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RESEARCH ARTICLE / ARAŞTIRMA YAZISI

**An Examination Of The Link**

**Between Neuroticism, Victim Sensitivity and Forgiveness Among University Students**

Işıl ÇOKLAR<sup>1</sup>, Ali DÖNMEZ<sup>2</sup>

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**Abstract:** The purpose of the study is to examine the relationship between neuroticism and willingness to forgive and to explore the mediating role of justice sensitivity in this relationship. Demographic form, Willingness to Forgive Scale, Justice Sensitivity Scale-Victim Form and Big Five Personality Inventory-Short Form were completed by 466 undergraduate students. The results of the hierarchical regression analyses revealed that justice sensitivity fully mediated the relationship between neuroticism and willingness to forgive. The results were discussed along with the literature findings, the strengths, and limitations of the study, suggestions for future researches and practical implications.

**Keywords:** Forgiveness, neuroticism, justice sensitivity, victim sensitivity

**Üniversite Öğrencilerinde Duygusal Tutarsızlık, Mağdur Duyarlılığı ve Bağışlama Arasındaki İlişkinin İncelenmesi**

**Özet:** Bu çalışmanın amacı duygusal tutarsızlık ile bağışlama istekliliği arasındaki ilişkiyi incelemek ve bu ilişkide adalete duyarlılığın aracı rolünü araştırmaktır. Katılımcılar 466 üniversite öğrencisinden oluşmakta olup, veriler demografik bilgi formu, Bağışlama İstekliliği Ölçeği, Adalete Duyarlılık Ölçeği Mağdur Duyarlılığı Formu, Beş Faktör Kişilik Envanteri, Kısa Formu ile toplanmıştır. Hiyerarşik regresyon analizi sonuçları adalete duyarlılığın duygusal tutarsızlık kişilik değişkeni ile bağışlama arasındaki ilişkide tam aracılık rolü üstlendiğini ortaya koymuştur. Bulgular, alan yazın çerçevesinde değerlendirilmiş, araştırmanın güçlü ve sınırlı yönleri üzerinde durularak gelecekte konuyla ilgili gerçekleştirilebilecek çalışmalar ve bu araştırmanın olası pratik doğurguları kapsamında tartışılmıştır.

**Anahtar Kelimeler:** Bağışlama, duygusal tutarsızlık, adalete duyarlılık, mağdur duyarlılığı

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<sup>1</sup>Dr., İstanbul Şehir Üniversitesi Psikoloji Bölümü, İstanbul-Türkiye. E-mail: [isilcoklar@sehir.edu.tr](mailto:isilcoklar@sehir.edu.tr)

<sup>2</sup>Prof. Dr., Çankaya Üniversitesi Psikoloji Bölümü, Ankara-Türkiye. E-mail: [adonmez@cankaya.edu.tr](mailto:adonmez@cankaya.edu.tr)

Address of correspondence/ Yazışma adresi: Dr. Işıl Çoklar, İstanbul Şehir Üniversitesi Psikoloji Bölümü, İstanbul-Türkiye. E-mail: [isilcoklar@sehir.edu.tr](mailto:isilcoklar@sehir.edu.tr)

**Date of received/ Geliş Tarihi:** 20.06.2019, **Date of acceptance/ Kabul Tarihi:** 26.07.2019

**Citing/ Referans Gösterimi:** Çoklar, I. & Dönmez, A., (2019). An Examination Of The Link Between Neuroticism, Victim Sensitivity and Forgiveness Among University Students. *Cyprus Turkish Journal of Psychiatry & Psychology*, 1(2): 108-115 doi: 10.35365/ctjpp.1.13

## Introduction

Forgiveness, a multidimensional construct, has been defined in a variety of ways; however, theorists don't have a consensus on a clear definition. For example, Worthington (1998) defined forgiveness as "a motivation to reduce the avoidance of and withdraw from a person who has hurt us, as well as the anger, desire for revenge, and urge to retaliate against that person". (McCullough, Pargament & Thoresen, 2000) have defined forgiveness as an intraindividual, prosocial change toward a perceived transgressor that is situated within a specific interpersonal context. (Berry, Worthington, Parrott, O'Connor & Wade, 2001) described forgiveness as a disposition.

