

Relationships between guilt and forgiveness in university students

Üniversite öğrencilerinde suçluluk ve affetme arasındaki ilişkiler



Abstract

Aim: Guilt is defined as a self-conscious emotion generated from negative attributions of own behaviors. It is observed that people with guilt are less forgiving. There are different types of forgiveness. Guilt is expected to have a stronger effect on self-forgiveness than forgiving others and situations. This study aimed to investigate the relationships between guilt and different types of forgiveness in a group of university students.

Methods: This research is in the correlational survey model. Research data was collected from 604 university students from Turkey in 2018. After confirming that the assumptions were adequately met, the relationships were examined through Pearson correlations and path (linear regression) analyses.

Results: All variables were significantly correlated at the 0.01 statistical significance level. It was seen that the feeling of guilt predicted forgiveness and all sub-dimensions of forgiveness at a statistically significant level ($p < 0.01$) but in the opposite direction. Thus, guilt strongly and adversely predicts forgiveness.

Conclusion: Forgiveness is an important protective factor in increasing psychological resilience. Guilt stands out as an important risk factor for forgiveness. The most striking finding is that self-forgiveness is lower in individuals with a high sense of guilt. For this reason; as people's sense of guilt decreases, it will be easier for them to forgive themselves. It is recommended that people who have difficulty in forgiving express their feelings of guilt as their other emotions in psychotherapy and psychological counseling sessions to help them relax and support their emotion regulation skills.

Keywords: emotion; emotion regulation; forgiveness; guilt; psychological resilience

Öz

Amaç: Suçluluk, kişilerin kendi davranışlarına olumsuz atıflarından kaynaklanan bir öz-bilinç duygusu olarak tanımlanır. Suçluluk duygusuna sahip kişilerin daha az affediciler oldukları gözlenmektedir. Affetmenin farklı türleri vardır. Suçluluğun kendini affetme durumu üzerinde, başkalarını ve durumları affetme durumundan daha güçlü bir etkiye sahip olması beklenmektedir. Bu çalışmada bir grup üniversite öğrencisinde suçluluk duygusu ve affetme türleri arasındaki ilişkilerin incelenmesi amaçlanmıştır.

Yöntemler: Araştırma ilişkisel tarama modelindedir. Araştırma verileri 2018 yılında Türkiye'de öğrenim gören 604 üniversite öğrencisinden toplanmıştır. Analiz varsayımlarının sağlandığı doğrulandıktan sonra, suçluluk ile affetme türleri arasındaki ilişkiler, Pearson korelasyonları ve yol (doğrusal regresyon) analizleri aracılığıyla incelenmiştir.

Bulgular: Tüm araştırma değişkenleri arasında .01 düzeyinde istatistiksel açıdan anlamlı ilişkiler bulunmuştur. Yol analizleri sonucunda suçluluk duygusunun affetmeyi ve affetmenin tüm alt boyutlarını istatistiksel açıdan anlamlı düzeyde ($p < .01$) ama ters yönde açıkladığı görülmüştür. Öyleyse, suçluluk duygusunun affetmeyi güçlü bir şekilde ve tersten açıkladığı anlaşılmaktadır.

Sonuç: Affetme kişilerin psikolojik dayanıklılığını artırmada önemli bir koruyucu etkidir. Kişilerin affediciliklerini artırmada suçluluk duygusu önemli bir risk etkeni olarak göze çarpmaktadır. Özellikle kendini affetmenin, suçluluk duygusu yüksek olan kişilerde daha düşük olması araştırmanın en çarpıcı bulgusudur. Bu nedenle, kişilerin suçluluk duygusu azaldıkça, kendilerini affetmeleri kolaylaşacaktır denilebilir. Affetmekte zorlanan kişilerin, diğer duygularda olduğu gibi suçluluk duygularını psikoterapi ve psikolojik danışma oturumlarında ifade ederek rahatlamalarının sağlanması ve duygu düzenleme becerilerinin desteklenmesi önerilmektedir.

