

## **Resentment, Forgiveness and Revenge Among Violent People Incarcerated for Property Offenses**

Ana Cristina Menezes Fonseca\*

*University of Oporto, Oporto, Portugal*

The present study was conducted among incarcerated people who had committed property offenses using more or less violent means. Using a simulation technique derived from Information Integration Theory, it examined the relationship between lasting resentment, willingness to forgive and willingness to avenge on the one hand, and level of violence (severity of the harm done) on the other hand. In the simulation, two adults work in the same company. One worker asks for a promotion, and the other worker tries to block his advancement by circulating rumors. The variables considered in the simulation are the offender's reaction and the type of response. The reaction factor has five levels: the offender (a) denies implication and joke about the victim's misfortune, (b) recognizes that he circulated rumors but try to self-justify, (c) recognizes that he circulated rumors and apologizes, (d) recognizes, apologizes, and try to repair his fault by informing the head of the company, and (e) recognizes, apologizes, and try to repair his fault by informing the head of the company who severely punishes him. The response factor had four levels. Participants were requested to express a level of (a) resentment/anger, (b) willingness to forgive, (c) willingness to avenge in circumstances where revenge would be riskless for them, and (d) willingness to avenge in circumstances where revenge would be risky for them. As expected, more violent offenders did not differ much from other offenders regarding the level of immediate resentment they experience just after having been harmed but they differed from them in the management of this emotion. Among them, resentment would be more directly converted into willingness to avenge, irrespective of the associated risk that is incurred.

Interpersonal and social relationships are fraught with conflicts and disagreements. If all these disagreements had to be resolved using procedures that are similar to the justice system's ones, social life would be intolerably cumbersome (Ttofy & Farington, 2008). If they had to be "resolved" using retaliation procedures, social life would be perilous. It is

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\* Correspondence to Dr. Menezes Fonseca, e-mail: [acmenezesfonseca@hotmail.com](mailto:acmenezesfonseca@hotmail.com)

the apology-forgiveness cycle that gives interpersonal and social interactions possible existence and possible future (Gibney, Howard-Hassmann, Coicaud, & Steiner, 2008).

Previous studies conducted in the field of aggression have shown that inappropriate reactions to provocations are a major determinant of violent aggression (Bushman & Anderson, 1998). Caprara, Gargano, Pastorelli, and Prezza (1987) have shown that hostile rumination and irritability are predictors of aggressive responses towards a confederate. Richardson, Green, and Lago (1998) and Giancola (2003) have found an association between perspective-taking abilities and empathy for others, and the capacity to successfully manage aggressive provocation. Jolliffe and Farrow (2004) have concluded that the relationship between low empathy and offending was especially strong among violent offenders. Eaton and Struthers (2006) have shown that forgiveness of a specific offense reduces aggression. Finally, Butler and Maruna (2009) have suggested that prisoners may engage in violence as a reaction to perceived lack of respect towards themselves.

### **Forgiveness and aggression among homicide offenders**

Menezes Fonseca, Neto and Mullet (2012) have explored the relationship between dispositional forgiveness and violent aggression. Their main hypothesis was that if it is true that dispositional forgiveness eases social interactions, then people who have been tried, condemned and incarcerated for extremely violent acts should have considerably lower forgiving dispositions than people who have never been incarcerated. Crime statistics show that homicides very frequently take place among people who were closely related; that is, people who have had meaningful relationships previous to the killing, and the desire for revenge is often cited as the main motive to kill by a substantial proportion of offenders (McCullough, Kurzban, & Tabak, 2011).

Menezes Fonseca et al. (2012) compared dispositional forgiveness between people having been convicted for homicide and a control group. They showed that homicide offenders reported (a) stronger (lasting) resentment towards others when they have been harmed, (b) lower ability to seek forgiveness when they have harmed someone else, (c) lower capacity to unconditionally forgive others, and (d) stronger tendencies to consider that forgiveness is an immoral behavior. In addition, the participants' relatively higher level of aggressiveness did not fully explain the observed differences, except in the case of immoral behavior.

These findings suggest that the participants who committed homicide did not do so simply because they suffered from strong aggressive tendencies but also partly because previous circumstances may have produced in them strong, lasting resentment that they were poorly equipped to successfully manage. These findings were considered as being consistent with previous findings (Butler & Maruna, 2009; Caprara *et al.* 1987; Eaton & Struthers, 2006; Giancola, 2003; Jolliffe & Farrington, 2004; Richardson, Green, & Lago, 1998).

