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2018-10-11

Deposited version:

Post-print

Peer-review status of attached file:

Peer-reviewed

Citation for published item:

Hanke, K. & Vauclair, C.-M. (2016). Investigating the human value "forgiveness" across 30 countries: a cross-cultural meta-analytical approach. *Cross-Cultural Research*. 50 (3), 215-230

Further information on publisher's website:

10.1177/1069397116641085

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This is the author version of a paper published as:

Hanke, K. & Vauclair, C.-M. (2016). Investigating the Human Value “Forgiveness” Across 30 Countries. *Cross-Cultural Research*, 50, 215-230. doi: 10.1177/1069397116641085

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Investigating the Human Value “Forgiveness” across 30 countries: A Cross-Cultural Meta-Analytical Approach

Abstract

The current study focuses on the human value of forgiveness in order to explore its correlates using a country-level meta-analytical approach. We investigated the importance of forgiveness using the Rokeach Value Survey (RVS) with 41,975 participants from 30 countries in order to address following research questions: How important is forgiveness across different countries? What contextual variables correlate with the ranked importance of forgiveness? This study provides important insights on country-level correlates of forgiveness in regard to conditions that may favour prioritizing the value forgiveness and its possible implications for societies. The results show that the value forgiveness is related to a highly developed socio-economic and socio-political environment as well as to subjective well-being at the country-level.

Keywords: forgiveness, values, meta-analytical approach, contextual variables

Investigating the Human Value “Forgiveness” across 30 countries: A Cross-Cultural Meta-Analytical Approach

“How far that little candle throws his beams! So shines a good deed in a weary world.”

(W. Shakespeare)

In times of unrest through a globalizing world, it is timely to investigate processes that may facilitate reconciliation and sustainable peace. One of the processes that captured the attention of scholars across a range of disciplines is forgiveness between peoples and nations (e.g., Oliner, 2005). Forgiveness has intuitive meaning across cultures, especially in the form of interpersonal forgiveness. Rokeach (1973) thought of forgiveness as a human value with universal meaning. There are also other ways to think of forgiveness as well: as a symbolic process involving apology and its acceptance or as an intrapersonal release from holding onto grievance (Langsley, 2005; McCullough, Bono, & Root, 2007; Worthington, 2005). The first assumption and its causal link have been debated and the positive impact of apologies in the public sphere on the willingness to forgive has been questioned (Hornsey & Wohl, 2013). Furthermore, recent research showed that forgiveness has to be regarded as a contextualized dynamic process (Hanke et al., 2013).

This paper presents a meta-analytic approach that examines forgiveness as a human value at the country-level, and details its relationship with contextual variables such as human development and socio-political variables in a society. Such contextual variables, rooted in a society’s socio-economic and political milieu, may well have an impact on the value accorded to forgiveness by a people. This may in turn facilitate reconciliation processes involving entire countries or groups within a society. In the following we review briefly and differentiate various conceptualizations of forgiveness.

Interpersonal conceptions of forgiveness. Everyone has suffered painful periods at some point when they were unjustly harmed by someone. Forgiving the perpetrator or cause of such

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hurtful experiences may allow a person to let go of anger, to restore a damaged relationship, or stop the desire for revenge. The dynamics of interpersonal forgiveness began receiving attention in the literature in the late 1980s (see McCullough, Pargament, & Thoresen, 2000 for a review). Studies have addressed questions such as how forgiveness as a process is able to heal the hurt caused by the harm done, and bring people together again (Fincham, Jackson, & Beach, 2005). This literature generally incorporates an analysis of the benefits and drawbacks of forgiveness in interpersonal settings (for an overview see McCullough et al., 2000). The majority of research has been embedded within the fields of developmental psychology (Enright, & the Human Development Study Group, 1991; Enright & North, 1998) and counselling/clinical psychology (e.g., McCarthy, 2005; McCullough, & Worthington, 1994, 1995; Murray, 2002). For example, forgiveness has been proposed as an intervention method and has been applied in therapeutic settings; an important finding is that studies have shown that forgiveness is positively related to psychological outcome variables such as overall well-being (Karremans, Van Lange, Ouwerkerk, & Kluwer, 2003, McCullough, 2000; Rye, Folck, Heim, Olszewski, & Traina., 2004) and happiness (Maltby, Day, & Barber, 2005) of an individual.

