

The Effects of Counterfactual Thinking on Unilateral Forgiveness: Can Victims Do It on Their Own?

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Background

Forgiveness

✓ forgiveness requires victims to undergo a set of cognitive, affective, and behavioural transformations (Fehr et al., 2010; Noor, 2016). For these transformations to occur, victims are required to engage in processes involving a re-appraisal of the circumstances and actions that led to the offence.

Present research

✓ Here we test if victims can attain such transformations necessary for forgiveness by engaging in a specific type of reasoning that incorporates re-appraisal of actual events with specific hypothetical alternatives to their own and the perpetrator's past behaviour - i.e., counterfactual thinking (CF).

Method

After writing down the recalled victimisation event, participants were required to generate counterfactual sentences focused on

	Additive CF	Subtractive CF
(Study 1, n = 196) Perpetrator-focussed CF	"Things would have been different if he[<i>she</i>] had..."	"Things would have been different if he[<i>she</i>] had not..."
(Study 2, n = 196) Victim-focussed CF	"Things would have been different if I had..."	"Things would have been different if I had not..."

Dependent variables

- Perspective-taking (Davis, 1983)
- Forgiveness (Brown & Phillips, 2005)

Key message

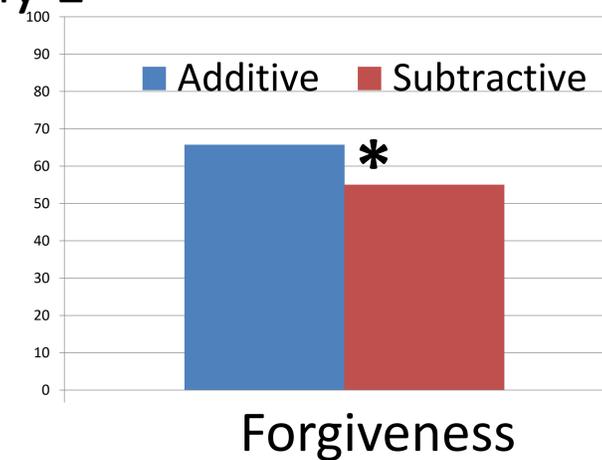
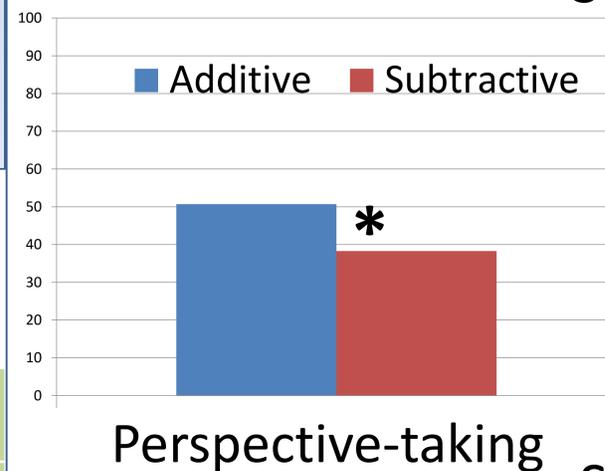
Additive (vs. subtractive) counterfactuals focused on the perpetrator or victim were associated with greater (vs. lesser) willingness to take the perpetrator's perspective and to forgive the perpetrator.

Implications

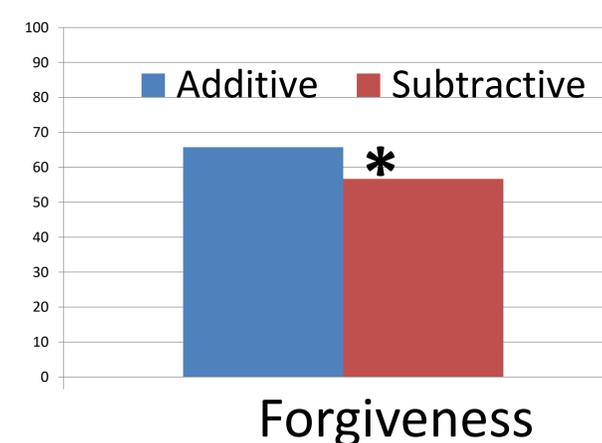
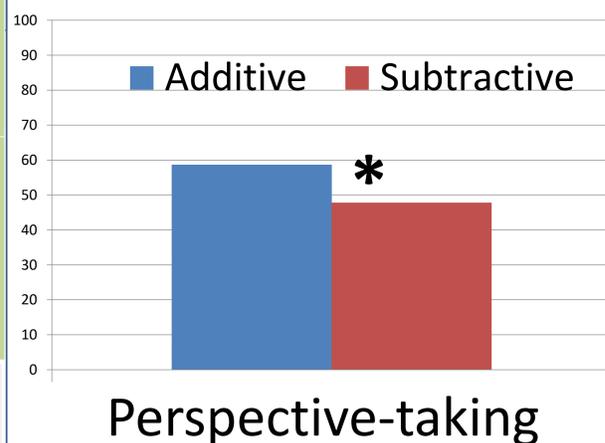
Our results indicate:

- Often, a shared understanding of past events between victims and their perpetrators is difficult to achieve.
- Victims can individually reassess past events, considering not only what has happened, but also what could have happened instead.
- Tapping victim's own cognitive resources through counterfactual thinking facilitates forgiveness.

Study 1



Study 2



For queries, collaborations, or just saying hi, please contact me via:
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