

Determinants of forgiveness after experiencing infidelity in a marital relationship

Czynniki warunkujące przebaczenie po doświadczeniu zdrady w związku małżeńskim¹
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Abstrakt: Niewierność małżeńska, niezależnie od jej rodzaju, powoduje poważne konflikty w relacjach między małżonkami. Za ważny element poprawy relacji w związku uznawane jest przebaczenie. Wspomaga ono proces rozwiązania konfliktów oraz zwiększa zaangażowanie w związek. Celem realizowanych badań było ustalenie czynników warunkujących przebaczenie zdrady u osób pozostających w związku małżeńskim. Przebadano 373 osób (339 kobiet, 34 mężczyźni), w wieku od 22 do 64 lat. Badania zostały przeprowadzone w formie elektronicznej z zastosowaniem: Skali Przebaczenia Małżeńskiego (MOFS, Paleari, Regalia, Fincham, 2009; polska adaptacja Brudek, Steuden, 2015), Skali Orientacji Pozytywnej (Positivity Scale, Caprara i in., 2012; polska adaptacja Łaguna, Oles, Filipiuk, 2011), TIPI-PL (Ten Item Personality Inventory, polska adaptacja Sorokowska, Słotwińska, Zbieg, Sorokowski, 2014) oraz ankiety personalnej. Przeprowadzone analizy korelacyjne wykazały pozytywny związek pomiędzy zaangażowaniem w związek, spełnieniem w związku, orientacją pozytywną i stabilnością emocjonalną a przebaczeniem u osób badanych. Im wyższy poziom przebaczenia, tym wyższa orientacja pozytywna. Częściowo potwierdzony został związek pomiędzy cechami osobowości a przebaczeniem u osób doświadczających zdrady. Wykazano dodatni związek na słabym poziomie między życzliwością a ugodowością oraz ujemny z sumiennością. Wykazano, że spełnienie i zaangażowanie są istotnymi predyktorami przebaczenia. Związek zaangażowania z przebaczeniem jest moderowany przez cechę sumienności. Przyjęty układ zmiennych wyjaśnia odpowiednio 17% zmienności wyników zmiennej przebaczenie.

Słowa kluczowe: zdrada, przebaczenie, małżeństwo, doświadczenie

Abstract: Marital infidelity, of whatever kind, causes serious conflicts in the relationship between spouses. Forgiveness is recognised as an important part of improving relationships in a relationship. It aids the conflict resolution process and increases commitment to the relationship. The aim of this study was to determine the determinants of forgiveness of infidelity in married people. A total of 373 people (339 women, 34 men), aged between 22 and 64 years, were studied. The study was conducted electronically using: Marital Forgiveness Scale (MOFS, Paleari, Regalia, Fincham, 2009; Polish adaptation Brudek, Steuden, 2015), Positivity Orientation Scale (Positivity Scale, Caprara et al., 2012; Polish adaptation Laguna, Oles, Filipiuk, 2011), TIPI-PL (Ten Item Personality Inventory, Polish adaptation Sorokowska, Słotwińska, Zbieg, Sorokowski, 2014) and a personal questionnaire. The correlational analyses conducted showed a positive relationship between relationship commitment, relationship fulfilment, positive orientation and emotional stability and forgiveness in the subjects. The higher the level of forgiveness, the higher the positive orientation. The relationship between personality traits and forgiveness in people experiencing betrayal was partially confirmed. A positive relationship was shown at a weak level between benevolence and agreeableness and a negative one with conscientiousness. Fulfilment and commitment were shown to be significant predictors of forgiveness. The relationship between commitment and forgiveness is moderated by the trait conscientiousness. The adopted pattern of variables explains respectively 17% of the variation in the results of the forgiveness variable.

Keywords: betrayal, forgiveness, marriage, experience

Introduction

Infidelity in a marital relationship is becoming an increasingly common phenomenon. It represents a significant source of strong emotions and

threatens the stability of relationships. Research by the Institute for the Study of Social Change (2020) found that 12.3% of married people had

¹ Artykuł w języku polskim: <https://www.stowarzyszeniefidesetratio.pl/fer/2023-2Dack.pdf>

committed infidelity. Data from the Central Statistical Office (2022) shows that in 2021 infidelity was the cause of divorce in 19.15% of cases and marital separation in 10.79% of cases. The most represented age group of divorcees are those aged 20 to 29. Over the last 40 years, there has been a 52.4% increase in divorces and a 45.2% decrease in marriages. These trends reflect the situation existing in Europe, as confirmed by Eurostat data (2022). In 2020, a slight reduction in the divorce rate from 1.9 to 1.6 per 1,000 existing marriages can be observed, compared to 2015. In relation to the number of marriages during the same period, the rate is 4.2 to 3.2 per 1,000 existing marriages.

Married couples experience various difficulties in the course of their lives that contribute to the disruption of mutual communication. Significant hindrances to the communication process include blaming each other, criticising, ridiculing, and downplaying problems that arise. Among the most worrying types of hurt in close relationships is infidelity. It violates trust and previous sexual and emotional intimacy (Fife, Weeks, Weeks, 2013). Partners of cheaters typically experience shame, anger, feelings of powerlessness (Chi et al., 2019), sadness, suffering, grief, and rage towards their spouse (Piątek, 2011).

