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Agreeableness and interpersonal forgiveness in young adults: the moderating role of gender

Agradabilidad y perdón interpersonal en adultos jóvenes: el papel moderador del género

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Abstract

Interest in psychological correlates and personality substrates of forgiveness has been growing recently. Empirical evidences have suggested that agreeableness may be the most robust predictor of forgiveness and revenge. This article examined gender differences in the relationship between this dispositional quality and interpersonal forgiveness in a sample of young adults. This study also tested the role of gender as a potential moderating factor between dispositional traits and forgiveness dimensions. While no gender differences were found in agreeableness in our sample, females scored lower in motivation to avoid while males scored higher in motivation to revenge. Results also indicated that agreeableness was significantly associated with motivations to avoid (only in males) and seek revenge (for both genders). Finally, gender also moderated the association between agreeableness and motivation to revenge. Our findings are discussed in terms of the need for future research to consider these differences in further positive psychology intervention programs. *Key words:* Agreeableness, Gender, Revenge, Avoidance, Forgiveness.

Resumen

El interés por los correlatos psicológicos y los factores de personalidad subyacentes a la capacidad de perdonar ha crecido recientemente. La evidencia empírica sugiere que la agradabilidad podría ser el predictor más robusto del perdón y la venganza. Este estudio examina las diferencias de género en la relación entre esta cualidad disposicional y el perdón en una muestra de adultos jóvenes. También se comprobó el papel del género como moderador entre agradabilidad y perdón. Aunque no se encontraron diferencias de género en agradabilidad, las mujeres puntuaron menos en evitación mientras los hombres puntuaron más en venganza. Los resultados también indicaron que la agradabilidad se relacionó significativamente con motivación a la evitación (en hombres) y motivación a la venganza (para ambos sexos). Finalmente, el género moderó la asociación entre agradabilidad y motivación a la venganza. Se discute la necesidad de considerar estas diferencias en futuros programas de intervención en psicología positiva.

Palabras clave: Agradabilidad, género, venganza, evitación, perdón.

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Introduction

Human relationships hang on mutual expectations about one another's behaviour, based on shared understandings of the rules of friendship (Forgas & Fitness, 2008). The forgiveness process is an integral response that allows the restoration of a relationship, and is a fundamental tool in the maintenance of satisfying and long term relationships (McCullough, 2001). This process results, at least initially, in decreased motivation for revenge and avoidance of a transgressor, and requires the release of negative emotions towards the transgressor so that the probability of restoring a harmonious and positive interpersonal relations with them is increased. In short, forgiveness is defined as a complex of pro-social changes in the motivation to avoid or to seek revenge against a transgressor (McCullough, Worthington & Rachal, 1997).

Dispositional traits are considered to impact forgiveness by shaping the way a person interprets their perceptions of the transgressor, experienced betrayals and the quality of the relationship (McCullough & Hoyt, 2002). Earlier research has found that a disposition to forgive is related most strongly to two specific higher-order dimensions of the five-factor personality domains: agreeableness and neuroticism (McCullough, 2001; Mullet, Neto & Rivière, 2005). Cumulative meta-analytic evidence suggests that agreeableness may be the most robust predictor of forgiveness (Riek & Mania, 2012) and interpersonal conflict (Bettencourt, Talley, Benjamin & Valentine 2006; Jensen-Campbell & Graziano, 2001), existing less empirical consensus with neuroticism. People who are low in agreeableness are antagonistic, hostile, irritable, and mistrustful of others; they also seem to have a need to punish people that they perceive to have provoked them, which might contribute to a lower dispositional tendency to forgive others (Lee & Ashton, 2012) and higher levels of interpersonal conflict (Jensen-Campbell, Gleason, Adams & Malcolm, 2003). McCullough (2001) have underlined that agreeableness is particularly important for forgiveness because it influences and is influenced by the person's affiliative and attachment needs. In general, agreeable individuals tend to maintain more positive interpersonal relations and report less social conflict and retaliation (Jensen-Campbell *et al.*, 2003; Lee & Ashton, 2012).

