Forgivingness and action orientation

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Forgivingness and Action Orientation

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Abstract

The present study investigated the relationship between forgivingness and action orientation, and examined the mediating role of action orientation for the neuroticism-forgivingness association. Participants (N = 210) completed the Tendency to Forgive Scale (TTF; Brown, 2003), two subscales from the Action Control Scale (ACS-90; Kuhl, 1994b) and the Neuroticism scale from the short form of the Big Five Inventory (BFI-K; Rammstedt & John, 2005). Results indicate that failure-related action orientation (AOF) was strongly positively related to forgivingness. Moreover, the negative relation between neuroticism and forgivingness was fully mediated by action orientation (AOF). This finding suggests that the ability to down-regulate negative affect is an important mechanism in explaining the association between neuroticism and forgivingness.

*Key words:* Forgiveness; Forgivingness; Action Orientation; Neuroticism
Introduction

Reaching forgiveness requires inhibiting relationship-destructive responses and instead responding in pro-relationship manner. This self-regulation may be easier for some individuals to overcome than others. It has been shown that several personality, relational, and socio-cognitive variables might encourage or inhibit forgiveness (cf. Worthington, 2005). For example, less forgiving people are higher in neuroticism and anxiety (e.g., McCullough, Bellah, Kilpatrick, & Johnson, 2001), are more likely to ruminate (e.g., Berry, Worthington, O’Connor, Parrott, & Wade, 2005), are more likely to display such relationship-damaging emotions as anger and hostility (Thompson et al., 2005), and are less oriented toward relationships (Burnette, Taylor, Worthington, & Forsyth, 2007).

In the present study, we extend previous research on personality correlates of dispositional forgiveness by examining individual differences in action orientation. Briefly, action orientation reflects a person’s general ability to regulate emotions, cognitions, and behaviors to accomplish intentional actions (Kuhl, 1992). It is an open question, however, whether more action-oriented people are, on average, more prone to forgive others than state-oriented people. Specifically, we investigated whether action orientation is positively related to forgivingness, and whether action orientation might explain, in part, the well-known negative link between neuroticism and forgivingness.

Forgiveness

Forgiveness can be considered from those interpersonal incidents that are contextualized to a dispositional, trait form that transcends individual injustices (cf. McCullough & Witvliet, 2002). Dispositional forgiveness (called forgivingness; Roberts, 1995) refers to individual differences in the tendency to forgive others across time, relationships, and situations (e.g., Allemand, in press; Berry, Worthington, Parrot, O’Connor, & Wade, 2001; Brown, 2003).
Research has begun to examine how personality traits relate to forgivingness (e.g., Brose, Rye, Lutz-Zois, & Ross, 2005; Walker & Gorsuch, 2002). Using the Big Five taxonomy to organize previous findings, Mullet, Neto, and Rivière (2005) reviewed research on the associations between personality trait variables and forgivingness. Previous studies have been consistently demonstrated that neuroticism is negatively related to forgivingness (Allemand, Sassin-Meng, Huber, & Schmitt, 2008; Berry et al., 2001, 2005; Brose et al., 2005). Mullet et al. (2005) reported correlations ranging from -.10 to -.32. Briefly, neuroticism represents an intrapersonal trait that reflects individual’s emotional stability and personal adjustment. Individuals who score high on neuroticism tend to have a lower threshold for experiencing negative affect and they marshal more attention toward negative stimuli than do people low in neuroticism (Derryberry & Reed, 1994). Consistent with the negative association to neuroticism, forgivingness is negatively related to other intrapersonal features comprising neurotic elements, e.g., state and trait anger, anxiety depression, negative affectivity, and rumination (McCullough et al., 2001; Mullet et al., 2005).