Forgiveness has been described in terms of forgiveness of self and forgiveness of others, both aspects being related to feelings of well-being (Ross, 2004). The benefits of forgiveness on physical health (Berry, 2001) and mental health (Maltby, Day, & Barber, 2004) have been examined in multiple studies, as has the connection to personality type. In terms of physical well-being, Witvliet, Phipps, Feldman, and Beckham (2004) found a strong association between lowered physiological reactivity and forgiving imagery. Besides, forgiveness has been found to mediate the effects of stress (Friedberg, Adonis, Von Bergen & Suchday, 2005), a condition frequently associated with negative mental health consequences.

A body of research on forgiveness focuses on people's tendency, willingness or capacity to forgive themselves or others. However, forgiveness is a complex process involving interpersonal and intrapersonal dimensions (Tangney, Boone & Dearing, 2005). Within the framework of intrapersonal processes, personality traits are of great importance. Examining different personality traits' impacts on interpersonal relations is necessary for both theoretical and practical reasons. On the theoretical level, it is essential, for instance, to understand how personality has an impact on the decision to forgive or to seek revenge. Because some aspects of personality can make us more sensitive about violations and some of them can ease to tolerate negative behaviors of others. On the practical level, especially for practitioners who give therapies and conduct intervention programs, it is important to know how to consider the client's traits in the process of choosing and adapting a specific method (Mullet., 2003) argued the importance of measuring the impact of different personality measures on forgiveness and related concepts. After making a study of the literature, we decided to focus on neuroticism, which seems to have a significant correlation with the willingness to forgive and "victim sensitivity as an important individual difference in interpersonal relationships.

In the process of getting more autonomous and more social at the same time, university students are starting to encounter many problems at the interpersonal level. Considering the importance of social relationships in this process, we decided to conduct our research with a sample consisting of university students. Besides being a barrier in terms of representing the general society, we thought that choosing a specific group similar in socio-demographic characteristics could give us a clear picture of the construct of forgiveness, which we try to examine at a theoretical level.

## Neuroticism and Forgiveness

Worthington's (1998) assertion that Neuroticism is an inhibitory characteristic of forgiveness has received empirical support (Ashton et al., 1998; Walker & Gorsuch, 2002). Angry hostility as an important facet of Neuroticism has been implicated as a consistent barrier to forgiveness (Kaplan, 1992; McCullough, Bellah, Kilpatrick, & Johnson, 2001). The five-factor model of personality has received some attention in previous studies of forgiveness. In a review of these studies, (Mullet, 2005) showed correlations between enduring resentment and neuroticism ranging from .24 to .39. People high in Neuroticism frequently have a negative affect, instability of affect, and greater sensitivity to negative events. Neuroticism, along with negative affectivity, also predisposes people to be easily offended and angered (Berkowitz, 1990; Caprara, Barbaranelli, & Comrey, 1992; Caprara, Manzi, & Perugini, 1992; Martin & Watson, 1997) and, thus, they may score higher in vengefulness, higher in victim sensitivity and lower in forgivingness.