### **The present study**

The present study was conducted among incarcerated people who had committed property offenses using more or less violent means. It examined further the relationship between lasting resentment, willingness to forgive and willingness to avenge on the one hand, and level of violence (severity of the harm done) on the other hand. It used a kind of approach, which was developed by Girard and Mullet (1997) and refined by Munoz Sastre, Riviere and Mullet (2007). These authors used a simulation technique (Anderson, 2008) in which participants were presented with concrete situations, and were requested to express, in each situation, a level of willingness to forgive or to avenge. By systematically varying the levels of various characteristics of the situation (e.g., whether harm was intentional or not), these authors were able to delineate what they called the forgiveness schema of each participants. This simulation technique has also been successfully implemented in post conflict situations as the one in post-war Lebanon (Azar, Mullet & Vinsonneau, 1999), and post-war Kuwait (Ahmed, Azar & Mullet, 2007).

In the present project, the situation that has been chosen is one in which two adults work in the same company. One worker asks for a promotion. The other worker tries to block the advancement of the first worker by circulating rumors. The variables considered in the simulation are the offender's reaction, and the type of response that is requested from the participant. The reaction factor has five levels: the offender (a) denies implication and joke about the victim's misfortune, (b) recognizes that he circulated rumors but try to self-justify, (c) recognizes that he circulated rumors and apologizes, (d) recognizes, apologizes, and try to repair his fault by informing the head of the company, and (e) recognizes, apologizes, and try to repair his fault by informing the head of the company who severely punishes him.

The response factor has four levels. In each case, the participants were requested to put themselves in the victim's shoes. In the first condition,

participants were requested to express a level of resentment/anger. In a second situation, they were requested to express a level of willingness to forgive. In a third situation, they were requested to express a level of willingness to avenge in circumstances where revenge would be riskless for them. Finally, in a fourth situation, they were requested to express a level of willingness to avenge in circumstances where revenge would be risky for them.

The main hypothesis was that, among incarcerated participants who had been given heavy sentences because they have used violent means, (a) the level of anticipated resentment would not be very different, (b) willingness to forgive would be lower, and (c) willingness to avenge would be higher than among participants who had been given relatively light sentences.

## METHOD

**Participants.** The participants were 54 male adults incarcerated in several prisons in Portugal. They were all property offenders, and the severity of their sentences ranged from 17 to 216 months. Their mean age was 38 years ( $SD = 10.05$ ). The mean duration of incarceration was 31 months.

**Material.** The material consisted of 20 cards containing a vignette of a few lines, a question, and a response scale. The vignettes were composed according to a two within-subject factor design: the aggressor's subsequent behavior x the victim's possible reaction, 5 x 4. An example of vignette was the following: "Paulo and Marco are both mechanics in a big garage downtown. Paulo has been employed in the garage for 15 years. His boss is about to promote him to a better paid responsibility position. Marco, who is jealous of Paulo, circulated a rumor according to which Paulo was used to rob material and sell it on the black market. The rumor has come to the boss' ears, and as a result, the boss decided not to promote Paulo. Paulo subsequently became aware that the rumor was Marco's initiative. Marco acknowledged his responsibility. He apologized to Paulo, and recognized that he had made a big mistake. Later, Paulo was offered an opportunity to avenge, without any risk of being discovered".

Under each vignette were a question and a response scale. In the example above, the question was, "If you were Paulo, to what extent do you think you would avenge in this case?" The response scale was an 11-point scale with a left-hand anchor of "Certainly Not" (0) and a right-hand anchor

of "Certainly" (10). The three other scales were about (a) the level of resentment the participant would experience in each case, (b) the participant's willingness to forgive in each case, and (c) the participant's willingness to avenge if it was risky to do so. The cards were arranged by chance and in a different order for each participant.

The participants answered additional questions about age, gender, educational level, religious belief, and religious background. Strict anonymity was respected.