For the quality of the marital relationship, *forgiveness* is important. It is described as a process (of strengthening, healing; Bacioğlu, 2020), a state of one's own choice (Sakız, Sariçam, 2015), a necessity for the survival of the relationship (Sharma, Das, 2017), and a virtue to control anger (Boleyn-Fitzgerald, 2002). In a marital relationship, the ability to forgive is a key ability leading to a happy life and marriage (Çelik et al., 2022). The ability to forgive is the foundation of a successful marriage and an important part of improving relationships after harm or hurt (Behrang et al., 2022). The most difficulties betrayed people experience with forgiveness is with the felt-harm related to the lack of fidelity and love, and trust is undermined in a sexual relationship (Piątek, 2011). Women most often fear being hurt again, whereas men fear being shown-up as weak. The motives for forgiveness for most betrayed

people are concern for the marriage and children. In the forgiveness process, women are more likely than men to place conditions on their partner. Research on forgiveness in intimate relationships has shown that it has a positive impact on partners' level of interest, stability, relationship satisfaction, and physical and mental health (Quenstedt-Moe, Popkess, 2014). Religiosity, quality of the partner relationship, empathy, perceived remorse, and stress management play an important role in the forgiveness process (Fehr et al., 2010; Fitness, Peterson, 2008).

The main goal of forgiveness is to maintain the relationship and improve it (Aalgaard et al., 2016). Forgiveness is undoubtedly an important part of maintaining a vibrant, strong relationship, and it determines the stability and satisfaction of a marriage. It helps to sustain the quality of the relationship, provides greater closeness and commitment, helps to resolve conflicts, increases the partners' level of commitment to each other, and enables the relationship to be rebuilt (Osei-Tutu et al., 2021). The highest propensity for forgiveness is demonstrated by those who are married (35.3%; Institute for Research on Social Change, 2020) and who show higher levels of relationship commitment and marital satisfaction (Fincham, Beach, 2007).

According to interdependence theory, when faced with unfavourable events – infidelity, for example – partners who are committed to the relationship and satisfied with the relationship tend to be more motivated to maintain it because of the many resources they have invested in the relationship (Rusbult, Hannon, Stocker, Finkel, 2005, pp. 185-206). Research by Brose et al. (2005) on young people showed that forgiveness is positively correlated with agreeableness and negatively correlated with neuroticism. A study by Saffarian et al. (2018) found that a sense of duty, hope, and forgiveness play mediating roles in marital satisfaction in couples on the verge of divorce. Personality traits, hope, and forgiveness may contribute to increased feelings of satisfaction in a relationship. Overall, the aim of this study was to identify the determinants of forgiveness in married individuals after experiencing infidelity in their marriage.

1. Theoretical introduction to the research

1.1. Characteristics of marriage as a relationship between two people

Marriage has different legal dimensions (Kozyra, 2021, p. 17). Article 18 of the Constitution of the Republic of Poland defines *marriage* as a union between a man and a woman, which is under the protection and guardianship of the Republic of Poland. In Poland, monogamous unions (with one partner) concluded in the form of a declaration in front of the head of the Registry Office (the so-called *civil wedding*) or in the form of a denomination (the so-called *church wedding*, concordat wedding) are recognised as legal. Both forms define marriage as permanent. Canon law further defines it as indissoluble.

According to Rostowski (2009), “marriage is a complex affair, with individual characteristics and social and individual contexts influencing its functioning, ensuring its more or less likely success” (p. 17). Marriage is sometimes considered to be a unique intimate relationship, providing a sense of being needed, respected, and noticed by another person. Marriage in modern times has increasingly been seen as “a legally recognised social contract between two people, traditionally based on a sexual relationship and implying permanence of the relationship” (Chadda, Kumar, Sarkar, 2019, p. 160). Marriage is also sometimes defined as a relationship between two people that is emotional, romantic, and sexual in nature. By living together, individuals identify themselves as a couple (Constantin, 2004). Ghiurca, Vintila (2019) described two different perspectives on marriage: a positive one (a source of happiness, satisfaction) and a negative one (an element of frustration, limitations). Marriage undoubtedly provides an important foundation for family building, satisfaction, and relationship quality (Fahimdanesh, Noforesti, Tavakol, 2020, p. 222). Recent research indicates that mutual respect, love, willingness to forgive, and generosity ensure marital relationship satisfaction, thereby reducing the likelihood of marital breakdown (Dew, Wilcox, 2013, pp. 1225-1226).

Mature marital love is characterised by sensitivity to the needs of the other person (Rostowski, Rostowska, 2014, p. 33). Marital satisfaction is determined by both the personality traits and mutual communication of the spouses. Marital satisfaction is fostered by empathy, reflexivity, emotionality, conscientiousness, and low neuroticism. Interpersonal communication is an essential part of maintaining good relationships and experiencing happiness. Precise, unambiguous, and understandable communication, both verbal and non-verbal, is essential for this to work. The ability to listen and responsibility and openness become important in the mutual contact between spouses. Communication in close relationships manifests either as supportive communication, deprecating communication, or committed communication between partners (Biel, 2013, pp. 39-40). *Support* is associated with the manifestation of interest in one’s partner’s needs, problems, and joint problem-solving. *Commitment* is related to creating an atmosphere of mutual understanding and closeness in the relationship by showing affection and emphasising one’s partner’s unique qualities. *Deprecation* of a partner is related to the manifestation of domination and aggression towards one’s partner, and a lack of respect demonstrated for one’s partner’s dignity. Compatibility of beliefs, values, and views affects the mutual attractiveness of partners (Bakiera, 2013, pp. 69-70). McKay, Davis, Fanning. (2019, pp. 9-10) pointed out that effective communication becomes the foundation for both life skills and building and maintaining relationships. Communication is important in the spouses’ relationship because success and marital success contribute to the longevity of the relationship, depending in some ways on it (Adamczyk, 2013, pp. 84-85). Most close relationships are characterised by at least some degree of caring or positive interaction (Salmon, 2017, pp. 122-123). Among the most distressing types of hurt in close relationships is infidelity. It contributes to the violation of trust, closeness, and intimacy between partners (Fife et al., 2017).

