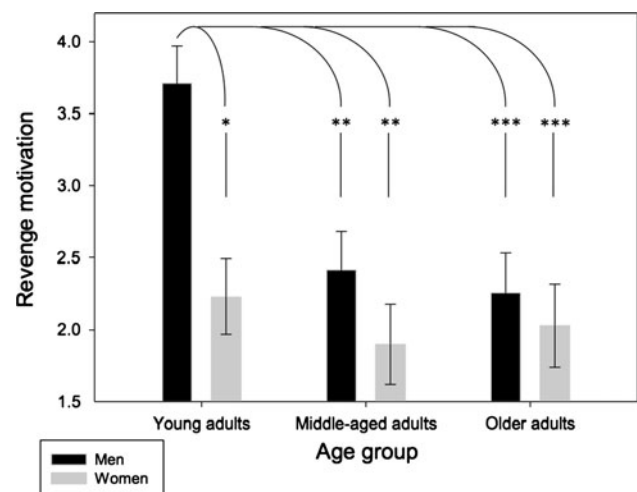


Fig. 2 Age and gender differences in revenge motivation (estimated marginal means). Error bars indicate standard errors. * $p < 0.05$

It also was the most frequently mentioned transgression in the age group of young and middle-aged adults. This might indicate that across lifespan, the termination of a romantic relationship possibly occurs more often in emerging, young and middle-aged adulthood than in later adulthood. Moreover, men tended to report more transgressions related to the workplace, whereas women seemed to feel greater distress when conflict arose in intimate relationships. This is consistent with previous findings suggesting that conflicts in romantic relationships might have a stronger negative effect on women than on men (Shulman et al. 2006). Furthermore, women tend to report greater anger when experiencing unresolved interpersonal disagreements (El-Sheikh et al. 2000) and seem to feel a greater responsibility for the emotional atmosphere of relationships (Nolen-Hoeksema and Jackson 2001).

In order to better comprehend the role of gender and age in forgiveness, it is necessary to understand the nature of the interpersonal events regarded as serious transgressions by men and women of different age groups. The investigation of age and gender differences in real-life interpersonal transgressions should therefore be addressed in future research. Moreover, in view of the damaging effects certain interpersonal transgressions can have (e.g., Cano and O’Leary 2000; Eisenberger et al. 2003; Kendler et al. 2003), it is essential to raise the awareness of this, to find means for prevention and coping. Further investigation is also needed in what concerns the implications of the different transgression types, for example, in having the different transgression categories rated by a third party subsequent to the self-reported transgression severity ratings. Future studies with larger samples should relate the different types of interpersonal transgressions with the TRIMs.

The present results partially support our first hypothesis. Age differences were found for revenge and avoidance motivation, whereas benevolence motivation was unrelated to age. Consistent with previous findings on age differences in dispositional forgiveness (e.g., Allemand 2008; Allemand and Steiner 2010; Girard and Mullet 1997), older and middle-aged adults showed a lower motivation to express revenge toward a person who offended them than emerging and younger adults.

Results for avoidance motivation indicated a surprising trend for middle-aged adults to be more prone to avoid an offender than emerging, younger adults. It was assumed that young adults would express the strongest and older adults the lowest avoidance motivation. But rather than the expected age-related downward trend, a peak was found for middle-aged adults, revealing a significant difference for this age group when compared with younger adults. Interestingly, this trend is consistent with the results for the salience of forgiveness, showing that the subject of forgiveness is more

of a concern in everyday life for middle-aged adults than for younger and older adults. One possible explanation for this phenomenon is that young adults did not show high levels of avoidance because the most frequently experienced transgression in their age range was the termination of a romantic relationship. Building up an intimate relationship is a major developmental subject of this age group (cf. Subkoviak et al. 1995; Younger et al. 2004). Emerging and young adults seem to have greater difficulty in accepting the end of a first intimate friendship and seem to be more motivated to make amends, perhaps because they believe more strongly in the possibility and necessity of reconciliation. Therefore, young adults might not be interested in avoiding their romantic partner after a transgression. Although middle-aged adults also quite frequently stated having experienced the termination of a romantic relationship, they might be more disillusioned and realistic concerning the subject of relationships and not as eager to reconcile as young adults. Moreover, middle-aged adults might be more prone to avoidance due to multiple stress-related responsibilities characteristic in this stage of life, such as children, family, and work (Willis and Martin 2005). In trying to cope with these multiple responsibilities, middle-aged adults feel possibly more vulnerable and not as interested in being confronted with still another problem and, therefore, are more inclined to mentally or behaviorally avoid a person who caused them harm and suffering in the past. Therefore, middle-aged adults are less motivated to confront themselves with “unfinished business” and thus have a higher avoidance motivation. Feifel and Strack (1989) examined whether middle-aged and older men were more inclined to use avoidance when coping with situations where decision-making was required or an authority conflict was present. They found that this was indeed so for the middle-aged group compared with older men. Future research on forgiveness should therefore pay special attention to the middle-aged adult group.

The lack of significant findings for benevolence might indicate that age differences are particularly evident for the “negative” interpersonal motivations dimensions. Similarly, Goeleven et al. (2010) recently investigated age differences in the processing of emotional information and found that older adults showed less interference from negative stimuli compared with younger adults, whereas no such age difference was found for positive information. Another explanation for the lack of age differences in benevolence motivation might be linked to the items of the Benevolence subscale, which to a large degree assess to what extent a person is motivated to restore a relationship. This, however, might be more strongly influenced by situational factors such as closeness to the offender than by age and gender. Future studies should test these ideas.