Anahtar Sözcükler: affetme; duygu; duygu düzenleme; psikolojik dayanıklılık; suçluluk

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INTRODUCTION

Guilt is an unpleasant emotion resulting from negative attributions of own behaviors, thoughts, and feelings perceived as wrong. It is a disturbing self-conscious emotion of having been involved in any kind of failure or sin; guilt is often generated from self-criticisms due to behaviors, cognitions, and/or feelings against one's moral judgments and conscience (1). Additionally, guilt is generally linked with other negative emotions like shame, hatred, and hostility (2). Anger is also related to guilt; angry people are generally going to feel guilty as soon as their anger is soothed and regulated (3). It was also found that negative states in university students such as high self-hostility and high self-hatred, low self-acceptance, and low self-esteem are strongly associated with guilt (4). Negative psychological states seem to attract each other, especially negative emotions are accumulating together as explained by the theory of self-discrepancies. The relationships between self-discrepancies and guilt were examined comprehensively in another research (5). In that study, it was determined that the tendency for guilt had positive and significant relationships with all kinds of self-conflicts. These findings support that guilt is a serious threat to positive self-perception.

The relationships between different parenting styles, self-regulation processes, and guilt were investigated in another study (6). It was seen that the tendency for feeling guilty decreases as the democratic parenting style increases, and the guilt tendency increases as the authoritarian parenting style increases. In addition, it was observed that the tendency for guilt increases as the self and other self-discrepancy increases because of relational conflicts (7). Thus, guilt-proneness is generally increasing loneliness. The detrimental effects of loneliness on several psychopathologies are well-known. In association with loneliness, self-blaming is another significant risk factor in most internalizing psychopathologies (8). Dismissing attachment style is also associated with guilt (9). In fact, dismissing attachment is among the major determinants of emotional loneliness and self-isolation. Childhood neglect and abuse are strongly linked with attachment insecurities. Both shame and guilt interact with each other in victims of abusive relationships (10). People with traumatic memories suffer from excessive guilt and have

difficulties in forgiveness due to their disturbing past experiences. Although they have either none or minor contributions to the happenings of traumatic events, most trauma survivors generally blame themselves, especially for their inability to prevent the event from happening. Guilty and shameful feelings are so common across different types of psychological trauma cases all around the world. Increased negative emotionality is among the fundamental characteristics of trauma-related disorders. Most psychotherapeutic interventions are aiming at increasing psychological resilience while decreasing negative emotions in people with traumatic experiences.

Forgiveness relates to psychological resilience. There are different types of forgiveness: self-forgiveness, forgiving other people and forgiving situations (11). Individuals with secure attachment are generally more forgiving as opposed to insecurely attached individuals; especially people with avoidant attachment have difficulties in forgiving others and situations while anxious attachment predicts less self-forgiveness (12). In one study, the independent variables of gender, self-esteem, religious orientation, and cognitive distortions were investigated for the prediction of different dimensions of forgiveness (13). According to the findings, it was revealed that self-esteem and cognitive distortions significantly predicted self-forgiveness. People with high self-esteem tend to be more forgiving. In addition, it has been observed that people with high cognitive distortions have less forgiveness. Both low self-esteem and high cognitive distortions are risk factors for psychological problems. For example, low self-forgiveness was strongly associated with affective disorders (14). Based on these and related findings, it can be said that the tendency to forgive is a protective factor for mental health. As long as people forgive, they will feel, think, and act more positively.

Few scientific research has appeared to explain the relationships between forgiveness and emotions in the context of mental health and psychological resilience. On one hand, positive emotions like happiness, pride, enthusiasm, and joy reflect life satisfaction and quality of life. On the other hand, negative emotions such as hate remorse, shame, and guilt decrease quality of life and accordingly satisfaction from life. It is important to reveal adverse relationships between positive and

Table 1. Demographic information

Characteristics	n	%	Mean	SD
Gender				
Male	246	40.7		
Female	358	59.3		
Age			20.65	1.31

n=Sample Size, SD: Standard Deviation

negative psychological qualities because they are continuously influencing each other. For instance; a decrease in hate, revenge and fury will eventually result in peace, calmness, and understanding. Similarly, forgiveness appears to be negatively influenced by guilt as a significant threat to mental health. Among forgiveness types, self-forgiveness was expected to be most negatively related to guilt because of the self-conscious nature of the emotion. This study aimed to investigate the relationships between guilt and three main types of forgiveness: Self-forgiveness (SF), forgiving the others (FO), and forgiving the situation (FS).