1.2. Infidelity in a marriage

The ever-increasing media coverage of marital infidelity clearly accentuates the prevalence of this phenomenon in our society. Marital infidelity is considered the

most serious and threatening injury to the stability of a marriage, leading to a breach of trust with the offending partner (Beltrán-Morillas, Valor-Segura, Expósito, 2015, pp. 76-77).

Infidelity is sometimes defined as “engagements in romantic relationships outside of an active, committed relationship that result in a sense of relational betrayal” (Thornton, Nagurney, 2011, p. 51). It has also been described as a feeling or behaviour during which a relationship expectation is broken (Octaviana, Abraham, 2018, p. 3158). It is also sometimes described as an emotional or sexual act that is outside the primary relationship; it is a breach of trust and boundaries of the existing relationship (Blow, Hartnett, 2005, pp. 183-184). Guitar et al. (2017) defined *sexual infidelity* as the breaking of a vow to remain sexually exclusive. Emotional and sexual infidelity often occur together. Interpersonal and contextual factors, education level, religiosity, career, and place of residence are often cited as risk indicators for marital infidelity (Hook, Worthington, Utsey, Davis, Burnette, 2015). Infidelity is one of the most common causes of divorce (Apostolou, Panayiotou, 2019, pp. 34-35; Buss, 2018, p. 157).

Infidelity can negatively impact the psychological well-being of the betrayed person. Sometimes betrayed spouses experience bouts of depression, anxiety, and a sense of loss (Fincham, May, 2017, p. 70). Infidelity can be physical or emotional. The former is considered an act of engaging in sexual relations with someone other than one's spouse. *Emotional infidelity* is considered to be falling in love with or sharing a deep emotional connection with someone other than one's spouse (Buss, 2018, pp. 158-159). Infidelity is associated with feelings of shame and embarrassment, as it leads to a broken promise of fidelity. The negative consequences of a detected affair often involve a degradation of trust and support, an experience of anxiety, anger, sadness, and lowered self-esteem of the personal and sexual sphere (Couch, Baughman, Derow, 2017, p. 504).

1.3. Forgiveness in a relationship

The issue of forgiveness has been addressed by thinkers and scholars representing different fields of knowledge. The French philosopher Jacques Derrida (1977, p. 34) defined forgiveness as “unconditional, gracious,

infinite, anonymous forgiveness granted to the guilty as guilty, without counterpart, even to those who neither repent nor ask for forgiveness” (p. 34). Forgiveness is an individual process of replacing feelings of revenge with a sense of empathy and tolerance. It is also a way of cancelling a debt to the person who has hurt or wronged one (Exline, Baumeister, 2000, p. 133). Forgiveness thus involves a willingness to abandon one's right to resentment, negative judgement and indifferent behaviour towards the one who has wrongly hurt us, while developing the undeserved qualities of compassion, generosity and even love. (Enright, The Human Development Study Group, 1996, p. 113)

The ability to forgive contributes to reduced anger (Thompson et al., 2005, p. 313), depression, anxiety, and higher self-esteem (Reed, Enright, 2006, p. 920).

Forgiveness on a psychological level is sometimes described as “an intrapersonal prosocial change towards the abuser that takes place within a specific interpersonal context” (Brudek, Steuden, 2015, p. 165). It is associated with personality traits and is sometimes considered a multidimensional construct that is an important element of physical, mental, and spiritual health (Matuszewski, 2018, p. 2). The elements of forgiveness understood in this way include an intensity of benevolence (lack of regret, readiness to forgive) and an intensity of resentment-avoidance (a desire for revenge or holding a grudge).

Forgiveness has been conceptualised in terms of two constructs: negative forgiveness and positive forgiveness. *Negative forgiveness* is associated with regret, withdrawal, avoidance of punishment, and revenge against the offending partner. *Positive forgiveness* is associated with a willingness to forgive and greater empathy and trust and less anger towards the offending partner.

Marital forgiveness is sometimes defined as “the forgiveness of a single, specific hurtful event in a specific interpersonal context” (Palcari, Regalia, Fincham, 2009, p. 194). Marital forgiveness is accompanied by both positive and negative motivational factors. The former are related to feelings, thoughts, and behaviours in which there is empathy for and acceptance of the partner's wrongdoing. Conversely, negative motivations are related to reducing negative feelings (anger), thoughts (developing resentment),

or behaviours (e.g., avoiding the partner). Forgiveness in a marriage aims to maintain the relationship. Interdependence theory (Kelly, Thibault, 1978) describes relationships in terms of punishments and rewards. It can help one understand forgiveness in romantic relationships by revealing the experienced quality of relationships and a certain commitment to make decisions. Forgiving others is the tendency to decrease negative and increase positive thoughts, feelings, and actions directed at the person who has erred (Toussaint, Shields, Dorn, Slavich, 2016, p. 2).