The present results partially support our second hypothesis on gender differences in real-life forgiveness. Based on

previous findings (Maltby et al. 2007; Miller et al. 2008; Sukhodolsky et al. 2001), we expected that men and women would differ in their TRIMs. However, gender difference in avoidance and benevolence motivation was not revealed. Nevertheless, significant differences were found for revenge, suggesting that men have a higher motivation to seek retribution after experiencing a transgression than women. These findings suggest that gender differences are only apparent in certain aspects of forgiveness but not in others and therefore contribute to the mixed results in this respect. The results for revenge are in line with previous studies (Miller et al. 2008; Mullet et al. 1998). A closer look at the gender-related findings supports our third hypothesis: The gender effect of revenge motivation particularly emerged for the young age group. A trend was found for the middle-aged group as well, but not for the older age group. Young adult men were significantly more inclined to seek revenge than young women. These gender differences are closely linked to gender differences in aggression (cf. Archer 2004). Findings have shown that men tend to be more aggressive than women and are more likely to display overt aggressive behavior, whereas women seem to express aggression more covertly (Archer 2004; Verona et al. 2007). Due to the social education of women, they might be more restrained in showing revenge motivation openly, but nevertheless experience it and possibly use more subtle forms of revengeful behavior. Furthermore, young men appear to have a significant higher motivation for seeking revenge than both middle-aged and older adult men. But no age differences were discovered in the group of women. This result might also explain, in part, the existing inconsistent findings for gender differences in forgiveness and point out to the importance of taking age into account when investigating gender differences in forgiveness. It would be interesting to investigate this phenomenon from a developmental point of view using longitudinal data. The motivation to seek revenge after experiencing a serious transgression might develop and manifest itself differently for men and women across lifespan. The tendency for revenge might decline and the differences between men and women might disappear in later adulthood.

The subject of forgiveness seemed to be more of a concern for women in everyday life than for men. These results are in line with findings indicating that women are more likely to engage in rumination than men (Nolen-Hoeksema and Jackson 2001), as well as with findings indicating the possibility that rumination declines with age (e.g., Erskine et al. 2007). The development of rumination across lifespan might have differing pathways for men and women. Therefore, further research is needed to clarify the aspect of rumination and its relation to forgiveness.

Some limitations of the present findings need to be noted. First, because the results are based on cross-sectional data, it is not clear whether these findings truly

represent a developmental process of forgiveness across the lifespan or whether they simply mirror a cohort effect. As researchers have pointed out, this has been a problem of most studies investigating age differences in forgiveness (Mullet and Girard 2000; Toussaint et al. 2001). Analysis of longitudinal data is therefore very essential. Second, since forgiveness is also closely linked to religion and culture (cf. Rye et al. 2000), the present study omitted questions assessing the cultural or religious background of the participants in order to prevent any possible moral pressure to forgive. Being required to indicate religious faith might cause respondents to answer with religion in mind, and in the present study, some respondents did indeed voluntarily mention that they forgave because of their religious views. Therefore, future studies should consider incorporating this aspect, perhaps at the end of the questionnaire or interview, because it would provide insight into the construct of forgiveness and its implications in people's lives. Third, this study relied on self-report measures, which are generally known to be susceptible to social desirability (Brose et al. 2005). Findings in connection with forgiveness in this respect are divergent. While links with certain forgiveness instruments and social desirability have been found (e.g., Brose et al. 2005), other scales on the other hand such as the Enright Forgiveness Inventory (EFI) do not seem to be correlated with social desirability (e.g., Carson et al. 2005; Subkoviak et al. 1995). The TRIM-12 Inventory, an earlier version of the TRIM-18 which includes the Revenge and Avoidance subscale, demonstrated very low associations with measures of social desirability (McCullough et al. 1998). Future studies should nevertheless take this aspect into account.

Despite these limitations, the present study greatly furthers our understanding of forgiveness across the lifespan. First, age differences in the forgiveness of real-life transgressions were investigated while taking gender into account. Second, the findings of the study are not restricted to a sample of college students but are based on a large community sample. Third, a wide range of transgression types was examined. By systematically analyzing the transgressions people experience, the types of interpersonal behavior that cause suffering can be better understood. Such findings assist in more accurately comprehending the forgiveness process and the difficulty involved in forgiving and can be applied for conceptualizing forgiveness, for intervention programs and in psychotherapy. Fourth, responses to experienced transgressions were investigated along three dimensions of forgiveness: The observed trend for a stronger avoidance motivation in middle-aged adults, the age differences in revenge motivation in men but not in women, and the lack of age and gender differences in benevolence motivation sheds new light on the subject of

forgiveness among emerging and young, middle-aged, and older adults and emphasizes the importance of incorporating gender when examining this aspect.

Acknowledgments This research was supported by a research grant from the University of Zurich (Forschungskredit 2005) to the second author. The authors would like to extend their special thanks to Catherine Ghaemmaghami, Assad Ghaemmaghami and Roberto La Marca for their valuable comments on this manuscript and also to Vicki Annaheim and Barbara Stauffer for rating the findings of the qualitative data analysis.

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