METHODS

Participants

In April and May of 2018, 604 university students from Hacettepe University participated in this study. All procedures were carried out in accordance with the Helsinki Declaration. An informed consent was taken from each participant according to the ethical committee of Hacettepe University approval (Decision no:35853172/433-2489, Decision date:11.07.2017)

Procedure and Materials

This study is correlational survey research to report some of the findings in the doctoral dissertation of the author. In addition to a brief demographic information form, guilt and forgiveness scales were given to the participants. Guilt as the predictor variable (IV) was measured by the guilt subscale of the Trait Guilt Shame Scale (TGSS) with a 5-point Likert-type grading with a score range from five to 25 (15). Types of forgiveness as the outcome variables (DVs) were measured by Heartland Forgiveness Scale (HFS) by a 7-point Likert-type grading with the score range from 18 to 126, and from six to 42 for each subscale (16). Higher scores in both scales mean higher levels of variables. There are five

items in the guilt subscale and Cronbach alpha internal consistency reliability coefficient was calculated as 0.793 for this study. There are 18 items in HFS, six for each subscale named as self-forgiveness (SF), forgiving others (FO), and forgiving situations (FS); Cronbach alpha coefficients of the total scale score and the scores of subscales were calculated as 0.821 (stratified alpha for total scale score), 0.795, 0.751, and 0.723, respectively. All reliability coefficients are above the critical value of 0.700 for Cronbach alpha. Therefore, the data collected for this study is accepted as reliable.

Statistical Analysis

Relationships between variables were examined by using Pearson correlations and path analyzes (linear regressions). Kolmogorov-Smirnov test for normality was applied and the distributions were not found significantly different from the normal distribution. Statistical Package for the Social Sciences statistical analysis program version 25.0 (SPSS Inc., Chicago, IL, USA) and MPLUS 7 (Muthén & Muthén, Los Angeles, California, USA) programs were utilized to perform statistical analyzes. The statistical significance level is 0.01 at minimum in this study.

RESULTS

Demographic information is presented in Table 1. Most of the participants were female university students. The ages of the participants were between 18 to 27 years. Means, SDs, and Pearson correlations were shown in Table 2. The distribution of guilt scores was a little positively skewed but not significantly different from the normal distribution. Similarly, forgiveness scores were normally distributed. All correlations between variables were statistically significant ($p < .01$). Correlations between guilt and forgiveness (types and total) were in the negative direction in accordance with the literature. The highest correlation value of guilt is with self-forgiveness ($r = -0.508$, $p < 0.01$). Correlations among forgiveness scores were all high and statistically significant at the .01 level.

The standardized results of path analyses (linear regression analyses) showing the relationships between the guilt feeling measured with the guilt measurement model and the forgiveness sub-dimensions (SF, FO,

Table 2. Means, SDs, and correlations

Variable	Mean	SD	Pearson correlations			
			2	3	4	5
1. Guilt (G)	10.46	4.29	-0.508**	-0.231**	-0.293**	-0.272**
2. Self-forgiveness (SF)	23.02	6.19		0.234**	0.448**	0.613**
3. Forgiving others (FO)	22.27	5.96			0.441**	0.720**
4. Forgiving situations (FS)	23.32	5.90				0.736**
5. Forgiveness (F)	69.79	11.76				

**p<0.01, SD: Standard Deviation.

and FS) measured with the forgiveness measurement model are given in Figure 1. All paths in the analysis were significant. The strongest effect of guilt was found on self-forgiveness ($\beta = -0.508$, $p < .001$) in comparison with its effect on forgiving others ($\beta = -0.231$, $p < 0.005$) and on forgiving situations ($\beta = -0.293$, $p < 0.005$). Accordingly, as the guilt feeling of the person increases, it becomes more difficult for the person to forgive oneself ($R^2=0.258$), others ($R^2=0.053$), and the situation ($R^2=0.086$). In other words, the more guilt the person has, it is much more difficult to forgive oneself than to forgive others and situations.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

Forgiveness is a protective factor for psychological well-being. More forgiving people are generally better at emotion regulation (17). On the other hand, guilt is rooted in past unpleasant memories (18). It is generated due to own behaviors, cognitions, and feelings perceived as wrong. Therefore, forgiveness and guilt are two psychological constructs in opposite directions as supported by the findings of this study. Guilt was negatively and significantly correlated with forgiveness and all its dimensions. The strongest relationship was between guilt and self-forgiveness. As a self-conscious emotion, self-directedness of guilt may cause more self-blaming issues rather than blaming others.

The findings of this study also showed that guilt was related to low levels of forgiving others and situations. However, the most difficulty is connected with self-forgiveness because it can be said that the person who can forgive themselves by reducing the feeling of guilt can forgive others and situations more easily. The people experiencing guilt perceive themselves as the source of the problem and continue to experience

guilt unless this negative perception is eliminated by forgiveness (19). Therefore, increasing self-forgiveness can bring about more forgiveness in total, positively influencing forgiving others and situations to increase emotion regulation strategies (e.g., feeling less guilty) and ultimately becoming more psychologically resilient as depicted in Figure 2. New research can be done to investigate relationships within variables in this proposed model based on the findings of the current study.

