Research Abstract

Experience of Parental Marital Dissolution Earlier in Life and the Disposition to Forgive Among Older Violent and Non-Violent Prisoners

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IMPLICATIONS FOR COOPERATIVE EXTENSION:

Results from this study have implications relative to providing evidence-based outcomes for translation into counseling services or educational programs that promote forgiveness and healing across families impacted by divorce and incarceration.

Overview

In the literature, there is a limited amount of research that examines whether or not type of crime and parental separation/divorce experienced in earlier life affects an individual’s disposition to forgive. This area of research is relevant, due to the vast number of non-violent and violent inmates that are incarcerated, which steadily continues to increase. Non-violent and violent inmates are human beings, despite major and minor acts of transgression they may have committed (e.g. homicide, drug offense, stealing/theft). Many of these inmates have been troubled since early childhood, because of growing up in impoverished neighborhoods, being exposed to criminal behavior, or simply coming from a broken home that ended in parental separation/divorce. These negative experiences have the ability to damage one’s future and their overall perspective on life.

In this study, forgiveness is viewed a mode of resiliency, which can provide a sense of solace for many individuals, after
being exposed to a conflict. It allows these individuals to cognitively and positively reframe negative thoughts and feelings toward life. It is important to understand the capacity of forgiveness among non-violent and violent inmates, because it provides a platform for an alternative resource to address past adversities and rebuild family relationships that have been recently strained.

The current study conducted interviews with non-violent and violent inmates. Participants were asked about their personal willingness to forgive, religious affiliation, self-reported, health, mood status, and social provisions. They were also asked for demographic information pertaining to: age, race, type of crime committed, and whether or not their parents separated/divorced, before they had reached the age of 18.

**Method**

*Design and Sample.* The inmates were recruited from eight state-managed Oklahoma Department of Corrections (OK-DOC) correctional facilities. The sample consisted of 261 older male inmates within the age range of 45-82 years ($M = 57.59, SD = 8.41$). The prison administration advertised announcements to recruit the non-violent and violent inmates, for this study. Accommodations were made for inmates that had trouble reading or visual and auditory impairments. A trained member of the research team conducted one-on-one interviews with the inmates that required accommodations.

*Measures.* The inmates were asked for information about their dispositional forgiveness with the Heartland Forgiveness Scale, which consisted of 18 items. The items were scored by a 7-point scale. The higher scores indicated higher levels of dispositional forgiveness. Second, the inmates took a 24-item Social Provisions Scale (SPS), which measured the degree to which their social ties provided the following: guidance, reassurance, social integration, attachment, nurturance, and reliable alliance. The items were scored from 1-4. Higher scores indicated a greater degree of social provisions. Third, the inmates completed a short form of the Geriatric Depression Scale (GDS), which measured depressive symptoms, it consisted of 10-items, and was scored from 0-10. Higher scores represented higher levels of depressive symptoms. Finally, control variables were also collected pertaining to: type of crime committed, whether or not they have experienced parental dissolution before age 18, and how they perceive their health status, social support, and depressive affect.

**Results**

The researchers hypothesized that older male non-violent inmates would be more inclined to forgive, however, this hypothesis was only partially supported. Results indicated that inmates who had been incarcerated for non-violent crimes (e.g., drug offense, theft) and whose parents did not separate or divorce were more inclined to seek forgiveness for their current situation. In contrast, inmates that were incarcerated for non-violent crimes, and whose parents did separate or divorce before age 18 reported a less willingness to engage in forgiveness based on the situation.

**Conclusion**

Findings provide evidence of the link the parental separation/divorce early in life and willingness to forgive among non-violent offenders aging-in-prison. In particular, parental separation/divorce before age 18 appears to alter the way in which non-violent prison inmates internalize the process of forgiveness and understanding their life situation. This has implications...
relative to how family counselors, community educators, and other professions help to initiate the process of healing among family ties broken by divorce and incarceration.