To summarize, previous research found that personality traits regarding sensitivity for negative experiences are related to forgivingness. That is, the amount and the intensity of dispositionally experiencing negative states is negatively related the ability to forgive others. With the present research we intend to broaden this framework by adding the aspect of self-regulatory ability. We argue that it is not only the sensitivity for negative experiences and states that hinders forgivingness, but the way people generally deal with these experiences and how able they are in down-regulating the negative emotions evoked by interpersonal transgressions. In line with this argument, action orientation might reflect an important psychological mechanism that explains interindividual differences in the ability to forgive.

Action Orientation
Action orientation captures individual differences in the ability to regulate emotions, cognitions, and behaviors in order to accomplish intentional actions (Kuhl, 1992, 1994a). This self-regulatory ability is conceptualized as a trait-like characteristic and is measured on a continuum ranging from action orientation to state orientation. Individuals with a strong action orientation are able to self-regulate affect intuitively, i.e., in a flexible, efficient, and non-repressive manner (Koole & Jostmann, 2004), and autonomously, e.g., being able to stop ruminations without external help (Kuhl & Beckmann, 1994). Further, individuals with a strong action orientation are able to reduce negative affect in response to negative life events and they have the ability to move forward after failures or setbacks (Rholes, Michas, & Shroff, 1989). Action orientation is, therefore, associated with decisiveness, low levels of negatively toned emotional thoughts, less vulnerability to stress, and parsimonious processing of information. By contrast, individuals with a strong state orientation are unable to perform self-regulated behaviors instead they tend to have persistent, ruminative thoughts in response to negative life events, which reduces the cognitive resources available for moving forward (Kuhl 1992, 1994a).

Action orientation has been conceptualized to encompass two major dimensions. First, failure-related action orientation (AOF) refers to the ability to down-regulate negative affect once it is aroused. The dimension contains the opposing poles of disengagement versus preoccupation. Disengagement is thereby the action-oriented pole and refers to the ability to reduce negative affect and to disengage from thoughts about negative events. By contrast, the state-oriented pole (SOF) is the inability to volitionally control negative affect and intrusive thoughts and is therefore associated with persisting thoughts about unpleasant experiences (Kuhl, 1994b). Second, decision-related action orientation (AOD), containing the opposing poles of initiative versus hesitation, refers to the ability to self-generate positive affect in the face of difficulties, and thus to initiate intended goal-directed activities. State-oriented people on the dimension of
decision-related action orientation (SOD) hesitate in the face of difficult tasks and have problems in the implementation of their intentions because they are not able to volitionally generate the required positive affect.

Many findings support this conceptualization of the two dimensions of action orientation in terms of low ability to volitionally control affect. Importantly, it was shown that the deficits of state orientation (SOF and SOD) occur in relation to corresponding situational stressors (e.g., Baumann, Kaschel, & Kuhl, 2005; Kuhl & Beckmann, 1994). Thereby stressful situations can be differentiated into threats and demands. Threats, e.g., dangers, painful experiences, and situations, which threaten one’s self-worth, hence, are life events that increase negative affect. By contrast, demands, e.g., goal conflicts, high task difficulties, obstacles, are stressful situations, where goal pursuit is hindered. Demand situations are stronger associated with reduced positive affect than increased negative affect (cf. Kuhl, 2000). Thus, within demanding situations persons who are not able to self-generate positive affect (high SOD) have difficulties to implement required actions. They might not necessarily be affected by threatening situations. As threatening situations increase negative affect they are particularly stressful for persons which have problems in the down-regulation of negative affect (high SOF).

