**When An Injured Group’s Socio-Economic Status Signals Forgiveness Expectancy In Perpetrators: The Moderating Role of SDO**

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Public significance: This study examined forgiveness from the perpetrator’s perspective showing that perpetrators’ forgiveness expectations are shaped by the perpetrators’ own social dominance orientation and victims’ socio-economic status.

**Abstract**

We investigated whether and when perpetrators might expect to be forgiven as a function of their own social dominance orientation and the injured group’s perceived socio-economic status. In a between-subjects design (N = 298), British participants imagined a realistic scenario in which they would offend members of either a low (Filipinos) or high (Chinese) socio-economic status group. Results revealed no significant differences between low and high socio-economic status conditions among participations with low SDO scores. In contrast, participants with high SDO scores expected the injured group in the low socio-economic status condition to be significantly more forgiving of them than the injured group in the high status condition. These results demonstrate the dynamic role that perceived group characteristics, such as status, and hierarchy-maintaining individual difference can play in shaping forgiveness expectancy among the perpetrator group.

Key words: forgiveness expectations, social dominance, victim power status

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Forgiveness, defined as the motivation to suppress one’s impulse to retaliate against a perpetrator, is consequential for victims, perpetrators, and the repair of their damaged relationships (Noor, 2016). So far researchers have predominantly studied forgiveness from the victim’s perspective, focussing on the different types of antecedents of forgiveness (Fehr et al., 2010; Van Tongeren et al., 2014). However, little is known about how perpetrators think regarding forgiveness. For example, it may well be the case that perpetrators’ expectations to be forgiven might vary as function of the different characteristics the perpetrators themselves bring to the table—such as their individual difference in accepting and even endorsing social inequalities in society. Additionally, perpetrators’ forgiveness expectations may also be influenced by characteristics associated with their victims—such as the relative (low vs. high) power status a particular victim group occupies in society.

Investigating forgiveness from the perpetrator’s perspective matters not least so because expecting (not) to be easily forgiven can elicit very different attitudes and behaviours among perpetrators following an offence that might deepen (or heal) the hurt and escalate (or resolve) the conflict. Thus, in the present work we addressed several gaps that exist within the forgiveness literature. Specifically, we tested the extent to which the perpetrator’s social dominance orientation and victim’s socio-economic status (experimentally manipulated) might influence perpetrators’ expectations to be forgiven after a wrongdoing.

# **Forgiveness As a Strategy To Maintain Group-based Hierarchies?**

# Most human societies tend to be structured as group-based hierarchies, reflecting how some groups have access to social and material resources whereas others are denied such access. Consequently, one’s group’s place in the hierarchy is known to influence individuals’ evaluation of and behaviour towards other groups (Kteily et al., 2020). To capture the individual difference that describes the preferences for group-based hierarchies and inequality, researchers have developed the concept of social dominance orientation (SDO, Ho et al., 2015). SDO is derived from social dominance theory (Pratto et al., 1994; Sidanius & Pratto, 2001), which attempts to explain how social hierarchies in society are formed and maintained. On average, individuals high on SDO are motivated to support and justify group-based hierarchies by endorsing institutions and policies that maintain and increase inequality between groups, whereas those low on SDO would oppose institutions and policies that aim to challenge and decrease inequality. Recent conceptual development of SDO has led to distinguishing between SDO-dominance (SDO-D) and SDO-egalitarianism (SDO-E). These sub-components are related but capture distinct ways to maintain hierarchies. Whereas SDO-D predicts, for example, overt discrimination, such as blatant dehumanisation, SDO-E predicts subtle forms of discrimination, such as negative attitudes toward social justice (Ho et la., 2015).

# Of high relevance, recent research (Karunarantne & Laham, 2019) suggests that one way to maintain group-based inequalities is for high-status groups to oppose apologise for their wrongs towards victim groups. Specifically, across different historical and contemporary contexts of injustices, Karunaratne and Laham (2019) demonstrated that their participants’ higher SDO scores predicted high levels of resistance to apologise for their ingroup’s harm-doings.

# In the current study, we further advance this research by exploring that even prior to considerations about whether (or not) to apologise, perpetrators high in SDO may have simply higher expectations to be forgiven by their victims. Additionally, we argue that high SDO perpetrator group members will not indiscriminately form such expectations. Instead, if they conceive of forgiveness as a strategy to maintain hierarchies, they will form such forgiveness expectations more readily after harming a low (vs. high) status group. Thus, we hypothesised that the expectation to be forgiven will be strongest among perpetrators high in SDO and who are facing victims of low (vs. high) status.

# **Method**

**Participants and Procedure**

Our sample comprised 301 white British adults, participating online via Prolific panels. Three participants were excluded because they failed to correctly answer our attention check. The final sample consisted of 88 males and 210 females (*M*age = 38.62; *SD* = 12.63). A sensitivity analysis revealed that with power = 0.90 and α = 0.05, a sample of 298 participants would detect a minimum effect size of *f* = 0.19.

**Procedure and Experimental Materials**

To induce the role of a perpetrator in participants and manipulate victim group’s low (vs. high) status, they were asked to imagine the following:

“Imagine you are sitting in the library studying. You want to take a break from your studies and start browsing through your Facebook or any other social media site. Among the many posts, you come across a post covering a TV talk show in which someone is shouting offensive slogans and insults against people from the Philippines (vs. China). Next, you realise that your headphones were not properly connected to your phone and everyone else around you in the study room, including a group of Filipino (vs. Chinese) students, heard the insults and offensive slogans against their group. In fact, you see that shortly after this incident the Filipino (vs. Chinese) students are starting to pack their books and leave the study room before you can do anything.”