## Victim Sensitivity and Forgiveness

Studies in the area of social justice confirms the existence of stable individual differences in sensitivity to justice issues (Dar & Resh, 2001; Lovas & Wolt, 2002; Schmitt, 1996; Schmitt, Gollwitzer, Maes, & Arbach, 2005; van den Bos, Maas, Waldring & Semin, 2003; Schmitt, Neumann & Montada, 1995) proposed the concept of justice sensitivity. They argue that (a) individuals differ in how readily they perceive injustice and how strongly they react to injustice, (b) these individual differences in the perceptions of and reactions to injustice are generalized across types of injustice, and (c) the differences are stable across time. Their assumptions were supported by several studies (Schmitt, 1996; Schmitt, Baumert, Gollwitzer & Maes, 2010; Schmitt, Gollwitzer, Maes & Arbach, 2005). Researchers claimed that Justice Sensitivity (JS) may be considered a personality trait reflecting the importance of justice issues in people's everyday lives (Baumert, Gollwitzer, Staubach & Schmitt, 2011). Studies revealed that persons high in JS tend to perceive injustice more frequently, ruminate about it, and react to it with stronger emotions compared to persons low in JS (Schmitt, Neumann, & Montada, 1995). These persons also tend to take steps to restore justice such as protesting against injustice (Mohiyeddini & Schmitt, 1997; Schmitt, 1996; Schmitt & Mohiyeddini, 1996) and punishing perpetrators even at their own expense (Fetchenhauer & Huang, 2004).

Four facets of the concept were differentiated: victim sensitivity, observer sensitivity, beneficiary sensitivity, and perpetrator sensitivity (Gollwitzer, Schmitt, Schalke, Maes, & Baer, 2005). Several studies have shown that observer, beneficiary, and perpetrator sensitivity are highly correlated with each other and only weakly correlated with victim sensitivity (Schmitt, 2005; Schmit., 2010). Observer-, beneficiary-, and perpetrator-sensitive individuals seem to be primarily concerned with justice for others. By contrast, victim-sensitive people seem to have a predominant interest in justice for themselves (Thomas, Baumert & Schmitt, 2012). (Gollwitzer and Rothmund., 2009) tried to understand how victim sensitivity emerges and stabilizes. Researchers developed a model aiming to explain why some people are more sensitive about victimization.

According to SeMI (sensitivity to mean intentions) model (Gollwitzer & Rothmund; Gollwitzer., 2013) victim sensitive people have a fear of being exploited and they are sensitive to cues associated with untrustworthiness. Several studies found that persons high in victim sensitivity are more sensitive to cues of untrustworthiness (Gollwitzer., 2009, 2012), more likely to behave aggressively (Bondü and Krahe, 2014) and destructively if there is a risk of being exploited (Schmitt & Mohiyeddini, 1996; Mohiyeddini & Schmitt, 1997, Schmitt & Dörfel, 1999). Victim sensitive individuals make more egoistic choices in social dilemma situations (Fetchenhauer & Huang, 2004), and are less willing to help others (Gollwitzer., 2005). Moreover, victim sensitivity is positively associated with self-related concerns such as jealousy, neuroticism, vengeance, and paranoia (Schmitt, Baumert, Gollwitzer, & Maes, 2010; Schmitt., 2005), and to antisocial, egoistic, and uncooperative behavioral tendencies. (Gollwitzer, Schmitt, Schalke, Maes, & Baer, 2005; Faccenda, Pantaléon, & Reynes, 2009).

Interpersonal hurts are often perceived as unfair, immoral, or unjustified and an unresolved transgression may create a so-called “injustice gap” (Exline., 2003). (As Schmitt 2009, 2010) argued, justice sensitivity from the victim’s perspective represents a mixture of genuine concern for justice along with intolerance regarding its violation as well as a strong motive for self-protection. Therefore, victim-sensitive persons may try to prevent future maltreatment or exploitation, which taps into the justice motive as well as self-related concerns and the need for self-protection, which strongly predict unforgiving reactions to interpersonal transgressions (Gerlach, Allemand, Agroskin & Denissen, 2012).

### Neuroticism and Victim Sensitivity

Schmitt (2005) correlated the justice sensitivity scales with measures of the domain factors of the Five-Factor Model (FFM; openness, conscientiousness, extraversion, agreeableness, and neuroticism) of Personality (Costa & McCrae, 1985). Although correlations between the justice sensitivity scales and the personality scales tended to be low, some correlations were significant. When the FFM factors were measured with the NEO-FFI (Borkenau & Ostendorf, 1993), the correlations among victim, observer, and beneficiary sensitivity with neuroticism were .36, .20, and .16, respectively. Also, victim and beneficiary sensitivity had correlations of -.19 and .19 with agreeableness, respectively. Finally, observer sensitivity correlated significantly (.28) with openness. It seems that within personality traits neuroticism is the strongest predictor of victim sensitivity. (Schmit, 2008) indicated that neuroticism is correlated with skepticism and fear of being exploited and thus neuroticism has a high correlation level with victim sensitivity.