Intergroup forgiveness. When looking at conflicts at a broader scale, such as atrocities committed by nations towards other nations, forgiveness has more recently been identified as a subject for research in the realm of conflict resolution and peace (for an overview see Roe, 2007). Most of the research addressed how forgiveness may function to facilitate peace and reconciliation. Scholars have also explored forgiveness as a process at the societal level after conflicts (Staub, 2005; Staub, & Bar –Tal, 2003; Staub, & Pearlmann, 2001; Wohl, & Branscomb, 2005) and in intractable conflicts using a social identity approach (Hewstone, Cairns, Voci, Hamberger, & Niens, 2006; McLernon, Cairns, Hewstone, & Smith, 2004). Such research has proceeded cautiously in extending concepts that are already complex in their operation at the interpersonal level to the macro-level (e.g., Staub, 2005).

Nonetheless, there is an overall agreement among scholars in the fields of sociology (e.g., Tavuchis, 1991), philosophy (e.g., Govier, 2002), political science (e.g. Amstutz, 2005; Minow, 1998), and quasi-legal institutions like Truth Commissions (e.g. in South Africa, see Tutu, 1999) that forgiveness seems to be a critical element in breaking cycles of counter-violence in post-conflict societies. Furthermore, forgiveness at the societal level may foster the process of *healing* between nations and work towards genuine reconciliation. Hamber (2007) noted that there is a motivation among scholars to research the dynamics of forgiveness in post conflict societies because such work may provide critical insight in developing sustainable peace. This motivation is particularly acute in light of contemporary peace-building processes that have been unable to escape cycles of violence and counter violence, consistently failing to develop long-term stability. Overall, important areas might include the positive relationship between forgiveness and subjective well-being. Furthermore, contextual correlates such as the stability of a society in form of the development of a country may shed some light on the complexity of forgiveness.

The human value “forgiveness”. A useful element in this endeavour is the neglected research on the human value “forgiveness”. McCullough and colleagues (2000) were surprised that not much research has been done with forgiveness as a value, although it could possibly reveal some crucial aspects about forgiveness. According to Rokeach (1973, p. 5) “a value is an enduring belief that a specific mode of conduct or end-state of existence is personally or socially preferable to an opposite or converse mode of conduct or end-state of existence. A value system is an enduring organization of beliefs concerning preferable modes of conduct or end-states of existing along a continuum of relative importance.” Rokeach’s pioneering work on human values inspired very influential subsequent research on values at the individual (e.g., Schwartz, 1992, 1994, 2012) and at the cultural level (e.g., Hofstede, 2001; Inglehart, 1997). Recently, Vauclair and colleagues (2011) conducted a meta-analysis on the Rokeach Value Survey (RVS) in order to replicate Schwartz’ (2006) country-level value structure, yet they did not examine the value forgiveness as such and its

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associations with other contextual variables. In sum, to the best of our knowledge, there is no research attempting to better understand forgiveness as a value priority across countries since McCullough and colleagues (2000) expressed their surprise. Consequently, this study has a rather exploratory character in order to gain an understanding about associations and their possible implications.

Engrained values, either at the personal or at the societal level, can guide peoples’ lives as they represent beliefs about the desirable and not desirable (Rokeach, 1973, Schwartz, 1992). Given that values are “conceptions (...) of the desirable which influences the selection from available modes, means and ends of action” (Kluckholm, 1954, p. 395), they can be seen as the underlying psychological foundations that motivate the expression of behaviours and attitudes at the societal level. According to Schwartz (1994) and Schwartz and Boehnke (2004), the importance and behavioural or attitudinal expression of values are influenced by contextual variables (Feather, 1975; Inglehart, 1997; Rokeach, 1973), including the social and political context.