We chose the above outgroups to manipulate the victim’s status, given Philippines’ lower socio-economic status relative to China’s status. Next, participants were asked to respond to a survey. In total, there were 147 participants in the low status condition 151 in the high status condition.

**Measures**

Unless noted otherwise, all measures ranged from 0 (*strongly disagree*) to 100 (*strongly agree*). Full measures, including those for exploratory analyse not reported here, are available in the supplemental online materials ([SOM](https://osf.io/ym9x5/?view_only=3b9f019f681d4b21a66d432662d34ea4)).

**Expecting to be forgiven.**Participants’ expectation to be forgiven was measured using a seven-item scale developed by Brown and Phillips (2005). A sample item included, “The Filipino (Chinese) students will forgive me”. This scale was reliable (Cronbach α = 0.85).

**Social dominance orientation.** To assess participants’ social dominance orientation, we used the two 4-item based sub-scales developed by Ho et al. (2015). A sample item of SDO-D was:“Some groups of people are simply inferior to other groups.*”* A sample item of SDO-E was: “We should work to give all groups an equal chance to succeed.” Both scales were reliable (Cronbach αs = 0.74 and 0.79, respectively).

**Outgroup status.** The status of the harmed outgroups was assessed by asking participants to rate the outgroup on a 10-rung ladder where the top (ranked 10) represented the group with most resources (most money, most education, & best jobs), and the bottom (ranked 1) represented the group with least resources (Adler et al., 2000).

# **Results**

## **Manipulation Check**

As intended, results revealed that participants viewed the Filipino outgroup (*M* = 4.97, *SD* = 1.45) as lower in status than the Chinese outgroup (*M* = 6.77, *SD* = 1.51), *t*(296) = -10.50, *p* < .001, Cohen’s *d* = 1.22, mean difference = -1.80, 95% CI [-2.14, -1.46].

## **Interaction Effect**

The main effect of status on forgiveness expectation was not significant (*p* = .61). However, as predicted, SDO-D significantly interacted with experimental condition (low vs. high status) to predict forgiveness expectation, *b* = -0.23, *p* = .02, 95% CI [-0.41, -0.03]. There were no significant differences in forgiveness expectations across status conditions among low SDO-D participants *(p* = .25). In contrast, high SDO-D participants were significantly more likely to expect to be forgiven by Filipino victims (*M* = 39.63) compared to Chinese victims (*M* = 34.15), *t*(294)) = -2.14, *SE*  = 2.57, *p* = .03, 95% CI [-10.54, -0.44]. Unexpectedly, SDO-E failed to significantly interact with experimental condition to predict forgiveness expectation (*p* = .15).

**Discussion**

Our findings extend past research (Fehr et al. 2010) by revealing the extent to which the dynamic interaction between perpetrator and victim characteristics influences forgiveness expectations. Whereas past research showed that perpetrators high (vs. low) in SDO object to apologise to their historical or contemporary victim groups (Karunaratne and Laham, 2019), our work demonstrated that high SDO perpetrators may also expect to be more readily forgiven by their victims. Our work further extends past research in that it revealed that high SDO perpetrators do not indiscriminately expect to be forgiven. Instead, their expectations to be forgiven vary as a function of their victims’ relative status, with such forgiveness expectations increasing the lower their victims’ status is. As such, these results provide evidence that forgiveness is likely to be utilised as yet another strategy to maintain group hierarchies among individuals high in SDO.

Interestingly, the effects revealed in this study were observed for SDO-D only, which indicates that it was the dominance motives, rather than the anti-egalitarianism motives, of SDO that were responsible for these effects. Such SDO-D driven effects are plausible, especially when considering that perpetrators high in SDO-D might *strategically* expect to be forgiven only when they deem their victims’ status to be low (vs. high). Given the already existing hierarchy then, it is likely that these perpetrators are inclined to assert their overt dominance, as opposed to be preoccupied with equality concerns. While plausible, our results are different from past research which, at least in contexts of intergroup apologies, reported SDO-E to be the driving force, rather than SDO-D (Karunaratne and Laham, 2019). Future research could further explore the extent such differences may have arisen due to the differences in focussing on forgiveness expectations versus oppositions to apologies.

Although reassuring that the manipulation of economic status was validated by our manipulation check, a future replication study should rule out that the observed results are not due to other cultural stereotypes – such as Chinese people being associated with traits linked to lacking generosity or forgiveness. For example, future research could employ our experimental design (see [SOM](https://osf.io/ym9x5/?view_only=3b9f019f681d4b21a66d432662d34ea4)), but through a pre-test should measure participants’ perceptions of Filipino and Chinese people’s forgivability prior to the actual study, which could be treated as controls in the analysis. Naturally, our results should also be replicated across other intergroup relations with perceived power differences – beyond economic status – such as gender differences (Yap & Chao, 2018).

In conclusion, we view the present work as a first step towards understanding forgiveness from the perpetrator’s perspective and establishing that dynamic link between forgiveness, status and ideology.

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