Gender differences in personality traits have consistently been reported in the research literature, with females typically reported as having higher levels of agreeableness, from low

to moderate magnitude, than males (Chapman, Duberstein, Sorensen & Lyness, 2007; McCrae, Terracciano, *et al.*, 2005). In addition, a large cross-cultural study across 55 cultures revealed that Spanish females are higher in agreeableness (Schmitt, Realo, Voracek & Allik, 2008). Similarly, a recent meta-analysis on gender and forgiveness has demonstrated that males report seeking vengeance following a transgression more often than females, with the larger gender differences compared to any other forgiveness-related measure (Miller, Worthington & McDaniel, 2008). To explain this gender difference in forgiveness, some theories have emphasized that males are more oriented toward justice-seeking while females desire to preserve relationships, which may encourage females to forgive more rather than seeking justice (i.e. revenge seeking behaviour) compared to males (Gilligan, 1994); while males are more oriented toward a justice-based morality in response to transgressions, emphasizing fighting, vengeance, or justice itself (Kohlberg, 1984).

It is plausible that although a willingness to forgive might be influenced largely by gendered behavioural norms, and oriented toward justice-seeking in males (Kohlberg, 1984), particular positive dispositional qualities might play a differential role in forgiving others, and be especially stronger in males, who are more vengeful (Miller *et al.*, 2008). Although there is evidence suggestive of gender differences in agreeableness and transgression-related dimensions, it has been paid surprisingly little attention, with gender variable typically used as control variables in forgiveness research (Miller *et al.*, 2008). Therefore, given the possibility that scores in agreeableness in males and females influence feelings of forgiveness differently, exploring whether this relationship varies by gender will enable us to gain new insight into the pathways through which personality dimensions influence forgiveness. Thus, we thought there might be gender differences in the correlations between agreeableness and the transgression-related interpersonal motivations in addition to the mean gender differences. Since the strongest and most reliable finding is that males are typically found to be more vengeful than females, beyond gendered behavioural norms, it seems reasonable that this finding may be explained by differential associations between dispositional qualities in males and females, such as agreeableness, because deficits in this dimension is associated with transgression-related variables.

The purpose of this study was to address these concerns. Specifically, our aim was to shed light on this issue by studying the association between dispositional qualities and transgression-related interpersonal motivations among males

and females. This study also tested the role of gender as a possible moderating factor between dispositional traits and forgiveness dimensions. In accordance with the literature mentioned above, we first conducted analyses to replicate gender differences in personality traits and forgiveness; thus, since the association between personality and forgiveness may differ for males and females, we tested the relationship between personality traits and dispositional forgiveness in correlational gender-specific analyses, examining the magnitude of the associations for females and males.

Based on previous research, we predicted that scores for dispositional traits, in particular agreeableness, the Big Five dimension that accounts for the largest amount of variance in transgression-related variables and interpersonal conflict in prior research, would be stronger associated with transgression-related interpersonal motivations. Although it is probable that some other dimensions of personality may be associated with interpersonal forgiveness (McCullough, 2001; Mullet *et al.*, 2005), the personality dimension of agreeableness may be especially important for understanding interpersonal forgiveness. Therefore, for the sake of completeness, we measured all five dimensions of personality to explore possible relations. However, since agreeableness deals with motives for maintaining positive relations with others, we hypothesize that agreeableness will most closely be associated with people's dispositions toward avoidance and revenge. Low agreeable people are expected to show high levels of both vengefulness and avoid motivations compared to their high agreeable counterparts. Likewise, given previous research on gender differences in personality traits and transgression-related dimensions, we hypothesized females would score higher in agreeableness, whereas males scored higher on revenge and avoid motivations. Besides, we expect that, in accordance with the body of research in gender differences in personality and transgression-related variables, the association between these agreeableness and basic motivations to seek revenge and avoid contact with the offender will vary in magnitude according to gender, with stronger associations in males than females. Finally, as an exploratory analysis, we considered whether gender would moderate the associations between agreeableness and interpersonal forgiveness dimensions.

Method

Participants and Procedure

Participants

Five hundred and forty undergraduate students (214 male and 326 female; $M_{age}=22.72$ years, $SD=6.15$) at a university in south Spain participated in this study. All participants were enrolled in an introductory psychology course and earned course credit for taking part in the study. All subjects were informed that they would be asked to participate in a research study on personality and emotions. The questionnaires were completed in class under the supervision of one of several research assistants. Twelve participants were excluded from further analyses because they failed to complete all instruments. Hence, the responses provided by the remaining 528 participants were used.