### Victim sensitivity as a mediator

The main purpose of the current research is to understand some specific personality traits’ impact on the willingness to forgive. Theoretical perspectives should be supported by empirical findings in order to shed light on practices in the field, especially for the practitioners working in the area of restorative justice and conducting counseling programs.

Considering findings demonstrating the relationships of neuroticism, forgiveness, and victim sensitivity variables,

which have been proved by previous studies above, neuroticism may influence the willingness to forgive via victim sensitivity. In this study, it was hypothesized that as neuroticism increases the willingness to forgive may decrease or vice versa and that justice sensitivity may have a mediating role in this relationship.

This study poses the following hypotheses:

Hypothesis 1 Neuroticism is negatively associated with willingness to forgive

Hypothesis 2 Neuroticism is positively associated with victim sensitivity.

Hypothesis 3 Victim sensitivity is negatively associated with the willingness to forgive.

Hypothesis 4 Victim sensitivity mediates the link between neuroticism and willingness to forgive

## Method

### Participants

The participants were 466 university students (53 % were female) enrolled in various undergraduate programs in two different universities in Izmir. Of the participants 55 % were studying Social Sciences and Humanities (History, Philosophy, etc.), 45 % were studying Natural Sciences (Physics, Medicine, etc.). The mean age of female participants was 21,25 (S=2.34) and the mean age of male participants was 20,61 (S=1.86).

### Instruments

**Willingness to Forgive Scale (DeShea, 2003):** The tendency to forgive was measured using the translated Turkish version of Willingness to Forgive Scale (Coklar, 2015). The scale consists of 12 short scenarios related to injustices rendered by a stranger, boss, significant other, family member, and close friend. Each scenario was presented on a five-point Likert-type scale with anchors 1: I would be willing to forgive and 5= I would not be willing to forgive. The total score can range from 5 to 60; a higher score indicates stronger feelings on willingness to forgive. Cronbach alpha was reported as .91 by (DeShea, 2003). Results of the adaptation study with the participation of 151 university students revealed that Cronbach alpha is .83 and item-total correlations are between .30 and .60. Exploratory factor analyses showed that the scale is a unidimensional measure with an overall explained variance of 39%. Factor loadings of the scale items ranged from .39 to .70. Confirmatory factor analysis indicated that the model fits the data well ( $\chi^2(54, N=151)=83.06, p<.05, GFI=.92, AGFI=.90, NFI=.92, CFI=.94, RMSEA=.06$ ). Internal consistency reliability was .83. In the present study, Cronbach’s  $\alpha$  was .78.

**The Justice Sensitivity Scale-Victim Form:** Justice Sensitivity Inventory includes four questionnaire scales measuring victim, observer, beneficiary, and perpetrator sensitivity. Each scale contains ten items that are answered on a 6-point rating scale ranging from 0 (not at all) to 5 (exactly). In the present study, the participants adopted the perspective of victims, hence the “JS-victim” scale was used. Higher scores indicate higher justice sensitivity as victims. Cronbach alpha coefficient of the scale was reported as .96. Turkish adaptation of the scale had been done (Coklar, 2015). Exploratory factor analyses showed that the scale is a unidimensional measure with an overall explained variance of 39%.

Factor loadings of the scale items ranged from .45 to .70. Confirmatory factor analysis indicated that the model data fit was at an acceptable level ( $\chi^2(33, N=151)=64.01$ ,  $p<.001$ ,  $GFI=.92$ ,  $AGFI=.87$ ,  $NNFI=.86$ ,  $CFI=.90$ ,  $RMSEA=.08$ ) The Cronbach alpha coefficient of the scale was found .82 and item-total correlations were between .30 and .60. In the present study, Cronbach's  $\alpha$  was .79.