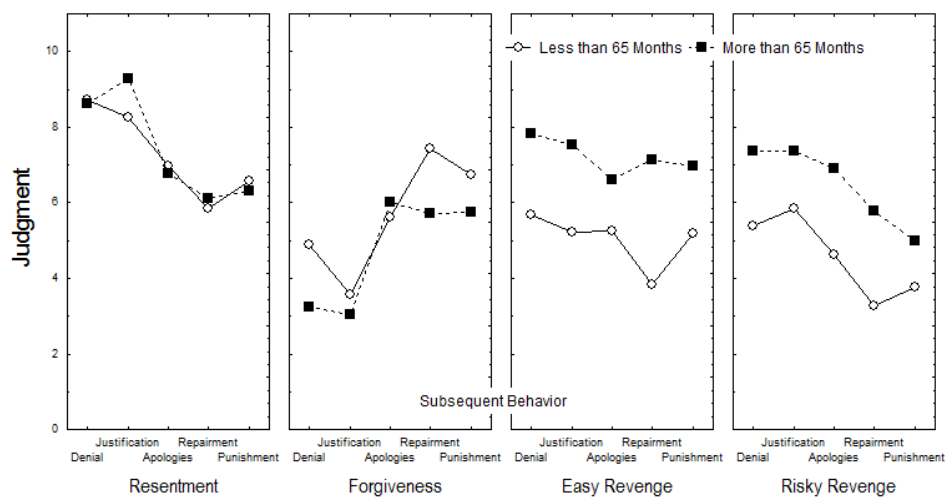
**Procedure.** The data were gathered in 2013. The site was the receiving room of the prison. Each person was tested individually. The session had two phases (Anderson, 1982), and in both phases, the experimenter made certain that each subject, regardless of age or educational level, was able to grasp all the necessary information before making a rating. In the first, familiarization phase, the experimenter explained what was expected and presented each participant with 10 vignettes taken from the complete set. For each vignette, the participant read it out loud, was reminded by the experimenter of the items of information in the story, and then made a rating by putting a mark on the response scale. After completing the 10 ratings, the participant was allowed to look back at his or her responses and to compare and change them. In the second, experimental phase, each participant gave ratings for the whole set of 20 vignettes, working at his or her own pace, but was no longer allowed to look back at and change previous responses. The participants took 25-50 minutes to complete both phases.

## RESULTS

An ANOVA was conducted on the raw data. The design was Severity of the sentence x Offender's subsequent behavior x Victim's possible response, 2 x 5 x 4. Severity was a between-subject factor, with two levels (more than 65-month of incarceration sentence vs. less than 65 months). As expected, the Severity x Victim's response interaction was significant,  $F(3,156) = 2.96$ ,  $p < .05$ . Main findings are shown in Figure 1. Four separate ANOVAs were then conducted, one for each type of response.

Regarding the expressed level of resentment that would be experienced, the difference between the two groups was minimal and non significant. Regarding willingness to forgive, the difference between the two groups was significant. Participants who had been given relatively light sentences were more willing to forgive ( $M = 4.65$ ) than participants who

had been given heavy sentences ( $M = 3.75$ ). Regarding willingness to avenge, the difference between the two groups was, in both conditions (easy and risky revenge), also significant. Participants who had been given relatively light sentences were much less willing to avenge ( $M = 3.81$ ) than participants who had been given heavy sentences ( $M = 5.85$ ),  $F(1,52) = 4.27, p < .05$ .



**Figure 1. Mean ratings observed as a function of type of property offender (more violent vs. less violent), aggressor's reaction (denial, justification, apologies, apologies and repairing, punishment), and emotional response (resentment, forgiveness, and revenge).**

## DISCUSSION

The hypothesized pattern of results was found. More violent offenders did not differ much from less violent offenders regarding the level of immediate resentment they would experience just after having been harmed but they differed from them regarding the management of this emotion. In other words, among violent offenders, the strong emotion (resentment and anger) that is (naturally) experienced after having been the victim of damage would be directly converted into willingness to avenge, irrespective of the risk that is incurred. In contrast, among less violent offenders, the

strong emotion that is experienced after having been the victim of damage would not be directly converted into willingness to avenge. This emotion would be processed as a function of the circumstances of the event (notably the deterrence factor), and, in some case, the process would even convert it into willingness to forgive.

As a result, therapies that have been explicitly created to help people manage resentment could be considered. Freedman, Enright, and Knutson (2005) showed that forgiveness can be learned. Therapeutic approaches based on forgiveness have been applied to persons experiencing trouble to forgive others, and they have been validated using stringent criteria. They could be introduced in treatment programs designed for violent offenders as complements to the approaches that already address related constructs such as anger, lack of empathy and lack of compassion (e.g., Serin, Gobeil, & Preston, 2009).

### **Limitations**

Our study has limitations. First, our sample was of modest size and was a convenience sample. Generalizations of our findings to other groups must be made with caution, and further studies including various groups of incarcerated people (e.g., homicides) need to be done. Second, the two groups have been composed as a function of severity of sentence. They possibly differed the one from the other regarding others characteristics that can have impacted on their responses, as for example the degree to which participants considered their sentence was fair. Future studies should control for possible confounding.

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