Forgivingness is also conceptualized as a trait referring to a particular type of stressful life events, namely interpersonal stress, i.e., situations in which people are hurt or wronged by others. Offenses often cause hurt, anger, and pain, and can threaten one’s sense of security (McCullough & Witvliet, 2002; Worthington & Wade, 1999). Forgivingness refers to the ability of a person to regulate negative feelings, thoughts and behaviors engendered by interpersonal transgressions (Berry et al., 2001; Brown, 2003). We therefore assume that failure-related action orientation (AOF), which describes the disposition to down-regulate negative affect and thoughts, is positively related to forgivingness. We do not expect decision-related action orientation (AOD)
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Studies have shown that action orientation is negatively related to neuroticism (e.g., Baumann & Kuhl, 2002; Kuhl & Beckmann, 1994). For example, Diefendorff, Hall, Lord, and Strean (2000) reported a correlation of $r = .35$ and $r = .22$ between emotional stability (reversed neuroticism scale) and the action orientation subscales. Although both constructs share common variance, they are conceptually distinct and need to be separated from a functional point of view (cf. Kuhl, 2000). Whereas neuroticism indicates a tendency to experience negative emotional states, which can be interpreted in terms of arousability of affect generation systems, action orientation refers to the ability to regulate such negative states in order to initiate goal-directed activities. In other words, neuroticism describes how quickly an individual enters a negative state, whereas action orientation describes how quickly an individual is able to leave an emotional state once it is aroused (Baumann & Kuhl, 2002). Following this sequential view, first, we assume that neuroticism determines the amount and intensity of hurt feelings after interpersonal transgressions. Second, action orientation accounts for down-regulating these negative feelings, and thus facilitates forgiving. Consequently, we suggest that AOF is a mediator of the neuroticism-forgivingness relationship.

The Present Study

The present study investigated the relationship between forgivingness and action orientation and tested the mediating role of action orientation for the neuroticism-forgivingness association. Specifically, we examined the hypothesis that failure-related action orientation
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(AOF) would be positively correlated with forgivingness. We did not expect an association between decision-related action orientation (AOD) and forgivingness. Furthermore, we tested the mediating role of AOF in sustaining the neuroticism-forgivingness relation.

Method

Participants and Procedure

A sample of 210 undergraduate students (177 females, 33 males) at University of Zurich participated in this study. Ages of participants ranged from 18 to 40 years ($M = 24.6, SD = 4.5$). Participants were recruited from psychology classes for participating in a study on interpersonal circumstances in life. They were provided with the questionnaire and a business reply envelopes for mailing the material directly back to the researchers. Participants completed the self-report questionnaires individually at home (response rate = 65%). Parts of the questionnaire were items on forgivingness, action orientation, and neuroticism. All participants were unpaid volunteers.

Measures

Forgivingness. The four-item Tendency to Forgive Scale (TTF; Brown, 2003; Brown & Phillips, 2005) was used to assess individual differences in the tendency to forgive others. Example items are “I tend to get over it quickly when someone hurts my feelings,” and “When people wrong me, my approach is just to forgive and forget.” Participants indicated the extent to which they agreed with each of the four statements of the TTF on 7-point Likert-type scales anchored with strongly disagree (1) and strongly agree (7). In the present study, the reliability coefficient (Cronbach’s alpha) of the TTF was $\alpha = .79$.

Action orientation. The Action Control Scale (ACS-90; Kuhl, 1994b) was used to assess individual differences in the failure-related (AOF) and decision-related (AOD) components of action orientation. The ACS-90 is a forced-choice self-report measure. The items depict brief scenarios of stressful situations that may occur in everyday life and require selection of one of
two options that indicate what the participant would do. (1) The 12-item AOF subscale ranges from 0–12 with lower scores indicating state-oriented preoccupation and higher scores indicating action-oriented disengagement. An example item is “When something really gets me down: (a) I have trouble doing anything at all (state-oriented response), or (b) I find it easy to distract myself by doing other things (action-oriented response).” (2) The 12-item AOD subscale also ranges from 0–12 with lower scores indicating state-oriented hesitation and higher scores indicating action-oriented initiative. An example item is “When I have to solve a difficult problem: (a) I usually don’t have a problem getting started (action-oriented response), or (b) I have trouble sorting things out in my head so that I can get down to working on the problem (state-oriented response).” Reliability coefficients (Cronbach’s alpha) $\alpha = .68$ and $\alpha = .79$, respectively.