Materials

Big Five Inventory-44 (BFI-44; Benet-Martinez & John, 1998).

The BFI-44 is self-report inventory designed to assess the Big Five Factors of personality: Extraversion, Agreeableness, Conscientiousness, Neuroticism, and Openness to Experience. The BFI-44 scales have shown substantial internal consistency, retest reliability and clear factor structure, as well as considerable convergent and discriminant validity with longer Big Five measures. We used the Spanish version of BFI-44 which has similar psychometric properties to the English version (Benet-Martinez & John, 1998). Cronbach's alpha in this study was .84 for Extraversion; .62 for Agreeableness; .78 for Conscientiousness; .80 for Neuroticism; and .78 for Openness.

Transgression-Related Interpersonal Motivations scale (TRIM-12; McCullough *et al.*, 1998).

Interpersonal forgiveness was measured with the TRIM-12 which consists of two subscales: avoidance and revenge motivations. The seven-item motivation to avoid subscale measures the degree to which the offended party intends to reduce contact with the transgressor. The five-item motivation to revenge subscale measures the degree to which the offended party intends to seek revenge on the transgressor. All items were measured on 5-point scales. The TRIM-12 has showed good levels of reliability in Spanish populations (Rey & Extremera, 2014) In this study, Cronbach's alpha for avoidance and revenge motivations was .86 and .82, respectively.

Results

Gender differences on agreeableness and interpersonal forgiveness dimensions

Univariate differences were tested by means of one-way Analysis of Variance (ANOVA). To provide an estimate of the magnitude of differences by gender, we calculated effect size, reported as Cohen's *d* (Cohen, 1988). The results are presented in Table 1. Gender differences were found, with females reporting higher scores for motivation to avoid while males showed greater motivation to revenge. With respect to agreeableness, in our study, no significant differences were found. Regarding the other four personality traits, females scored significantly higher for conscientiousness; while males showed higher scores for openness than females did. Finally, no significant gender differences were found for extraversion.

Descriptive analyses

Intercorrelations for all study measures, for the total sample, and for females and males are presented in Table 2. We used the Fisher *r*-to-*z* transformation to assess gender difference in the strength of these correlations. As the table shows, agreeableness but also neuroticism were significantly

related in the expected direction for motivation to avoid (in particular for males). Similarly, agreeableness, neuroticism, and conscientiousness were significantly related in the expected direction for motivation to revenge (ranging from $-.25$ to $-.42$), with agreeableness showing the stronger magnitude. For both genders, agreeableness showed the stronger relation with motivation to revenge. Fisher's *Z* coefficients revealed that there were significant gender differences in the strengths of the relationships between motivation to revenge and agreeableness ($z=-2.97$; $p<.01$), neuroticism ($z=2.00$; $p<.01$), and conscientiousness ($z=-1.73$; $p<.05$), showing that the magnitude of the associations were larger for males in each case.

Hierarchical regression analyses

Finally, to test for potential agreeableness-gender interaction, two separate analyses were conducted with motivation to avoid and motivation to revenge as the dependent variables. Age as a co-variable, gender (1=male and 2=female), and the five dimensions of personality were entered on the step one, and the interactions between gender and each of the personality traits following centring procedures were entered in the second step to explore moderating effects

Table 1. *Gender differences in personality traits and transgression-related interpersonal motivations*

	Total Sample N = 528 M (SD)	Female N = 319 M (SD)	Male N = 209 M (SD)	p	d
Motivation to Avoid	3.83 (.84)	3.94(.81)	3.67(.86)	0.001	0.32
Motivation to Revenge	2.19 (.83)	2.06(.71)	2.39(.95)	0.001	0.37
Extraversion	3.52 (.78)	3.50(.78)	3.56 (.80)	0.40	---
Agreeableness	3.81 (.50)	3.82(.48)	3.79(.52)	0.48	---
Conscientiousness	3.41 (.64)	3.47(.62)	3.32(.65)	0.006	0.23
Neuroticism	2.91 (.75)	3.07(.72)	2.66(.74)	0.001	0.56
Openness	3.61 (.60)	3.52(.61)	3.74(.55)	0.001	0.37

Table 2. *Intercorrelations of the variables of interest for total sample, females and males.*

	Motivation to avoid			Motivation to revenge		
	Total Sample N = 528	Female N = 319	Male N = 209	Total Sample N = 528	Female N = 319	Male N = 209
Extraversion	-.03	.00	-.07	-.07	-.01	-.15*
Agreeableness	-.11**	.10	-.15*	-.29**	-.18**	-.42**
Conscientiousness	-.05	-.07	-.08	-.19**	-.10	-.25**
Neuroticism	.12**	.04	.13*	.16**	.14**	.31**
Openness	-.01	.03	-.02	.07	.06	.01

Note: * $p<.05$. ** $p<.01$.