Therefore, we derived the following research questions for the study: How important is forgiveness across different countries? Is it possible to replicate the relationship found between well-being and forgiveness at the individual at the country-level? How is the importance of the value “forgiveness” related to contextual variables, such as socio-economic and socio-political context variables?

Method

The common procedure was employed for a meta-analysis. A literature search was conducted covering studies that uses the RVS (Rokeach, 1973) since this is one of the most widely used instruments to measure human values across a large period of time and with many different samples around the world (e.g., Allen, Ng, & Wilson, 2002; Feather, 1975). Commonly, the RVS consists of 18 terminal (desirable end-states of existence) and 18 instrumental (preferable modes of conduct) values. The value of “forgiving” is included in the set of instrumental values and is briefly

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described as “Forgiving – willing to pardon others”. Usually, the values are listed alphabetically and the participants are instructed to rank the importance from 1 (most important) to 18 (least important) in each set and a low number indicates high importance.

We used the data on forgiveness from a previous study in which we conducted a meta-analysis on all Rokeach values and examined the structure of Rokeach values at the country-level. The detailed procedure for compiling the data can be found in Vauclair and colleagues (2011). For the current paper, we briefly summarize the main steps. We used the database PsycINFO and searched for articles that covered the period 1967 (year of the publication of the RVS) to March 2006. We used the keywords *Rokeach* and *values* in our search. It resulted in 558 references. We included studies in which participants were at least 16 years, were not delinquent and not mentally or physically disabled. Only studies were included that reported sufficient statistical information (such as the mean, median or rank orders for values). If relevant statistics were not reported in the original article, we contacted the authors and requested the information. Original articles that were not published in English language articles (22 out of 130) were translated by the authors or native speakers.

Three hundred thirty-four independent samples were used for the meta-analysis originating from 168 independent studies. The meta-analysis contains data from 41,975 participants coming from 30 different countries. There was considerable variation regarding the samples sizes ranging from 25 participants (Sweden, number of independent samples =2) to 5,589 participants (Australia; number of independent samples = 68) excluding the USA. However, there were only 4 countries with less than a hundred participants ($M = 61$). The complete list of articles included in the meta-analysis and further statistics on the countries and samples can be obtained from the second author.

We coded the mean or median rank that were reported in the studies. General rank orders were used, if no mean or median rank orders were reported. If the rating procedure was used (10.5% of all samples) instead of the original ranking procedure, we coded the mean rating. Successively,

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all coded information was ranked within each sample ensuring maximal comparability of the data-. After that, sample-size weighted rank-orders were aggregated to the country level. Hence, our analysis is based on 30 countries. Lastly, each coded number was then again rank ordered across groups at the country level.

Subjective Well-being

Country-level data on subjective well-being was obtained from Diener and colleagues (for reliability of these measure and further information see Diener, Diener, & Diener, 1995). The aim was to replicate findings from previous research at the interpersonal level (Karremann et al., 2000; Maltby et al., 2005; Rye et al., 2004).

Contextual variables

As possible socio-political correlate various indices issued by The Polity IV Project (Marshall, Gurr, & Jaggers, 2014) were used: namely, the *Polity index*, *institutionalized autocracy* and *institutionalized democracy* from 1967 to 2006. We performed a factor analysis with the Polity index, institutionalized autocracy and institutionalized democracy scores using Varimax rotation showing a strong single factor solution (Eigenvalue=2.91) which explained 96.92% of the total variance. We then calculated one factor score which is regression-based and represents democracy in a wider sense in the given time frame.