**Neuroticism.** Neuroticism was assessed using a four-item scale from the short form of the Big Five Inventory (BFI-K; Rammstedt & John, 2005). An example item is “I see myself as someone who tends to find fault with others” (reverse). Participants indicated the extent to which they agreed with each of the four items using 5-point Likert-type scales ranging from strongly disagree (1) to strongly agree (5). According to Rammstedt and John (2005) the BFI-K neuroticism scale highly correlated ($r = .93$) with the standard BFI neuroticism scale (John, Donahue, & Kentle, 1991), implying a good representation of the longer BFI scale. In the present study, the reliability coefficient (Cronbach’s alpha) of the Neuroticism scale was $\alpha = .80$.

**Results**

Bivariate correlations, means, and standard deviations among the investigated variables are depicted in Table 1. Descriptive analyses were conducted to evaluate variations in responses to the variables of interest as a function of demographic characteristics. A series of bivariate correlations and regression analyses followed to assess the relationships between forgivingness,
action orientation, and neuroticism and the potential mediating role of action orientation in the relation between neuroticism and forgivingness.

**Descriptive Analyses**

Independent *t*-tests revealed that women tended to show lower scores in forgivingness (*M* = 3.38, *SD* = 1.17) than men (*M* = 3.83, *SD* = 1.28; *t*(208) = 2.01, *p* < .05), however, the gender effect was small (η² = .019). Further, women reported lower scores in the failure-related action orientation scale (AOF) (*M* = 5.53, *SD* = 2.62) than men (*M* = 7.09, *SD* = 2.52); *t*(208) = 3.15, *p* < .01, η² = .046), but women and men did not differ in terms of the decision-related action orientation subscale (AOD) (women: *M* = 6.22, *SD* = 3.26; men: *M* = 6.64, *SD* = 2.78; *t*(208) = 0.68, *p* = .49, η² = .002). Women (*M* = 2.94, *SD* = 0.76) reported higher scores in neuroticism than men (*M* = 2.54, *SD* = 0.74; *t*(208) = -2.84, *p* < .01, η² = .037). Hence, we did include gender as a control variable in the regression analyses when testing for mediation. Next, bivariate correlations were conducted to evaluate age variations. With the exception of a statistically significant correlation between age and AOD (*r* = .17, *p* < .05), none of the variables of interest varied as a function of age.

**Bivariate Associations and Mediation Analyses**

We found support for our hypothesis that forgivingness is positively related to AOF (*r* = .50, *p* < .001). In terms of effect sizes, this correlation represents a large effect (Cohen, 1988). The AOD subscale was marginally related to forgivingness (*r* = .13, *p* < .06). The correlation between AOF and forgivingness was significantly stronger than the correlation between AOD and forgivingness (*t*(207) = 5.31, *Z* = 4.97, *p* < .01).

Table 1 further shows a statistically significant negative association between neuroticism and forgivingness and a strong association between neuroticism and action orientation. As regards the subscales of the ACS-90, both AOF and AOD were significantly related to
neuroticism, indicating that there is a moderate overlap among neuroticism and both action orientation subscales. However, neuroticism was significantly less strongly related to AOD than AOF ($t(207) = -2.12, Z = -2.05, p < .05$).