The process of forgiveness can create an environment for the potential development of better and more positive attitudes and feelings towards the betraying spouse. It contributes to reduced anger, higher self-esteem, and increases in the quality, satisfaction, and stability of marital relationships (Fincham, Hall, Bech, 2007). Forgiveness interrupts destructive patterns of revenge and promotes closeness (Bono, McCullough, Root, 2008, pp. 182-183), trust, and constructive communication between spouses (Wieselquist, 2009, p. 531). Understanding forgiveness is important because it can result in relational harmony and a range of physiological and psychological benefits (Rusbult, Hannon, Stocker, Finkel, 2005; see pp. 185-187). Forgiveness is also positively associated with quality of life (Offenbacher et al., 2017, pp. 528-529), better anger control (Mefford, Thomas, Callen, 2014, pp. 283-284),

increased productivity and work performance, and fewer mental and physical health problems (Toussaint et al., 2018, pp. 2-3). Forgiveness is also associated with seeking support (Flanagan et al., 2012, pp. 1215-1216) and a greater use of positive forms of general coping, such as acceptance, positive refocusing, and reassessment of situations (Malinovic, Finka, Lewis, Unterrainera, 2016, pp. 43-44; Rey, Extremera, 2016, pp. 2944-2945). It is a skill that can be mentally and emotionally improved (Nussbaum, 2016).

1.4. Determinants of forgiveness

A person prone to forgiveness has an overall adaptive personality profile. This is characterised by both low rates of depression, hostility, and anxiety and a tendency to ruminate on one's own thoughts, with

no tendency to take advantage of others. Individuals inclined to forgiveness enact various pro-social traits and are more optimistic about maintaining positive relationships (Ajmal, Amin, Bajwa, 2016, p. 91). A person is more likely to be willing to forgive if the relationship between them and the betrayer was meaningful, satisfying, and engaging for them (Zarzycka, 2016, p. 167). Individuals with narcissistic traits show less willingness to forgive. This is presumably due to an exaggerated belief in their own superiority (Szczęśniak, Król, Szałachowski, Kaliczyńska, Tabosa, 2017). The inability to forgive is associated with anxiety, impulsivity, coldness, aggression, and guilt. Some researchers view forgiveness as a disposition, a reaction to a situation, or a relationship characteristic (Carlisle, Tsang, 2013, pp. 423-437). According to Balliet (2010, pp. 260-261) and Mullet, Neto, Rivire, (2005, pp. 159-182), two characteristics/traits from the Big Five model of personality are considered the main correlates of forgiveness: agreeableness and neuroticism. Individuals who are prone to forgiveness tend to feel less anger and are less likely to seek revenge. They are characterised by lower scores on neuroticism and higher scores on agreeableness. *Conscientiousness* (being conscientious, considerate) has shown a positive relationship with the tendency to forgive (Shepherd, Belicki, 2008, p. 389). Research by Hill, Allemand (2012, p. 497) indicated that conscientious individuals are more effective at self-regulation, and that this promotes forbearance and the promotion of forgiveness (Hill, Allemand, Heffernan, 2013, p. 274). The ability to take the other person's perspective is a mediating factor in forgiveness (McCullough, 2000, pp. 446-455).

Traits conducive to forgiveness also include *extraversion* (sociability, friendliness, assertiveness) (Szczęśniak et al., 2017), as well as religious commitment. A study conducted with students at the University of Jordan found a relationship between personality traits, mental health, and the tendency to forgive. High correlations occurred between agreeableness and forgiveness and low correlations between neuroticism and forgiveness. The results also showed a positive relationship between forgiveness and mental health (Al-Sabeelah, Alraggad, Ameerth, 2014, pp. 224-225).

Finally, analysing previous research, a strong correlation between chronological age and the understanding of forgiveness has been observed (Hill et al., 2013). Research findings confirm that as people get older, they become more willing to forgive (e.g., McCullough, Witvliet, 2002, pp. 446-455).

1.5. The theory of positive disintegration

According to the assumptions of the theory of positive disintegration, the formation of identity and personality requires the transgression of certain biological and genetic boundaries, as well as conditioning in the development of certain social and cultural patterns (Tylkowska, 2000, p. 231). In Polish psychologist Kazimierz Dąbrowski's view, an individual's developmental potential is associated with inner transformation and deliberate, conscious work on one's character. Internal transformation is associated with an individual's high moral values, respect, compassion, and service to others. *Level*, in Dąbrowski's (1975) theory, refers to the characteristic intra-psychic arrangement of mental-emotional dynamisms. The first level is *primary integration*, which is characterised by a rigid psychic structure that is subordinate to biological needs (Dąbrowski, 1975, p. 51). While the person at this level is able to adapt to the environment and changing conditions, they do not show empathy or sensitivity in relationships with others. They do not experience internal conflict, reflexivity, or guilt (Limont, 2011, p. 97).

Level 2, referred to as *single-level disintegration*, is characterised by ambivalence, ambivalencies, volatility, and a predominance of sadness and despondency. Personal characteristics include jealousy, value relativism, dependence on others, and a sense of inferiority (Kędrzyński, 2019, p. 53; Limont, 2011, p. 97).