**Big Five Personality Inventory Short Form:** The 44-item Big Five Inventory (BFI; Benet-Martinez & John, 1998) was administered to assess five personality dimensions – neuroticism, extraversion, openness, agreeableness, and conscientiousness. Ratings are indicated on a scale from 1 (disagree strongly) to 5 (agree strongly) for each item. The scale was adapted into Turkish (Sumer, Lajunen, and Ozkan, 2005). who reported Cronbach's Alpha reliabilities ranging from .64 to .77. The coefficients of Alpha were .62, and .78, respectively, in the data set used in this study.

### Procedure and Data Analysis

Firstly permission of the Ethics Committee of Ankara University was obtained. Then the permission of the departments was obtained and the administration of the scales was conducted. Participants were informed of the purpose and the voluntary nature of the study. Anonymity was ensured for all responses given. Participants signed a consent form and returned the completed survey to the researcher. Self-report questionnaires were administered in quiet classroom settings.

Four hundred and seventy-one students participated in the study. However, 5 students were excluded from the study because they were found to produce extreme scores. Therefore, the data obtained from 466 students were statistically analyzed.

Pearson correlation coefficient and hierarchical regression analyses were used to determine the relationships among personality traits, justice sensitivity, and willingness to forgive. To test whether justice sensitivity mediated the link between neuroticism and willingness to forgive with hierarchical regression analyses, (Baron and Kenny's 1986). recommendations were followed.

### Results

#### Descriptive Data and Inter-Correlations

The means, descriptive statistics, inter-correlations and internal consistency coefficients of the variables used in the study are indicated in Table 1. There are significant correlations between neuroticism, justice sensitivity, and willingness to forgive.

Hypothesis 1 Neuroticism is negatively associated with willingness to forgive

Hypothesis 2 Neuroticism is positively associated with justice sensitivity.

Hypothesis 3 Justice sensitivity is negatively associated with the willingness to forgive.

Hypothesis 4 Justice sensitivity mediates the link between neuroticism and willingness to forgive

Testing the Mediating Role of Justice Sensitivity in the Relationship Between Neuroticism and Willingness to Forgive

Following the steps of the mediation procedure, firstly it was verified that neuroticism and justice sensitivity were positively related ( $\beta = .19$ ,  $t = 4.04$ ,  $p<.01$ ). Then it was verified that justice sensitivity and willingness to forgive revealed a negative relationship ( $\beta = -.21$ ,  $t = -.438$ ,  $p<.01$ ). To test the third and last steps of the mediation procedure, a hierarchical regression analysis was done. The results of the hierarchical regression analysis demonstrated that neuroticism was negatively associated with willingness to forgive ( $\beta = -.13$ ,  $t = -1.97$ ,  $p < .01$ ). However, when victim sensitivity and neuroticism were taken together in the regression analysis, the significance of the relationship between neuroticism and willingness to forgive ( $\beta = -.10$ ,  $t = -1.48$ ,  $p<.01$ ) decreased, yet the relationship between neuroticism and willingness to forgive was significant. According to (Baron and Kenny 1986), this result indicated partial mediation. Therefore, it can be said that victim sensitivity partially explains the relationship between neuroticism and willingness to forgive (Sobel, 1982)  $z = 2.95$ ;  $p <.01$ . The results are presented in Table 2 and Fig. 1.

To test the mediator role of justice sensitivity in the relationship between neuroticism and willingness to forgive the mediation procedures were followed again. Firstly it was verified that neuroticism and justice sensitivity were positively related ( $\beta = .21$ ,  $t = 4.46$ ,  $p<.01$ ). Then it was verified that justice sensitivity and willingness to forgive revealed a negative relationship ( $\beta = -.29$ ,  $t = -6.20$ ,  $p<.01$ ). To test the third and last steps of the mediation procedure, a hierarchical regression analysis was done. The results of the hierarchical regression analysis demonstrated that neuroticism was negatively associated with willingness to forgive ( $\beta = -.13$ ,  $t = -1.97$ ,  $p < .01$ ). However, when justice sensitivity and neuroticism were taken together in the regression analysis, the significance of the relationship between neuroticism and willingness to forgive ( $\beta = -.10$ ,  $t = -1.48$ ,  $p<.01$ ) disappeared. According to (Baron and Kenny, 1986) this result indicated a full mediation. Therefore, it can be said that justice sensitivity explains the relationship between neuroticism and willingness to forgive (Sobel, 1982)  $z = 2.95$ ;  $p <.01$ . The results are presented in Table 1,2 and Fig. 1.

