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Time Heals All (Shallow) Wounds: A Lesson on Forgiveness of Ingroup Transgressors Learned by the Feyenoord Vandal Fans

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Abstract: This paper examines how a social threat posed by a deviant behavior affects second-hand forgiveness over time toward ingroup and outgroup transgressors. In Study 1, using real news reports, we investigated intergroup rivalries between soccer fans in order to understand the role of group membership in predicting the intention to forgive transgressors. Results suggested that transgressors were less likely to be forgiven by ingroup members rather than outgroup members, thus showing evidence of the black sheep effect. In Study 2 (using a different sample), we analyzed the same intergroup rivalries one year after the transgression in order to explore changes in intention to forgive over time. Results showed that, after one year, ingroup members were more likely to forgive ingroup than outgroup transgressors, but only when the threat to the group stereotype was not salient. The implications of the results for the subjective group dynamics theory and for the black sheep effect are discussed.

Keywords: forgiveness; time; ingroup bias; group stereotype; vandalism; soccer fans

1. Forgiveness of Ingroup Transgressors

On 19 February 2015, more than 7000 Dutch football fans arrived in Rome for the European League game Feyenoord Rotterdam vs. A. S. Roma. In the days immediately preceding the match, several Feyenoord fans engaged in acts of hooliganism, rampaging through Rome, clashing with the Police, and permanently and intentionally damaging one of Rome's iconic baroque monuments, namely "La Barcaccia fountain" (sculptured by Bernini in 1629) situated in front of the famous "Spanish Steps". Dutch fans' behaviour triggered heated reactions and indignations from both Dutch and Italian politicians and from other civil societies in Europe. The actions of Feyenoord football fans could be considered as a manifestation of incivility that represents a social norm violation (Mutz and Reeves 2005). Feyenoord fans strongly offended the whole Italian population and destroyed one of their most beautiful monuments and historical sites. Moreover, highly relevant for our research is the fact that, due to their behaviour, Feyenoord fans tarnished the social reputation of Dutch people, thus affecting the overall group's stereotype.

We present two studies where we investigated whether Dutch people, when compared to people from other countries, had forgiven their ingroup transgressors for their shaming behaviour. We used a social identity approach to analyse the forgiveness responses of ingroup and outgroup members, starting with the assumption that people are motivated to protect the overall positive identity of their group to achieve positive self-esteem (Abrams and Hogg 1988, 1990). We focused on the highly-documented black sheep effect (BSE, Marques and Paez 1994; Levine and Marques 2016; Rullo et al. 2015), a form of a group's

identity protection strategy that emerges when a group's positive identity is at stake. This protection strategy is shown when ingroup transgressors are more devaluated than outgroup transgressors.

As suggested by social psychologists, people frequently tend to forgive the ingroup perpetrators more than the outgroup perpetrators (Otten 2009), a well-documented effect called ingroup favouritism (Brewer 2007; Tajfel and Turner 1979). When people share similar attributes with others (e.g., religion, language) and identify themselves and similar others as members of the same social group (Abrams et al. 2000), they tend to favour those members (Tajfel and Turner 1979). However, there is evidence showing that, in some circumstances, ingroup perpetrators suffer harsher reactions compared to outgroup perpetrators. Literature on the BSE (Marques and Paez 1994; Marques and Yzerbyt 1988; Marques et al. 1988) has widely demonstrated that an ingroup member showing a negative behaviour is usually more derogated than a similar outgroup counterpart. Similarly, an ingroup member showing a positive behaviour is typically evaluated more positively when compared to an outgroup member showing the same behaviour. Prior research suggests that this kind of bias concerns the motivation to protect a group's positive identity. Given the fact that group membership is a fundamental part of individuals' self-concept (Tajfel and Turner 1979), the derogation of the ingroup deviant members is an act of taking distance from negative actions.

The subjective group dynamics theory (SGDT (Marques et al. 2001a; Abrams et al. 2000)) suggests that derogation allows fellow group members to sustain and preserve a positive social identity by remarking the intragroup differences among normative and deviant members. Ingroup members violating both prescriptive norms, that are representative of a moral behaviour, and descriptive norms, that describe how to behave in a group, put at stake the validity of such norms that give value to the group's identity (Pinto et al. 2010, 2015; Travaglino et al. 2014; Hornsey and Jetten 2003; Marques et al. 2001b). This is the reason why ingroup perpetrators—rather than outgroup perpetrators—are harshly derogated as well as sometimes punished (Mendoza et al. 2014; Shinada et al. 2004).