To test our second hypothesis whether failure-related action orientation (AOF) mediates the relationship between neuroticism and forgivingness, we employed Kenny, Kashy and Bolger’s (1998) procedure for testing for mediation effects. Gender was included as a control variable in all regression analyses. Following the procedure outlined by Kenny et al. (1998), we first regressed forgivingness on neuroticism. The relationship was statistically significant ($\beta = -.29, p < .001$). Second, AOF (the proposed mediator) was regressed on neuroticism, which also demonstrated a statistically significant relationship ($\beta = -.51, p < .001$). Third, in order to examine whether AOF relates to forgivingness after controlling for neuroticism, forgivingness was regressed on both neuroticism and AOF. The relationship between AOF and forgivingness was statistically significant ($\beta = .47, p < .001$), and the relationship between neuroticism and forgivingness became non-significant ($\beta = -.05, p > .10$). To demonstrate mediation, the significant relationship between predictor and criterion should disappear, or at least be significantly reduced, when the effects of the mediator are controlled for (cf. Kenny et al., 1998). These results suggest a full mediation by AOF. The Sobel test was statistically significant ($z = -5.22, p < .001$), supporting the hypothesis of a (full) mediation of the neuroticism-forgivingness relationship.

Discussion

The first objective of this research was to investigate the relationship between forgivingness and action orientation. To the best of our knowledge, this was the first study to examine this association. As predicted, failure-related action orientation (AOF) was significantly and positively related to the tendency to forgive, whereas decision-related action orientation (AOD)
was only marginally related to forgivingness. It appears that people with a pronounced ability to
down-regulate negative affective states and to disengage from ruminative thoughts are more
prone to forgive than state-oriented people. Thus, individuals with an inability to volitionally
control negative affect and intrusive thoughts and low scores in forgivingness may persist in the
negative state. Worthington and Wade (1999) argued that sometimes negative emotional
reactions engendered by interpersonal transgressions are transformed into a more enduring state
of unforgivingness. Unforgivingness is an emotionally complex state, which involves enduring
negative affects such as resentment, bitterness, hostility, hatred, residual anger, fearfulness, and
depression (cf. Berry et al., 2005). In this line of reasoning, persisting thoughts or rumination
about the transgression and its consequences and the inability to down-regulate those negative
affects may cultivate unforgivingness (Berry et al., 2001; McCullough et al., 2001). Although it is
not possible to draw conclusions about the direction of the effects given the cross-sectional nature
of the study, it seems plausible that self-regulatory abilities such as AOF might help the
individual to leave a negative emotional state and to become more willing to forgive. Indeed,
studies have shown that AOF might buffer effects of stressful life events (Baumann et al., 2005;
Kuhl, 2000).

The second objective of this research was to examine action orientation as a potential
mediator of the neuroticism-forgivingness relationship. First, replicating prior findings (cf. Mullet
et al., 2005) we found a significant and negative association between neuroticism and
forgivingness. This suggests that people who are sensitive for negative experiences such as
interpersonal transgressions are less prone to forgive others than emotional stable and well-
adjusted individuals (Allemand et al., 2008; Berry et al., 2005; Brose et al., 2005). Second,
consistent with previous research (Dieffendorff et al., 2000; Kuhl & Beckmann, 1994),
neuroticism was negatively related to action orientation, indicating that individuals who were
more neurotic tended to be less action-oriented. A closer look at the action orientation subscales shows that neuroticism was less strongly related to AOD than AOF, which was also reported by Dieffendorff et al. (2000).

In support of our second hypothesis, AOF fully mediates the relationship between neuroticism and forgivingness. It appears that the extent to which neuroticism is related to forgivingness may be explained by individual differences in the ability to down-regulate negative affect and to disengage from thoughts about negative events. As noted, neuroticism indicates a tendency to experience negative states, whereas action orientation, in particular AOF, refers to the ability to volitionally regulate negative states (cf. Baumann & Kuhl, 2002). Consequently, the present results suggests that it is not primarily the sensitivity for negative experiences or states that hinders forgivingness, but the way people generally deal with these experiences and their self-regulatory abilities. Therefore, interpersonal stressors, which produce more negative emotional reactions and ruminations among people high in neuroticism (Gunthert, Cohen, & Armeli, 1999), might cause neurotic people to be less forgiving because of their inability to volitionally control negative affect and rumination. Although the hypothesis underlying this study implies a causal influence of neuroticism and action orientation on forgivingness, the cross-sectional nature of the study demands caution in the interpretation of the data. Longitudinal studies therefore are critical to examine specific temporal and motivational aspects of forgiveness (cf. McCullough, Fincham, & Tsang, 2003). Alternatively, experimentally manipulating neuroticism may demonstrate the causal relations. For example, McNiel and Fleeson (2006) manipulated neuroticism and demonstrated that participants reported more negative affect when instructed to act neurotic than when instructed to act stable.