Table 3. *Regression results for the moderating effect of personality traits and gender on transgression-related interpersonal motivations*

Predictor	Motivation to avoid				Motivation to revenge			
	R ²	F	β	ΔR^2	R ²	F	β	ΔR^2
Step 1	.057	4.43		.05**	.18	16.07		.18**
Age			-.11*				-.11**	
Gender			.17**				-.19**	
Extraversion			-.09				-.07	
Agreeableness			-.08				-.58**	
Conscientiousness			.00				-.27**	
Neuroticism			.15				.31**	
Openness			-.01				.12	
Step 2	.060	2.70		.003	.03	11.09		.03**
Gender x Extraversion			.10				.07	
Gender x Agreeableness			-.00				.37*	
Gender x Conscientiousness			-.02				.19	
Gender x Neuroticism			.06				-.02	
Gender x Openness			.12				-.19	

Note: * $p < .05$. ** $p < .01$.

Note: Beta weights from the final step of the regression equation.

(Aiken & West, 1991). The results of these analyses are presented in Table 3.

The first dependent variable we analysed was motivation to avoid. As seen in Table 3, we found that age and gender were significant predictors in the first step. In short, older individuals and females expressed higher motivation to avoid after an interpersonal offense. However, we found neither main nor interaction effects which explained motivation to avoid.

Next, we analysed the motivation to revenge dimension. For this variable, step 1 revealed that gender and age were significant predictors: younger individuals and males reported greater motivation to take revenge on others. The main effects of agreeableness, neuroticism and conscientiousness were significant predictors, with agreeableness showing stronger relation ($\beta = -.58$): lower levels of agreeableness and conscientiousness and higher levels of neuroticism were associated with a greater tendency to seek revenge on others. In step 2, we found a significant increase in variance for a two way interaction effect. In short, gender x agreeableness interaction ($b = .37$; $p = 0.01$) explaining a significant incremental portion of variance in motivation to revenge ($\Delta R^2 = .03$), beyond the variance contributed by the gender, age, and the main effect of others personality dimensions and their interactions with gender.

To illustrate the gender x agreeableness interaction for motivation to revenge, we plotted the regression, following the procedures outlined by Hayes and Matthes (2009). As Figure 1 shows, there was a significant negative relationship between agreeableness and motivation to revenge for males ($b = -.61$ $p < .001$). Similarly, for females, agreeableness also had a negative, albeit, weaker influence on motivation to revenge ($b = -.22$ $p < .05$). Hence, for both females and males, agreeableness was a significant determinant of levels of motivation to revenge. However, the slope for males appeared to be steeper than the slope for females. Males who reported lower scores in agreeableness showed higher motivation to take revenge on others while the slope for females did not vary as much.

Discussion

Over the past few years there has been a growing interest in the psychological correlates and personality substrates of interpersonal conflict and forgiveness, especially within the Big Five personality model. Meta-analytic evidence suggests that deficits in agreeableness may be the most robust predictor of revenge intentions and interpersonal conflict across a variety of situations (Bettencourt, *et al.*,

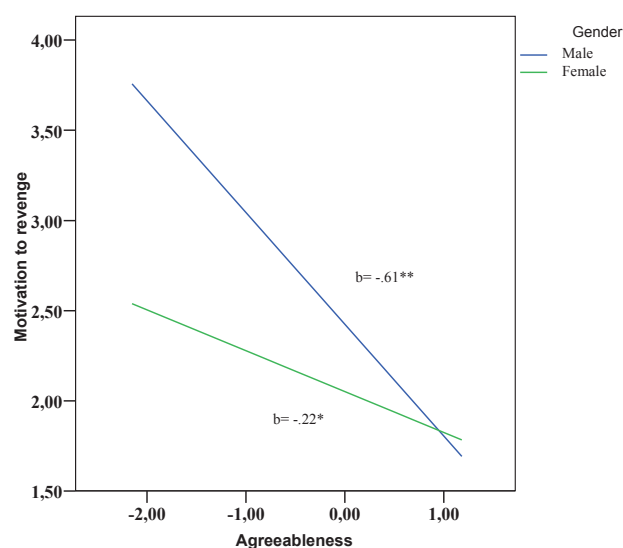


Figure 1. Relationship of agreeableness to motivation to revenge for males and females

Note: * $p < .05$. ** $p < .01$.