Nevertheless, the severity of judgment and punishment attributed to ingroup perpetrators is obviously commensurated with several factors such as a clear intention to harm showed by the transgressors (Wang et al. 2016; Marques et al. 2001b; Abrams et al. 2000), the strength of identification with the ingroup (Biernat et al. 1999; Branscombe et al. 1993; Rullo et al. 2015, 2017; Otten 2009; Begue 2001) or the impact of the transgression on the overall group's stereotype (Biernat et al. 1999; Castano et al. 2002; Abrams et al. 2000).

However, although the BSE has been deeply investigated for judgments and punishment (Marques and Paez 1994; Pinto et al. 2010; Shinada et al. 2004), to the best of our knowledge, there seems to be a lack of investigation on willingness to *forgive* ingroup perpetrators (Noor et al. 2015; Wang et al. 2016). Focusing on forgiveness, commonly defined as “a suite of pro-social changes” toward a transgressor that encourages people to be less vengeful (Enright et al. 1998; McCullough et al. 1997), gives us the opportunity to investigate the reconciliation process between non-deviant members and perpetrators. Forgiveness encourages the aggrieved individual to move from a desire to retaliate to a desire to reconcile (McCullough et al. 1997, 2001, 2003; Pargament et al. 2000) and it could represent an important issue in research on group reactions to internal deviance. Indeed, as pointed out by recent research, sharing the same social identity with the victims of transgressions leads to a low chance of forgiveness (McLernon et al. 2004; Wohl and Branscombe 2005; Rullo et al. 2016).

Hence, it is not necessary to be directly affected by a transgression to decide whether it has to be forgiven or not. Research on *second-hand transgression* (Brown et al. 2008) suggests that people who belong to the same group as victims of a harmful action feel anger on behalf of the victims (Yzerbyt et al. 2003). Hence identifying with the victims of a transgression paves the way for reconciliation with the transgressors, an effect called *second-hand forgiveness*. However, research on second-hand transgression has focused more on situations in which the outgroup is the perpetrator

and the victims are from the in-group, but there may be circumstances where the ingroup members are at the same time the perpetrators and the victims. As matter of fact, a transgression toward a third part can indirectly affect other group members in many ways, such as reducing members' perceptions of their group's positive value and damaging its social reputation (Pinto et al. 2016). Although there is evidence of the notion suggesting that when the group's value is at stake, ingroup members tend to downplay the severity of their group's past violations in order to protect the ingroup's image (e.g., Miron et al. 2010), we suggest that there are circumstances in which ingroup members are more unforgiving toward ingroup than outgroup transgressors. As demonstrated by Miron et al. (2010), dealing with information that threatens the perceived morality of the ingroup may results in using an "ingroup-serving" definition of injustice but only when there is not any other opportunity to affirm the group's value. As a matter of fact, when ingroup members can affirm their group's value, they tend to be even harsher in judging the ingroup's past behavior and to experience more collective guilt.

Starting from these premises, the aim of the present study was two-fold: (1) to examine if sharing the same social identity with transgressors affects willingness to forgive them and (2) to investigate if the willingness to forgive the transgressors changes across time.

In line with the *second-hand forgiveness* predictions and the BSE hypothesis, we would expect that ingroup members are likely to show decreased forgiveness toward those who harm their ingroup. Consequently, we hypothesize that when ingroup perpetrators hurt the group by damaging its positive, ingroup members will be less forgiving than outgroup members. As a matter of fact, since group members are perceived similarly by observers (Pickett and Brewer 2001; Lee and Ottati 1995), a public transgression committed by an ingroup member threatens the public image, especially if he/she is perceived as representative of the overall group's stereotype (Van Leeuwen et al. 2010; Pickett and Brewer 2001). This leads to a perceived threat to the non-deviant members of a group, although they were not in the first instance transgressors, and consequently leads to the rejection of ingroup transgressors. However, when the damage to the group's stereotype is weakly perceived, ingroup members may show an ingroup favouritism effect by protecting their fellow group member.

Moreover, we suggested that the threat to the stereotype decreases over time, thus resulting in an increased readiness to forgive. In fact, the notion that forgiveness increases over time has been shown by recent research (McCullough et al. 2003; Worthington et al. 2000; Pronk et al. 2010). Starting from this literature, our main idea is that time can reduce the salience of the threat to the identity, thus facilitating the process of forgiveness.