Level 3 is characterised by *spontaneous multilevel disintegration*. Here, individuals experience strong internal conflicts and crises affecting the transformation of their internal psychic structure. A characteristic feature of this period is bewilderment about the relationship to oneself and the external world and dissatisfaction with oneself, including feelings of inferiority and guilt. Differences in conflicts within levels are thought to cause a state of high psychological tension (Tylkowska,

2000, p. 245). There is an internal hierarchy of goals and values, reflexivity, strong moral conflicts, and existential anxiety. Breakdowns are noticeable, mental resilience increases, and the ability to solve complex problems improves (Dąbrowski, 1979).

The fourth level in positive disintegration theory is referred to as *organised multilevel disintegration*, characterised by a relatively higher level of development of value hierarchies and goals (Limont, 2011, p. 99). The person experiences more conflict and tension. The person is capable of self-reflection. Also characteristic of individuals at this level is conscious personality development and synthesis, and a readiness to help others is noticeable. Striving for excellence, responsibility, self-awareness, intra-psychic transformations, and empathy are visible.

Secondary integration, Level 5, is characterised by the highest levels of autonomy, empathy, authenticity, and responsibility. At Level 5, two kinds of essences are formed: individual and social. These constitute the most "essential" sets of qualities of a person. A person's *essence* is characterised by their strong abilities, interests, and lasting relationships and a conscious sense of identity with the history of their own development. It is associated with an individual's felt-responsibility – the need to take on unique, important tasks. A person's social essence is associated with empathy, responsibility, autonomy, authenticity, and social awareness (Tylkowska, 2000, p. 248).

2. Research methodology

The object of this research was to find out the determinants of forgiveness following infidelity in a marriage. The research problem was: What factors determine the forgiveness of betrayal in a marital relationship? Two groups of factors were considered: the personality characteristics of the respondents and the characteristics of their marriage.

2.1. Characteristics of the study group

A total of 373 people (339 women, 34 men) aged 22 to 64 participated in the study ($M = 39.65$; $SD = 8.38$). Those aged 31 to 40 years (39.7%) and

41 to 50 years (36.5%) were the most represented, followed by those aged 20 to 30 years (15.0%) and over 50 years (8.8%). Most respondents had a tertiary (52.3%) or secondary (36.5%) education, with the remainder of the study group reporting vocational (9.1%), lower secondary (1.6%), or primary (0.5%) education. Of the participants, 75.8% were from a city (of which 44.2% were from a city of more than 100,000 inhabitants), and 24.2% were from a village.

The majority of those participating in the study (85.8%) had children. The average fertility rate was 1.65 +/- 1.076 (range 0–8). The mean marital tenure of the respondents was 14.15 +/- 9.18 years (range 1–46). The largest number of respondents experiencing infidelity in their marriage had not used specialist help (49.3%). Of the participants, 27.6% declared attending 1 to 2 professional consultations, 12.9% revealed that they had used help 3 to 5 times, and 10.2% indicated that they had consulted a specialist more than 6, or very many, times. Most respondents (84.2%) stated that they were involved in their marriage, including 57.4% “completely.” The majority (71.3%) also felt fulfilled in the relationship, either “completely” (35.1%) or “somewhat” (36.2%).

2.2. Research tools

This study used Polish versions of the Marital Offence-Specific Forgiveness Scale, the Positive (orientation) Scale, the Ten-Item Personality Inventory, and a questionnaire. The questionnaire was divided into two parts: “metrics,” which included questions regarding the subjects’ gender, age, education, and place of residence, and “relationship characteristics,” regarding marital tenure, having children, the use of professional help after a difficult relationship situation, the degree of subjective assessment of relationship commitment, and marital fulfilment.

The Marital Offence-Specific Forgiveness Scale (MOFS; Paleari et al., 2009; [Polish adaptation by] Brudek, Steuden, 2015) was used. The Polish version of MOFS, which contains 10 items, consists of two dimensions: Resentment-Avoidance and Kindness. The respondent provides answers on a 5-point scale, including “yes,” “rather yes,” “yes, no,” “rather no,” and “no.” The internal consistency coefficient

(Cronbach’s alpha) for each dimension was 0.87 for Resentment-Avoidance and 0.72 for Kindness. The confirmation analysis theoretical accuracy coefficients were 0.97 (Brudek, Steuden, 2015).

A positivity orientation scale – the Positivity Scale by Caprara et al. (2012; [Polish adaptation by] Łaguna et al., 2011) – was also used. The questionnaire consists of eight statements, one of which is reversible. Respondents provide answers on a 5-point scale, including 1 = “Strongly disagree,” 2 = “Disagree,” 3 = “Neither agree nor disagree,” 4 = “Agree,” and 5 = “Strongly agree.” The reliability of the scale (Cronbach’s alpha) is 0.84 (Łaguna et al., 2011).

Also used was the Ten-Item Personality Inventory (TIPI) by Gosling et al. (2003; [Polish adaptation – PL – by] Sorokowska et al., 2014). The TIPI-PL consists of 10 items. The respondent provides answers with a 7-point scale, including 1 = “Strongly disagree,” 2 = “Rather disagree,” 3 = “Slightly disagree,” 4 = “Neither agree nor disagree,” 5 = “Slightly agree,” 6 = “Rather agree,” and 7 = “Strongly agree.” The calculation of scores results in an assessment of the intensity of the following traits: extraversion, conscientiousness, emotional stability, openness to experience, and agreeableness. The Scale has satisfactory psychometric parameters, so that an accurate picture of the subject’s personality can be obtained; the reliability of the scale is 0.77 to 0.83 (Sorokowska et al., 2014). The TIPI-PL consists of five subscales: Openness to Experience, Emotional Stability, Conscientiousness, Agreeableness, and Extraversion.