Several limitations should be considered when interpreting the results of this study. First, our study exclusively used self-report questionnaires for data collection. Although self-report
data are useful in forgiveness research, researchers should consider using observer reports and behavioral measures, and experimental manipulations as well in order to enhance the understanding of the forgiveness process (cf. Worthington, 2005). Second, the internal consistency of the AOF was relatively low. Another limitation refers to the undergraduate sample of the present study. Future studies needs to examine relationships among the same variables in individuals with different demographic characteristics (e.g., older adults). In this study, forgivingness and action orientation were examined as trait-like characteristics. One can appreciate that an individual’s forgivingness and action orientation might also vary as a function of contextualized strategies used to achieve life goals and life narratives (cf. Emmons, 2000). As noted earlier, action orientation is a self-regulatory ability in order to accomplish intentional actions. Similarly, forgiveness may be conceptualized as a regulatory goal-related behavior in order to, e.g., regain individual well-being and maintain goodwill in relationships after interpersonal transgressions. In this line of reasoning, forgiveness may facilitate goal-striving by enabling hurt individuals to disengage from thoughts on painful experiences. Such a goal and context-related approach to forgiveness and action orientation represents a dynamic perspective and a departure from the structural and trait-related approach investigated in this study. Therefore, future research may jointly consider the multi-level nature of personality and forgiveness, and examine their cross-level interrelationships with respect to action orientation.

To conclude, the present findings provide initial support for the relation between individual differences in action orientation and in forgivingness. The results are important from a theoretical perspective because they address the issue why neuroticism may impede forgivingness. The study shows that action orientation is a key mechanism that may explain why neurotic people are less prone to forgive than emotional stable people. Given that the self-regulatory ability of action orientation is strongly related to forgivingness, this may also have important implications for
forgiveness-promoting interventions, thereby helping individuals who wish to reach forgiveness.
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References


Footnotes

1) The construct of trait self-control shows similarities with action orientation. Trait self-control refers to the capacity to change and adapt the self to achieve an optimal fit between self and the environment (e.g., Tangney, Baumeister, & Boone, 2004). However, whereas trait self-control focuses on the suppression and control of immediate self-interested impulses (e.g., “fight fire with fire”), action orientation emphasizes the regulation of affect and attention in order to leave a state of inhibited action caused by enhanced negative (or blocked positive) affect.

2) Although Cronbach’s alpha is usually used for scores which fall along a continuum, it will produce the same results as the Kuder-Richardson 20 coefficient (K-R 20) with dichotomous data. In the present study, the internal consistency for the AOF scale (α = .68) is relatively low, but comparable to previous psychometric studies of the ACS-90 (e.g., Kuhl, 1994b).
### Table 1

*Correlations, Means and Standard Deviations for the Study Variables*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variable</th>
<th>1</th>
<th>2</th>
<th>3</th>
<th>4</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Neuroticism</td>
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<td></td>
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<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Forgivingness</td>
<td>-.31***</td>
<td>—</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>3. AOF</td>
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<td>.50***</td>
<td>—</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. AOD</td>
<td>-.39***</td>
<td>.13⁺</td>
<td>.32***</td>
<td>—</td>
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</table>

Possible range 1-5 1-7 0-12 0-12  

*M*  
2.88 3.45 5.77 6.29  

*SD*  
0.77 1.20 2.66 3.19  

*Note. N = 210; AOF: Failure-related action orientation, AOD: Decision-related action orientation; †p < .06, ***p < .001.*