Moreover, we used the Human Development Index (HDI) as provided by the United Nations (UNDP, 2006) from 1975 – 2004 as potential socio-economic correlate. We calculated a factor analysis with Varimax rotation to be used as a single indicator for Human Development across this given time frame. We received a strong single factor solution (Eigenvalue=6.90) explaining 98.57% of the total variance. The HDI provides a single statistical indicator of a country’s level of development that serves as a frame of reference for both social and economic development. The HDI sets a minimum and maximum for life expectancy at birth, educational

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attainment, and Gross National Income per capita. Each of the three indicators then shows where each country stands in relation to these standards (Human Development Report, 2009).

We used these two indicators to correspond to the socio-economical and socio-political context at the country level.

Results

The ranked importance of the human value “forgiving” across countries.

Out of the 18 instrumental values, forgiveness was ranked as the eighth most important value across the 30 countries. Therefore, the value has moderate importance in relation to all other instrumental values. Descriptive statistics are shown in Tables 1 and 2.

Insert Table 1 and 2 about here

Correlations at the country level

For all analyses we used the country scores and the ranks of forgiveness across all countries. The country scores of the indices are listed in Table 3.

Insert Table 3 about here

An alpha level of 5% was used for all statistical tests in this study. Since we had a small sample size (sample size is the number of countries here), we employed Kendall’s tau. Hence, we calculated several rank order correlations (Kendall’s tau) across all countries between the countries’ ranks of forgiveness and subjective well-being (Diener et al., 1995), the overall socio-political indicator and the Human Development index (HDI). The reported correlations are all negative, because of the ranking procedure used in the RVS where a low value indicates high importance (see Table 4), but in fact it shows a positive relationship.

Insert Table 4 about here

We found a moderate but significant correlation between the ranked importance of forgiveness and subjective well-being, $\tau(30) = -.33, p < .01$ at the country level. It shows that the more importance was placed on forgiveness across countries, the higher the scores for subjective well-being were and vice versa. This replicates earlier findings at the individual level (Karremans et al., 2003; Maltby et al., 2005; McCullough, 2000; Rye et al., 2004).

Surprisingly, there was no significant relationship with the socio-political indicator $\tau(29) = -.05, p = .36$. Furthermore, we found a significant relationship between the Human Development indicator and the ranked importance of forgiveness, $\tau(21) = -.37, p < .05$. The more important forgiveness was ranked, the higher the human development in a country and vice versa. Overall, well-being as well as HDI were positively associated with the importance of the value of forgiveness. However, after controlling for the socio-economic context via HDI, the correlation between well-being and forgiveness became insignificant. This means the level of development is driving the correlation between well-being and forgiveness which is an interesting discovery.

Discussion

The aim of this study was to explore the relationship between the ranked importance of the value forgiveness across countries and contextual variables at the country level, such as country-level subjective well-being as well as socio-economic and socio-political context variables.

Our findings demonstrated that forgiveness is positively associated with subjective well-being at the country level. This result was somewhat anticipated as it is a replication of results found at the individual level (Karremans et al., 2003; Maltby et al., 2005; McCullough, 2000; Rye et al., 2004). This finding is highly encouraging since it shows the potential benefits of forgiveness at the country level. Whereas previous research only examined the positive benefits of forgiveness at

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the individual level, our analysis showed that forgiveness is associated with positive effects across cultural contexts. Of course, the direction of causality in these effects cannot be ascertained using correlational methods, but it shows that the more forgiveness is valued, the higher well-being is at the country level. Previous research (Hanke & Fischer, 2012) in another multilevel meta-analysis has examined country-level indicators as predictors of interpersonal forgiveness. One predictor that stood out was postmaterialism (Inglehart, 1997) and predicted interpersonal forgiveness over and above socio-economic and other context variable pointing to the explanation that “Forgiveness can thrive within a society if political and economic needs are met, and the values of citizens shift toward postmaterialistic ...” (Hanke & Fischer, 2012, p. 10). Hence, it could be argued that an underlying shift to postmaterialistic values driven by the basic fulfilment of needs as assessed by the HDI may have an actual impact on the importance of forgiveness in a society which then in turn may lead to higher well-being, but it seems also plausible that the underlying value shift leads to higher well-being which then in turn may lead to higher importance of forgiveness. Thus, we are talking about a possible mechanism which we unfortunately cannot test with our data, but based on previous research, this avenue may be a possibility that socio-economic development is a driving force.