2006; Riek & Mania, 2012). Nevertheless, studies into potential gender differences in the association between this dispositional quality and forgiveness have been scarce. Using an undergraduate sample, this article examined gender differences in the relationship between agreeableness and people's dispositions toward avoidance and revenge when they incur transgressions. The magnitude of these relationships were compared for males and females. Our results revealed that males showed significant associations between agreeableness and motivation to avoid. Also, males showed stronger associations between agreeableness and motivation to revenge compared to females. Finally, we found preliminary supportive evidence that gender might moderate the association between agreeableness and motivation to revenge.

Contrary to the findings of previous researchers, no significant gender differences were found in agreeableness in our sample, where earlier studies have found significant differences between males and females. Possible explanations for the lack of difference in agreeableness might be due to the size of the sample or the use of a convenient undergraduate sample. Reported gender differences in the literature have also varied by the specific item content of scales intended to measure the same trait and by the mode of measurement (Stake & Eisele, 2010). Importantly, significant differences were found between males and females for mean levels of motivation to avoid and motivation to revenge. Specifically, females compared to males were

found to show significantly greater motivations to avoid following a transgression. These results suggest that females use more avoidance coping strategies than do males after an interpersonal offense. Although no gender differences in motivation to avoid contact with the offender have been reported in prior work, our results are in line with gender differences in coping, in which females consistently scored higher than males for avoidance coping styles (Matud, 2004). It is possible that, since females define themselves in the context of their relationships (Gilligan, 1994), in the event of a transgression females might adopt a less aggressive position characterized by attempts to distance, deny, apply selective attention, disengage from, and minimize the importance of the interpersonal offense. Clearly, this issue raises question about the role of gender in strategies used towards transgression, and warrants further exploration to examine the specific mechanisms that link differences in coping and forgiveness between males and females. In contrast, males reported a greater tendency to seek revenge than females when responding to a transgression, consistent with robust findings from a meta-analysis review (Miller *et al.*, 2008).

With regard to relationships between agreeableness and transgression-related interpersonal motivations, our findings support our hypothesis by identifying a low-to-moderate negative association between agreeableness and avoid/revenge motivations. Highly agreeable people are found to be more trusting, altruistic, kind, and have a greater tendency to solve social conflict, which should contribute towards a greater dispositional tendency to forgive others (McCullough, 2001). Thus, replicating previous work (Lee & Ashton, 2012), our results suggest that agreeableness is strongly correlated with revenge intentions. This dispositional quality has also consistently been associated with motives to maintain positive interpersonal relationships and, among the Big Five dimensions, was most closely related to emotional responses and positive outcomes during interpersonal conflict (Jensen-Campbell & Graziano, 2001). As suggested by McCullough & Hoyt (2002), it is possible that agreeable individuals report lower revenge responses because they possess a relatively high threshold for provocation, or may restrain impulses towards revenge following a transgression.

When we examined the magnitude of the relationship for gender, none of the dispositional traits were associated with motivation to avoid for females, while agreeableness was significantly associated, in the expected direction, with motivation to avoid for males. With respect to motivation to revenge, analyses showed significant differences between males and females in the magnitude of correlations, with

stronger relationships between agreeableness and motivation to revenge for males than for females. Our study suggests that in people who have suffered an offense, variability in disposition to forgive has a significant association with variability in agreeableness and this seems to vary by gender. It is noteworthy that the magnitude of the correlation between agreeableness and motivation to revenge was moderate for the full sample, females and males. In fact, agreeableness has shown to be the most powerful predictor when dispositional traits are entered simultaneously, as previously demonstrated (Shepherd & Belicki, 2008). Our findings are also consistent with a recent meta-analysis by Riek & Mania (2012) in which agreeableness was more strongly correlated with forgiveness than all assessed dispositional traits, suggesting that it is a particularly relevant determinant of the forgiveness process in terms of personality level.