**Table 1:** Descriptive statistics, Cronbach's alpha coefficients, and inter-correlations of the variables Testing the Mediating Role of Justice Sensitivity in the Relationship Between Neuroticism and Willingness to Forgive

Variables	1	2	3
1.Justice Sensitivity	-		
2.Willingness to Forgive	-.301**	-	
3.Neuroticism	.209**	-.127**	-
Mean	40.92	32.60	22.35
Standard deviation	8.08	10.38	5.65
Cronbach's $\alpha$	.79	.78	.74

\*\* $p<.01$

**Table 2:** Hierarchical regression results indicating the mediating role of justice sensitivity in the relationship between neuroticism and willingness to forgive

Dependent Variable	Independent Variables	R <sup>2</sup>	R <sup>2</sup> change	F change	β	T
Justice sensitivity	Neuroticism.	.04	.04	19.93**	.21**	4.46
Willingness to Forgive	Neuroticism.	.02	.02	6.92**	-13**	-1.97
1.Step	Neuroticism.	.10	.08	38.43**	-.07	-1.48
2.Step	Justice Sensitivity				-.29**	-6.20

\*\*p<.01

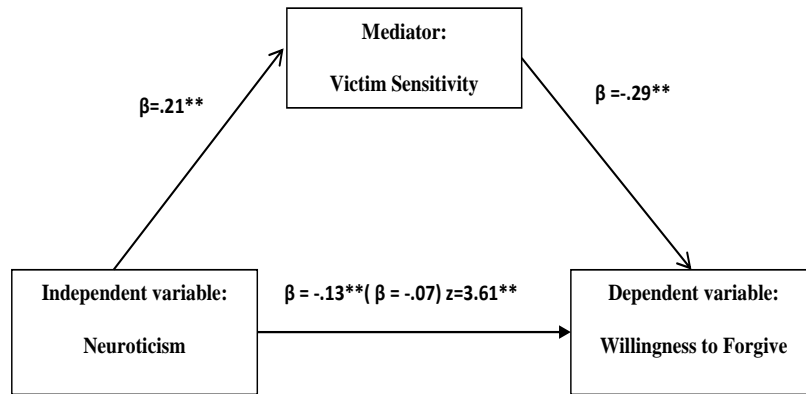


Figure 1: Standardized regression coefficients for the relationship between neuroticism and willingness to forgive as mediated by justice sensitivity. The standardized regression coefficient between neuroticism and willingness to forgive, controlling for justice sensitivity, is in parentheses. \*\*p<.01

**Discussion**

The purpose of the current research was to examine the relationships between neuroticism, willingness to forgive, and victim sensitivity. The relationship between neuroticism and willingness to forgive was fully mediated by victim sensitivity. In other words, as neuroticism increases in this model, victim sensitivity increases, willingness to forgive decreases. People who have higher levels of neuroticism are more likely to be high in justice sensitivity and less likely to be high in willingness to forgive. This finding indicates that justice sensitivity is an important factor in the relationship between neuroticism and willingness to forgive. People with high levels of neuroticism may be more inclined to be sensitive to unjust events towards themselves and to have vengeful thoughts and actions, which cause unforgiving attitudes and affect general well-being negatively. A lot of research findings can be seen in literature proving the high correlation between neuroticism and the tendency to forgive (Ashton., 1998; Berry., 2001; McCullough., 2001; Mc-Cullough & Hoyt, 1999). Authors addresses the fact that people high in neuroticism have a temper which changes quickly and due to their sensitiveness they cannot forgive easily (Ashton., 1998; Berry., 2001; McCullough & Hoyt, 1999) The mediator role of justice sensitivity in the relationship between neuroticism and willingness to forgive shows that this relation emerges via justice sensitivity. (Schmitt, 2008) indicated that neuroticism is correlated with skepticism and fear of being exploited and thus

neuroticism has a high correlation level with victim sensitivity.