Along these lines we can further think about the possibility that in order to develop a sense of forgiveness and to value forgiveness as important, there needs to be some stability in society (in form of economic stability) and a certain level of development. In post-conflict societies there is a heightened need for safety (Staub, 2004) which then reduces the likelihood of endorsing and developing a sense of forgiveness. Forgiveness as a central value (being a part of more postmaterialistic values) within a country could well foster cooperation and increase the economic and developmental vitality across societies, which would suggest forgiveness as a possible engine of the social stability in a society. Therefore, this meta-analytical approach complements the findings from previous individual-level research.

One limitation of the current analysis is that we had to derive our country level indicators across multiple time points and diverse samples. We therefore then used contextual variables that also captured a larger time period. However, by doing this we might have missed particular temporal patterns. This goes beyond this study, but future research could look more deeply into temporal patterns, if there is enough data that allows such an analysis. The nature of the data (ranked data) and the level of the data (country-level) restricts the ways we can employ statistical techniques. Consequently, we were not able to go beyond correlations, since the country-level sample size was simply too small. Future research should employ a multilevel approach in which it is possible to predict individual level variation with country-level indicators. Nevertheless, the complementary nature of the findings indicates validity of this approach. Moreover, we need to further investigate the causality of relations found between forgiveness and socio-economic variables and possible time pattern. Future research might find stronger effects when employing more accurate and sensitive indicators of forgiveness.

One surprising finding emerged out of our meta-analysis where the importance of forgiveness as a value is not meaningfully associated with socio-political indicator. This suggests that other factors have an impact on the importance on the value forgiveness. Context variables such as the economic vitality which provides a safe environment free from survival fears as well as the level of human development which goes further than sole economic development might have an influence on the importance of forgiveness. It is possible that the human development index actually taps into basic needs fulfilment, such as health, education and financial security. Furthermore, our results suggest that forgiveness might have need a certain level of stability within a society in order to grow. As already pointed out, this overlaps with a recent meta-analysis looking at the Enright Forgiveness Inventory (EFI; Hanke & Fischer, 2013) assessing forgiveness at individual level and testing prediction using contextual predictor variables in which it was shown that postmodernism was a strong positive predictor of forgiveness at the individual level.

Conclusion

Individuals do not exist in a vacuum. The social context and the culture individuals are embedded in have an impact on them (Power, 2004). We have to carefully consider the contextual background which can stimulate the prioritization of forgiveness. In order to facilitate forgiveness, we have to know how different cultures perceive and value forgiveness. This paper sheds some light on how the value forgiveness is related to complex contextual variables and how it is perceived across 30 countries. It is of moderate importance in comparison to the other values that were ranked. The more important forgiveness was ranked, the greater the subjective well-being in society. However, this relationship disappeared after controlling for human development. Furthermore, we provide some evidence that economic and human development representing stability within a country is associated with the ranked importance of forgiveness. Previous research was more focused on psychological variables such as empathy, perspective-taking or contact in a social psychological framework when examining processes of forgiveness at the intergroup level (e.g. Hewstone et al., 2006). However, contextual variables at the macro-level need more consideration. This study addresses questions about contextual variables and their associations with the importance of forgiveness across different countries. In order to value forgiveness as important it may be necessary to live in a societal context that fulfils basic needs. In order for forgiveness to thrive, probably a secure and stable environment is needed as a foundation.