2.3. Procedure

The research was conducted electronically on webanketa.co.uk. The address of the research page was posted on a Facebook group called “Betrayed, betrayed, heartbroken.” Participation in the study was voluntary. The subjects were assured of anonymity and the scientific purpose of the study. The prerequisites for participation in the study were being married and being up to 55 years of age. The study lasted from 15 to 30 October 2020. A total of 924 people started completing the measures, but only 390 continued until the very end. The responses of 17 people were excluded from the survey due to exceeding the set age limit. Results from 373 people qualified for statistical analysis.

2.4. Statistics

Statistical analyses were performed using R software (version 4.0.4). A preliminary exploration of the data revealed missing data, which were replaced by mean (variables: Age, Marital Tenure, Extraversion, Agreeableness, Conscientiousness, Positive Orientation) or median (variables: Number of Children, Number of Specialist Consultations) values. To create a Forgiveness Index, the variables Kindness and Resentment were standardised, and the difference between Kindness and Resentment was calculated. The data were then normalised, with the exception of the qualitative (Gender, Children) and ordinal (Commitment and Fulfilment) variables. Different methods were used to normalise the variables. One analysis showed that the centre scale technique was most appropriate for the following variables: Age, Number of Specialist Consultations, Emotional Stability, and Positive Orientation. The orderNorm technique was used for the variables Marital Seniority, Kindness, and Forgiveness. The arcsinh x technique was used for the variables Number of Children, Conscientiousness, and Openness. The Box-Cox technique was used for the variables Extraversion and Agreeableness. Finally, the Yeo-Johnson technique was used for the variable Resentment.

The following descriptive statistics were used to characterise the results: mean, standard deviation, median, range of scores, skewness, kurtosis, and percentage. Pearson's r correlation was used to determine the relationship between variables. The level of collinearity coefficient (VIF) for the individual predictors of the variable Forgiveness was in the range 1.04 to 5.54, so there was no collinearity. A series of explorations was then performed to identify significant moderators. A confidence level of $p < 0.05$ was assumed.

3. Results

The presentation of the results has three stages: characterisation of the results of the variables, interpretation of the correlations, and exploration to identify moderating variables.

Analysing the data in Table 1, it can be seen that:

1. the results of the variable Resentment are significantly elevated and the variable Benevolence significantly decreased, compared to the results of the adaptation sample (Brudek, Steuden, 2015);
2. the results of the variables Extraversion, Agreeableness, and Conscientiousness are comparable to the results of the adaptation sample, while the results of the variables Emotional Stability and Openness are significantly lower than the results of the adaptation sample (Sorokowska et al., 2014);
3. the results of the Positive Orientation variable are average, slightly lower than in the normalization group (Łaguna et al., 2011);
4. the results of the Commitment variable show that the subjects who are married after betrayal rated their commitment to the relationship highly, while the results of the Fulfilment variable show that they felt fulfilled in the relationship to a lesser extent.

It was found (Table 2) that an increase in the level of the variable Forgiveness occurred with an increase in the scores of the following variables: Commitment ($r = 0.39; p < 0.001$), Fulfilment ($r = 0.43; p < 0.001$), Emotional Stability ($r = 0.12; p < 0.05$), and Positive Orientation ($r = 0.17; p < 0.001$). These results are presented in Table 2.

In our exploratory phase, regression analyses with a moderator were performed, using Forgiveness as the dependent variable, with the most strongly correlated variables (i.e., Commitment and Fulfilment) as predictors, and the remaining variables as moderators. One significant moderation model was obtained.

Conscientiousness was shown to be a significant moderator of the relationship between Commitment and Forgiveness: $F(3, 369) = 25.68; p < 0.001$. The regression model of the included independent variables (Conscientiousness, Commitment, and Conscientiousness * Commitment) explained approximately 17% ($R^2 = 0.17, R^2_{\text{corrected}} = 0.17$) of the variation in the scores on the variable Forgiveness. An increase in the scores on the Commitment variable was statistically significant ($\beta = 0.40; p <$

Table 1. Descriptive Characteristics of Variable Scores

Variables	M	SD	Me	Min	Max	Skośność	Kurtoza
Commitment	1.42	0.75	2	0	2	-0.85	-0.72
Fulfillment	1.06	0.80	1	0	2	-0.12	-1.42
Extraversion	5.08	1.27	5	1	7	-0.45	-0.37
Agreeableness	5.60	1.01	6	2	7	-0.85	0.54
Conscientiousness	5.58	1.10	6	2	7	-1.02	0.74
Emotional stability	3.80	1.42	4	1	7	0.16	-0.54
Openness	4.55	1.03	4.5	2	7	0.13	0.04
Positive orientation	27.70	4.90	28	14	40	-0.27	-0.20
Resentfulness	21.52	5.47	22	6	30	-0.56	-0.35
Kindness	10.33	4.04	10	4	20	0.31	-0.56

Kindness > Resentfulness 2,3%;
Resentfulness > Kindness 87,7%

Table 2. Results of Pearson Correlation Analysis Between Explanatory Variables and Forgiveness