Despite the existence of numerous research in the area of interpersonal forgiveness, it would be beneficial to continue the research in new directions. Considering the cultural differences, age-related differences the impact of the situational factors are of great importance in terms of understanding the complex nature of forgiveness. For further studies, it is recommended to work with different samples representing general society. The current study was conducted with participants who are university students and living in the same city, which can be seen as a bias in terms of the socio-demographic characteristics.

Forgiveness has significant implications in the areas of health and justice since it correlates with physical and psychological wellbeing (Berry & Worthington, 2011) and reconciliation (North, 1987) which can be linked to restorative justice. According to (Tony F. Marshall’s 1996) definition “Restorative justice is a process whereby all the parties with a stake in a particular offense come together to resolve collectively how to deal with the aftermath of the offense and its implications for the future” (Braithwaite, 1999). The fundamental premise of the restorative justice paradigm is that crime is a violation of people and relationships (Zehr, 1990) rather than merely a violation of the law. The most appropriate response to criminal behavior, therefore, is to repair the harm caused by the wrongful act (Law Commission, 2000). As such, the criminal justice system should provide those most closely affected by the crime (the

victim, the offender, and the community) an opportunity to come together to discuss the event and attempt to arrive at some type of understanding about what can be done to provide appropriate reparation (Latimer, Dowden, Muise, 2005). Reconciliation, as a legal foundation, can be valued as an instrument of restorative justice, which has been defined as a method functioning in the hands of the criminal justice system without executing investigation and judgment processes due to the decision of the victim whose harm is compensated by other ways except for judiciary. The main goal of the institution is to reconstruct social peace which has been harmed by a criminal act (Yaşar, Gökcan, Artuç, 2010). Thus, people with higher tendencies to forgive can tolerate and compensate for the harm more easily. Karremans and VanLange (2004) found that forgiving people are less aggressive towards the offender and more willing to cooperate. There are also findings proving that in close relationships people with higher tendencies to forgive are experiencing higher relationship satisfaction, trust and commitment comparing those with lower tendencies to forgive (Fincham & Beach, 2002; Gordon, Hughes, Tomcik, Dixon, & Litzinger, 2009; McCullough., 1998). Forgiveness also plays an important role in the restoration of a relationship (Paleari, Regalia

& Fincham, 2005; Tsang, McCullough & Fincham, 2006; Vasalou, Hopfensitz & Pitt, 2008). In conclusion, understanding and adopting the intervention perspectives based upon forgiveness would be beneficial in terms of reconciliation processes

Another practical implication of forgiveness studies can be essential for therapists. In the therapeutic process, it could be helpful to know to what extent the personality characteristics of the client is important when trying to solve problems related to interpersonal relationships. Considering its important effects in the area of health (Lawler, Younger, Piferi, Billington, Jobe Edmondson, & Jones 2005; Friedberg, Suchday & Shelov, 2007; Friedberg, Adonis, Von Bergen & Suchday, 2005; Harris, Luskin, Norman, Standard, Bruning, Evans & Thoresen, 2006), forgiveness have also benefits in clinical practices. Forgiveness increases the degree of wellbeing and life satisfaction (Ysseldy., 2007). That is why in recent years forgiveness based intervention programs were developed and used effectively (Fitzgibbons, 1986; Enright, 1998; Hope, 1987; Worthington ve Diblasio, 1990; Maugerve ark., 1992; Enright, 1996). Forgiveness has significant implications both in the areas of health and justice, for this reason, empirical studies aiming to understand this complicated construct are of great importance.

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