Extending the previous literature, we also found that agreeableness was the only trait dimension which interacted significantly with gender when all gender x dispositional trait interactions were entered simultaneously, in predicting motivation to revenge. Specifically, while no gender differences were found for agreeableness, our results indicate that there are significant differences in the net of associations between agreeableness and motivation to revenge and how strongly these variables are reported for males and females. It is at the low agreeableness level where the gender difference is the greatest with males showing a higher motivation to revenge compared to females. As levels of agreeableness increased, the tendency to seek revenge after an interpersonal transgression decreased, for both males and females, but more dramatically in males, implying that agreeableness might be more related to motivation to take revenge for males, while it would be less relevant or imply other psycho-social factors than agreeableness, for females.

Drawing from the moral theory (Kohlberg, 1984), one would expect that those who show a greater tendency to seek justice are in a position to take better advantage of having positive personal qualities, which might influence on revenge intention levels. Accordingly, our results suggest that, after an interpersonal transgression, agreeable people would show a higher willingness to develop meaningful, fulfilling, and authentic relationships with others, and thus it is possible that this dimension might mitigate their sense of seeking justice and would help them to forgive others more easily, especially in males who are more vengeful. As a result, if agreeableness influences male and female tendencies to forgive in distinctive ways, positive psychology programmes focused on increasing levels of forgiveness through development of personal qualities may not have a

uniform effect on both females and males. Additional studies are clearly needed to determine the subtle and ongoing interplay of relationships between personal qualities within the five factor model and their interaction with gendered behavioural norms for a better understanding of gender differences in forgiveness. Therefore, an implication of the present findings is that further research should not only focus on the main effect of personality traits and forgiveness, but should also consider the possible mediating/moderating factors in the understanding of the mechanism involved that help to explain individual variations in these relationships. Such research may ultimately suggest that different types of forgiveness intervention, designed to train the ability to forgive others as a partial solution to interpersonal conflict, are required for males and females.

In considering the implications of these findings, attention to the study's limitations is certainly warranted. First, our study was conducted with a convenient sample composed of undergraduate students: our findings from this relatively young and well-educated sample may not necessarily generalize to older participants or community-based samples.

Before our results can be generalized with confidence, it would be interesting for future research to examine whether the gender differences in the relationship between dispositional traits and forgiveness found in this study are maintained throughout the life cycle, from adolescence to older age. In addition, our data is clearly cross-sectional, although no causal hypotheses were formulated and only correlation and moderation analyses were computed. It would be valuable to determine the extent to which agreeableness predicts forgiveness differently for both genders in prospective design studies. Finally, for the agreeableness scale, the alpha was found to be relatively modest ($\alpha = .62$ in our study), hence, conclusions should be drawn cautiously. However, this pattern in which agreeableness's alpha did fall below .70 was found across the BFI in original validation study with college students (Benet-Martínez & John, 1998) and across 56 nations and 10 world regions (except for North American and Oceania) (Schmitt, Allik, McCrae, & Benet-Martínez, 2007), which is similar to our agreeableness findings. Benet-Martínez & John (1998) reported that in adult population the alpha in the Spanish agreeableness scale was above .70. As suggested by authors, one possible reason for this discrepancy is that undergraduate samples show consistently lower standard deviations compared to adult samples, therefore, further research should examine the reasons for this restriction of range in undergraduate students' self-reports in this dimension, such as potential age differences in the social desirability. Clearly, these findings

should be interpreted with caution and in the context of the sample (undergraduate students). Further testing is required with other larger and heterogeneous samples.

Notwithstanding the above-mentioned limitations, our research serves as a preliminary study to expand prior work on the differential role of dispositional qualities in forgiveness in males and females (Toussaint & Webb, 2005). Our study thus provides some empirical support for the idea that agreeableness might have the potential to exercise a protective influence on an individual's motivation to seek revenge, and this relationship might be moderated by gender. Although these findings warrant replication, they suggest that efforts at increasing personal qualities from positive psychology might benefit by developing gender-specific models when testing antecedents and correlates related to prosocial changes in one's motivations toward an interpersonal transgressor.

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