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Table 1

Mean rank and rank order for forgiveness across all countries and across all instrumental values

Instrumental values (desirable mode of conduct)	Mean rank	Rank order
Honest (sincere, truthful)	3.26	1
Responsible (dependable, reliable)	4.07	2
Loving (affectionate, tender)	7.43	3
Broadminded (open-minded)	7.74	4
Independent (self-reliant, self-sufficient)	8.21	5
Courageous (standing up for your beliefs)	8.68	6
Capable (competent, effective)	8.79	7
Forgiving (willing to pardon others)	8.85	8
Intellectual (intelligent, reflective)	9.24	9
Self-controlled (restrained, self-disciplined)	9.43	10
Helpful (working for the welfare of others)	9.63	11
Ambitious (hard-working, aspiring)	9.90	12
Cheerful (lighthearted, joyful)	10.19	13
Clean (neat, tidy)	11.69	14
Polite (courteous, well-mannered)	11.75	15
Logical (consistent, rational)	12.60	16
Imaginative (daring, creative)	14.64	17
Obedient (dutiful, respectful)	14.90	18

1 (most important) to 18 (least important)

Table 2

List of countries and the ranks for the human value “Forgiveness” within and across the countries

Country	Aggregated mean rank within a country‡	Aggregated mean rank across all countries †
Egypt	1.0	1.0
Ukraine	3.0	3.5
Vietnam	3.0	3.5
United States	4.0	6.0
Australia	5.0	9.0
Japan	5.0	9.0
Sweden	5.0	9.0
New Zealand	6.0	11.0
Finland	7.0	13.5
Mexico	7.0	13.5
Papua New Guinea	7.0	13.5
Singapore	7.0	13.5
Brazil	8.0	17.5
Germany	8.0	17.5
Malaysia	8.0	17.5
Romania	8.0	17.5
Jordan	10.0	22.0
South Africa	10.0	22.0
United Kingdom	10.0	22.0
China, Hong Kong	12.0	25.5
Spain	12.0	25.5
Taiwan	12.0	25.5
Bangladesh	12.5	28.0
Canada	13.0	30.0
Turkey	13.0	30.0
China	14.0	32.0
Poland	15.0	33.0
Chile	16.0	34.5
India	16.0	34.5
Israel	17.0	36.0
$\Sigma = 30$	M	
	8.84	

NOTE:

‡ = aggregated and sample-size weighted mean ranks, a low value indicates high ranked importance

† = mean ranks were computed using tied ranks

Table 3

Country scores for Subjective well-being (SWB), Socio-Political Indicator (SPI), Human Development Index (HDI)

Country	SWB	SPI	HDI
Australia	1.02	.86	.95
Bangladesh	-.29	-.45	-2.30
Brazil	.57	-.32	-.28
Canada	.97	.86	-
Chile	.13	-.24	.16
China	-1.92	-1.61	-.83
China, Hong Kong	-	-	.62
Egypt	-.78	-1.42	-1.30
Finland	.74	.86	.92
Germany	.18	.86	-
India	-1.13	.65	-1.74
Israel	-.18	.75	.72
Japan	-.86	.86	.99
Jordan	-.77	-1.47	-
Malaysia	.08	.02	-.29
Mexico	-.28	-.56	.07
New Zealand	.82	.86	.84
Papua New Guinea	-	.07	-1.96
Poland	-.90	-.55	-
Romania	-	-.72	-
Singapore	.43	-.83	-
South Africa	-.63	.25	-.52
Spain	-.41	.32	.87
Sweden	1.03	.86	.99
Taiwan	-	-.65	-
Turkey	-1.02	.36	-.59
Ukraine	-	.38	-
United Kingdom	.69	.86	.90
United States	.91	.86	1.01
Vietnam	-	-1.57	-

Table 4

Intercorrelation-Matrix between “Forgiving” and subjective well-being (SWB), socio-political indicator (SPI - Polity, Autocracy, Democracy), and Human Development indicator (HDI)

Indicator	1	2	3
1. Rank of “Forgiving”	--		
2. SWB	-.37*	--	
3. SPI	-.19	.33*	--
4. HDI	-.38**	.41**	.55***

* $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$, *** $p < .001$