



# Can a leopard change its spots? The effects of implicit theories of personality on forgiveness via attributions of behavioral stability



Tatiana Iwai<sup>a,\*</sup>, João Vinícius de França Carvalho<sup>b</sup>

<sup>a</sup> *Inspere Institute of Education and Research, Brazil*

<sup>b</sup> *University of São Paulo – FEA/USP, Department of Accounting and Actuarial Sciences, Brazil*

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## ABSTRACT

People differ in their implicit theories about the malleability of key individual attributes. While some people hold the view that traits are fixed (entity theorists), others believe that they can be changed (incremental theorists). As these beliefs set up an interpretive framework for forming impressions and shaping attributions, they may affect victims' responses to interpersonal transgressions. With two studies, we investigate how victims' implicit theories of personality influence forgiveness following a transgression. Using an autobiographical narrative method, Study 1 ( $N = 82$ , college students) shows that having a fixed view of personality is associated with a lower willingness to forgive. In Study 2 ( $N = 181$ , adult workers), using a standardized hypothetical scenario of a transgression, we measure three motivations associated with forgiving: avoidance, revenge, and benevolence. Our results provide evidence that attributions of behavioral stability to the offender play a mediating role in the relationship between implicit theories and forgiveness. Having an incremental view of personality leads to lower attributions of behavioral stability to offenders. Such attributions in turn reduce victims' motivations to avoid offenders and also improve positive feelings toward them. However, stability attributions do not decrease the victims' desires to seek revenge against offenders.

## 1. Introduction

Although we strive to nurture positive, harmonious and collaborative relationships, interpersonal transgressions are commonplace in our everyday life. Broken promises, lies, unfulfilled expectations, violations of rules or social norms are some of the various ways that relationships can be damaged. Once harmed, they need to be repaired. One important step toward healing a relationship is to let go of resentment and vengeful feelings against offenders. That is, to forgive. Forgiveness has been found to yield several benefits to both sides in a relationship: on the victims' side, forgiveness is associated with greater mental and physical health (Hannon, Finkel, Kumashiro, & Rusbult, 2012; Karremans, Van Lange, Ouwerkerk, & Kluwer, 2003; Toussaint & Webb, 2005); on the side of the offenders, it fosters repentance and discourages repeated offenses (Struthers, Eaton, Shirvani, Georghiou, & Edell, 2008; Wallace, Exline, & Baumeister, 2008). Although desirable, not all transgressions are forgiven. While in some cases victims forego the grudge and act prosocially toward perpetrators, in other cases, offenses may start a vicious spiral of conflict, resentment and retaliation. Given the various ways victims may react to transgressions, an interesting question then to be asked is why some people forgive and others

do not.

To address this question, an important stream of research has been taking a cognitive perspective to investigate situational and dispositional factors that may affect how victims interpret the offense and guide their behavior toward the offender (Fehr, Gelfand, & Nag, 2010). At the situational level, research has focused on properties of the transgression context itself, such as transgression severity (Fincham, Jackson, & Beach, 2005; McCullough, Fincham, & Tsang, 2003), relationship closeness (Donovan & Priester, 2017; McCullough et al., 1998), intentions and responsibility attributions of the transgression (Adams & Inesi, 2016; Bradfield & Aquino, 1999; Struthers, Eaton, Santelli, Uchiyama, & Shirvani, 2008), and the use of apologies (Fehr & Gelfand, 2010; Gold & Weiner, 2000; Takaku, 2001). At the dispositional level, prior work has explored how individual differences, such as narcissism (Exline, Baumeister, Bushman, Campbell, & Finkel, 2004), the Big Five factors of personality (McCullough & Hoyt, 2002), and empathic concern (McCullough, Worthington, & Rachal, 1997), predispose victims toward certain interpretations of the transgressions.

Building on this cognitive perspective, we aim to contribute to the ongoing discussion by proposing that willingness to forgive is

\* Corresponding author.

E-mail addresses: [tatianai@insper.edu.br](mailto:tatianai@insper.edu.br) (T. Iwai), [jvfc Carvalho@usp.br](mailto:jvfc Carvalho@usp.br) (J.V.d.F. Carvalho).

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