Variables	Przebaczenie	Variables	Przebaczenie
Age	0.02	Extraversion	0.08
Marital seniority	0.04	Agreeableness	0.08
Number of children	0.00	Conscientiousness	-0.08
Number of specialist consultations	0.02	Emotional stability	0.12*
Involvement	0.39***	Openness	0.00
Fulfillment	0.43***	Positive orientation	0.17***

Note: * p < 0.05, ** p < 0.01, *** p < 0.001

Table 3 Forgiveness Effect of the Variables Conscientiousness, Commitment, and Conscientiousness * Commitment on the Scores of the Variable Forgiveness

Variables in the model	B	s.e.	t	p	β	DPU	GPU
Constant	-0.74	0.10	-7.36	< 0.001			
Conscientiousness	0.09	0.10	0.93	> 0.05	0.10	-0.10	0.29
Commitment	0.53	0.06	8.37	< 0.001	0.40	0.27	0.52
Conscientiousness*Commitment	-0.13	0.06	-2.09	< 0.05	-0.21	-0.34	-0.09

Note: B = unstandardized regression coefficient; s.e. = standard error for B; t = student t statistic; DPU = lower confidence interval; GPU = upper confidence interval; p= statistical significance; β = standardized regression coefficient

0.001), associated with an increase in the scores on Forgiveness. A significant interaction effect was also found ($\beta = -0.21; p < 0.05$). The results of the regression coefficients for the described model are presented in Table 3.

In order to clarify the significance of the interaction effect Commitment * Conscientiousness, a regression analysis was conducted at two levels of the moderator Conscientiousness. The median ($Mdn = 12$) was taken as the dividing point

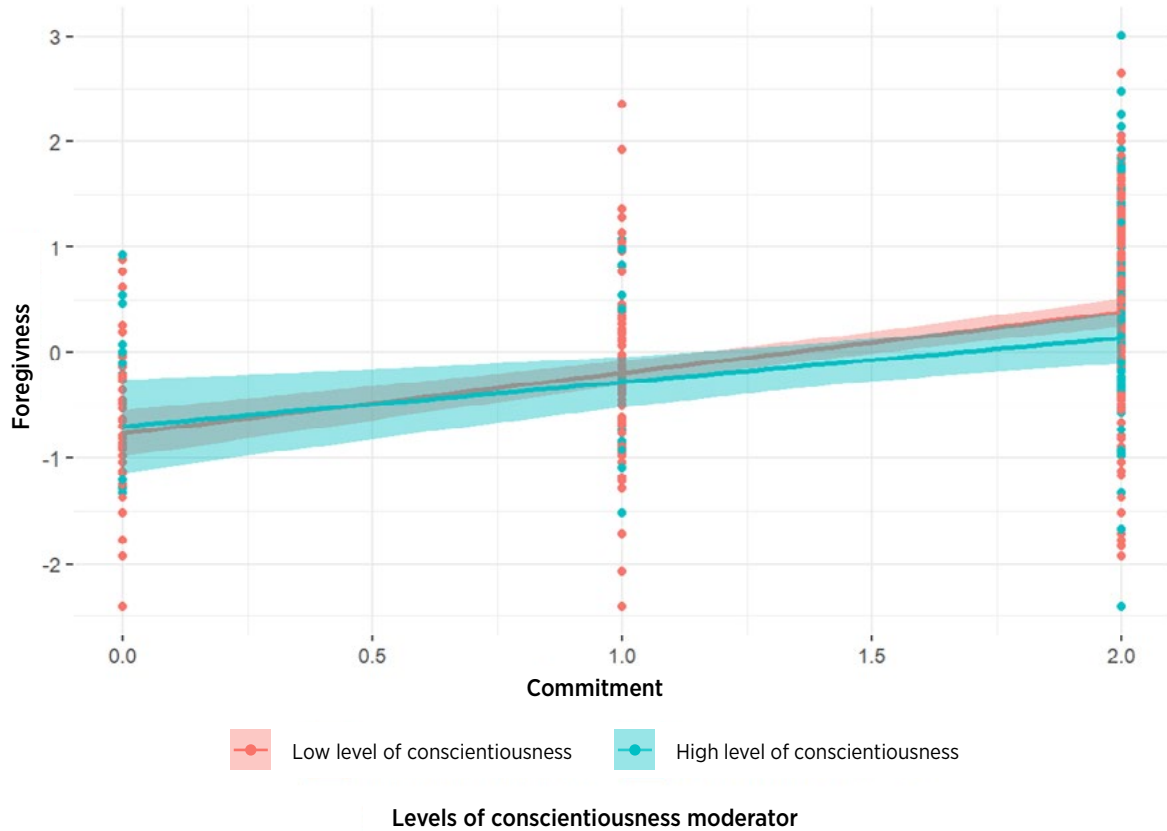


Figure 1: Effect of Commitment on the variable Forgiveness across levels of moderator Conscientiousness

for low and high scores on the Conscientiousness variable. The analysis found that for a low level of the Conscientiousness variable, an increase in the score on Commitment was statistically significant ($\beta = 0.44; p < 0.001$), associated with an increase in scores on Forgiveness. In the case of a high level of Conscientiousness, we also found that an increase in scores on Commitment was statistically significant ($\beta = 0.30; p < 0.01$), associated with an increase in scores on Forgiveness. The interaction effect for low Conscientiousness was stronger than for high Conscientiousness. Graphically, the relationships are depicted in Figure 1. The results of the other moderation analyses were not significant.