Some intervention programs targeting the empowerment of forgiveness can be developed to improve emotion regulation and psychological resilience. Some examples were found such as the effects of the psycho-educational program for 'Increasing the Forgiveness Tendency' which was prepared for university students on their intolerance to uncertainty, psychological well-being, anger control and trait anxiety levels (20). According to the findings obtained from 30 university students in the study, there was a negative significant relationship between forgiveness and intolerance of uncertainty and trait anxiety. On the other hand, positive significant relationships were found between psychological well-being and anger control, and forgiveness. In addition, the results from another psycho-educational program evaluation research revealed that the increase in the tendency to forgive effectively increased the levels of emotion regulation, and psychological resilience; and reduced the levels of intolerance to uncertainty and stress (21). Similar psycho-educational interventions can be developed, and their effectiveness should be evaluated in terms of a decrease in guilt and other negative emotions as risk factors for psychological well-being and an increase in forgiveness and other protective factors.

The detrimental outcomes of being less forgiving should not be underestimated. For example, not for-

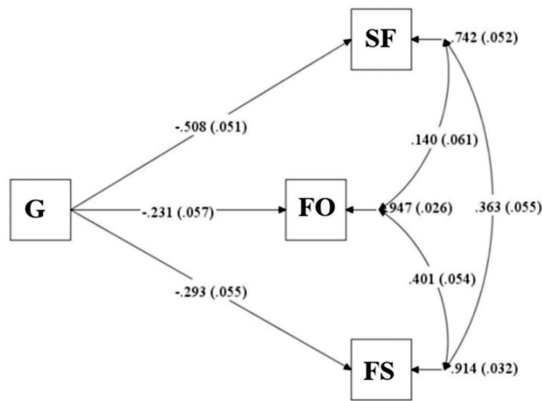


Figure 1. Path analyses between guilt (G) and types of forgiveness: Self-forgiveness (SF), forgiving others (FO), and forgiving situations (FS) (Standardized regression weights).

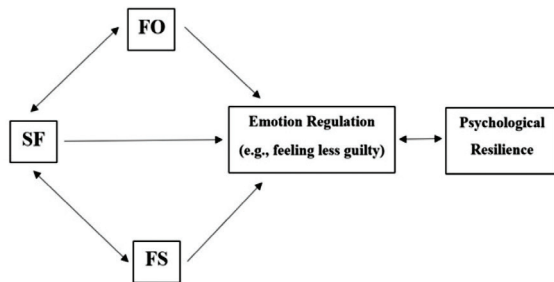


Figure 2. A model proposal based on results of the current study. (SF=Self-Forgiveness, FO=Forgiving Others, and FS=Forgiving Situations)

giving oneself, others, and situations may cause psychological unfinished business and other mental health issues like depression (22). Like regrets, guilt itself can be accepted as a sign of unfinished business and other mental health problems (23). Therefore, increasing forgiveness can decrease the guilty feelings of individuals and resolve unfinished business and other psychological disturbances. In the famous tragedy by Shakespeare, King Lear was suffering from the pains of guilt in the seek of forgiveness from her daughter Cordelia due to his previous cruelty. (24). Human history is full of similar kinds of tragedies of guilt and not forgiving (25). We need to learn several lessons from them. People are suffering from emotional pains and seriously harming themselves and others today (26). Research showed that being more self-forgiving could remove the largest barriers to mental health (27). Research also revealed that some people had dispositional pros and cons for

forgiveness (28, 29). However, psychoeducation can help as well (30). Forgiveness can be placed in curriculums, there are some examples from medical students: Forgiveness makes better physicians (31). For one thing, forgiveness increases trust among people (32). In a large meta-analysis review, it was shown that forgiveness added substantially to the subjective well-being of people around the world (33). Across cultures, forgiveness increases moral values and spirituality through decreasing guilt and other negative emotions (34). This study also emphasize the strong negative relationship between guilt and forgiveness.

There are some limitations as well as strengths of the study. One of the major limitations is that the data was collected from a single setting, and solely from university students. Collecting only self-reported data is another limitation of the study. It was assumed that participants replied to the questions in the guilt and forgiveness scales truthfully. In the future, replication of the study was recommended in different settings with multi-source data collected from more diverse populations. On the other hand, showing strong relationships between forgiveness and guilt can help psychological help professionals and researchers to develop new and more effective intervention and prevention programs to deal with problems in forgiveness and regulating guilt-like negative emotions. Future research on the topic is strongly recommended.

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