Discussion

The aim of the present research was to attempt to identify factors important in the process of forgiveness for marital infidelity. Attention was paid to selected intrinsic factors of the betrayed person (personality,

positive orientation) and relationship characteristics (seniority, number of children, use of specialist help, commitment, and fulfilment in the relationship).

The severity of the forgiveness indicators suggested that married respondents experienced resentment more than kindness towards the perpetrator of infidelity. A positive balance of kindness and resentment was achieved in 12.3% of respondents. People in relationships are similar to others in terms of personality traits such as extraversion, agreeableness, and conscientiousness, although they differ in reduced intensity of the traits emotional stability and openness. These individuals cope less well with stress, are more likely to react with anxiety and tension, and have a greater tendency to worry. They are more likely to prefer socially recognised ways of doing things, stemming from a traditional value system. Disruption of emotional stability after experiencing infidelity may be the result of the impact of chronic stress after infidelity. Their behaviour more closely resembles that of those experiencing chronic stress, and being with the perpetrator of the stress on a daily basis exposes

them to constant, at least internal, confrontation. So why do victims stay? The reason for the decision to stay in a relationship post-infidelity may be from adherence to a traditional value system. So-called *legal forgiveness* – that based on religious principles – may be involved here (Piątek, 2011). In addition, “for religious people, a significant factor facilitating the forgiveness process is the experience of receiving forgiveness from God” (Jaworski, 2016, p. 154). It can also be assumed that they strive for a certain internal harmony, in line with Level 3 of the theory of positive disintegration. They experience conflicts, internal crises, and tension, often of a moral nature. In people at this level, a new hierarchy of values and ideals is established. There are attempts to control behaviour and experiences. Strong at this level is the need to both experience harmony and cope with resulting tensions and certain contradictions experienced in everyday functioning. Porter and Schumann’s (2017) research showed that being aware of the limitations of one’s own knowledge and appreciating the efforts of the other party are good predictors of openness during disagreements and attempts to resolve difficult situations.

In additional analyses, it was revealed that people with a positive and negative forgiveness balance differed significantly in the intensity of extraversion and emotional stability traits – with “forgivers” reporting a higher intensity. A similar result was obtained for endorsing a positive orientation, fulfilment, and commitment. Forgiving individuals appeared more committed to their relationships and reported greater fulfilment in them. They may also be more prone to self-reflection and perceive the need to shift their own focus to recognising the needs of others. According to positive disintegration theory, people can become aware of their own faults and bad habits they want to change in order to improve their relationships with others and the environment (Dabrowski, 1994). At Level 3 of one’s psychic life, a positive maladaptive dynamism oriented towards pro-developmental values is at work. Here individuals start to become aware of important values, and towards them they begin to move (Kobierzycki, 1989, p. 181).

Although a positive balance of forgiveness was revealed by only 12.3% of respondents in our study, commitment to the relationship at various levels was

declared by 84.2%, and fulfilment in the relationship by 71.3% of the sample. All those with a positive balance of Kindness-Forgiveness reported relationship commitment. Regarding fulfilment in the relationship in the forgiveness group, the results shifted to the right, meaning that the majority felt fulfilled. In the negative balance group, the results shifted to the left, meaning that the majority did not report feeling fulfilled, or only felt a little fulfilled. Referring to interdependence theory in the context of marriage infidelity, those involved in the relationship post-discovered infidelity experienced satisfaction with the relationship and showed greater motivation to maintain it due to the investment of numerous resources in the relationship (Rusbult et al., 2005, pp. 185-206). According to McCullough et al. (2000), the reactions of forgivers towards the betrayer become more prosocial over time. These researchers pointed to an important chronological factor for mitigating the emotional connotations associated with marital betrayal. Piątek’s (2011) research confirmed that most people, especially women, require time to make the decision to both forgive and initiate the process of working through difficult emotions.

The propensity to forgive was greater the more emotionally adjusted our subjects were, the more they revealed the ability to cope with stress without experiencing tension, and the more positive they felt about themselves, life, and their future. Referring to Dąbrowski’s theory (1979), it might be said that despite the tensions, crises, and conflicts experienced, forgivers strive to achieve inner harmony. The anxiety that arises is existential in nature, contributing to a change in the way the forgiver looks at themselves and their surroundings.

The relationship between the variables Commitment and Forgiveness was moderated by Conscientiousness in this study, and the interaction effect for low Conscientiousness was stronger than for high Conscientiousness. Forgiveness as an outcome of Commitment to the relationship was accompanied by goal-oriented, action-motivated behaviour (Conscientiousness). It appeared, however, that a more favourable situation occurred when the subjects showed flexibility in the pursuit of goals, which, moreover, were not very specific. According to Van Tongeren

et al. (2014), in long-term relationships, awareness of one's own limitations and respect for the opinions of others are protective factors against unforgiveness. Humility makes it possible to reduce both the impact of negative life events on life satisfaction and the severity of negative emotions (Krause et al., 2016).

However, the present research has several limitations. Future researchers might include as significant determinants of forgiveness not only personality

traits, but also the length of the relationship, attachment styles in the relationship, or the time since the experienced betrayal. Forgiveness is associated with the possibility of improved physical and mental health. When planning further research, it would be worthwhile to both analyse the quality of the relationship after the betrayal experience and to identify differences in the determinants of forgiveness found in the male and female groups.

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