In order to test these hypotheses, we collected field data using news reports. Such reports involved a tangible instance of deviance and damage to social reputation where ingroup respondents shared a real social identity with the perpetrators. We investigated the willingness to forgive the Dutch hooligans' vandalism of the Italian historical monuments by comparing the responses of Dutch people (ingroup) with the responses of foreign people (outgroup). In Study 1, we collected the responses one day after the episode. In Study 2, we collected data on a different sample of participants one year after the episode. We hypothesize that: (a) (H1a) when the group stereotype is highly affected by the negative members, (Study 1, one day after the episode), a BSE will occur, (H1b) and thus Dutch people will be less forgiving toward ingroup hooligans compared to outgroup members; (b) when the negative impact on the group stereotype is no longer perceived as relevant (Study 2, after one year from the episode), ingroup favouritism will occur, thus Dutch people will be more likely to forgive the hooligans than outgroup members. Finally, we further explore (c) whether the degree of the social threat (Study 2) moderates the relationship between group membership (ingroup vs. outgroup) and willingness to forgive the hooligans.

2. Study 1

2.1. Method

Participants

We used an online survey tool (Lime Survey) for collecting data¹. The survey included questions regarding demographics and whether participants were football fans, as well as measures of the perceived representativeness of perpetrators (affected stereotype) and willingness to forgive the transgressors. The overall sample contained answers from 38 participants (69.2% females), with an age ranging from 19 to 60 years ($M_{age} = 29.79$ years, $SD = 10.03$). The sample is comprised Dutch people ($N = 18$), as well as people from other countries ($N = 12$ Europeans and $N = 8$ outside Europe) contacted one day after the episode. Before filling the online survey, participants were invited to watch a video published in a local online newspaper where Feyenoord vandals damaged the “Barcaccia” (Giannoli 2015). The collection of data lasted for one day.

2.2. Measures

Affected stereotype: two items on a 10-point Likert scale from 1 “strongly disagree” to 10 “strongly agree” were used: “These persons are representative of the overall Dutch population (reverse item)” “I believe that these persons are not representative of the positive stereotype of Dutch people” ($r = 0.51$, $p = 0.00$).

Forgiveness: Seven items on a 5-point response format (from 1 = *strongly disagree* to 5 = *strongly agree*) were adapted from Jordan et al. (2013). The scale combines two aspects of forgiveness discussed by (McCullough et al. 1997): the increased desire for reconciliation, and the decreased desire for retaliation. Examples of items are: “These people should be forgiven” or “These people apologies are insufficient (Reverse Item)”. The average of the seven forgiveness items ($\alpha = 0.60$) was used as our measure of forgiveness.

2.3. Results and Discussion

Forgiveness does not show any relationship with age, gender or being a football fan (respectively $r = 0.105$, $p = 0.53$; $r = -0.246$, $p = 0.13$; $r = -0.132$, $p = 0.42$). Also, forgiveness and affected stereotype do not have any significant relationship ($r = -0.05$, $p = 0.76$).

In order to test our predictions, we performed two ANOVAs using the nationality of participants (Dutch vs. Non-Dutch) as an independent factor, and using forgiveness and the perception of affected stereotype as dependent measures.

(H1a) **Affected stereotype.** Results of the ANOVA showed a non-significant, main effect of nationality ($F(1, 38) = 2.98$, $p = 0.09$, $\eta^2 = 0.07$) with Dutch people showing a similar threat to the stereotype of the Dutch population ($M = 7.78$, $SD = 1.69$) compared to people from other countries ($M = 6.80$, $SD = 1.87$).

(H1b) **Willingness to Forgive.** Willingness to forgive the vandal Feyenoord fans gave us an interesting picture in line with our first prediction: results showed a main effect of nationality ($F(1, 38) = 4.08$, $p = 0.05$, $\eta^2 = 0.10$) with Dutch people showing lower levels of forgiveness ($M = 2.44$, $SD = 0.66$) compared to people from other nationalities ($M = 2.86$, $SD = 0.63$).

Results from Study 1 suggest that one day after the Dutch football fans’ act of vandalism in Rome, Dutch people were less willing to forgive the ingroup perpetrators when compared to people from other countries. The results concerning the affected stereotype revealed only a barely significant effect.

¹ As we did not have enough time to sample participants following the standard routine, Dutch, and Non-Dutch-non-Italian participants were contacted on personal basis (email and social networks such as Twitter and Facebook) in order to be sure of their nationality. Participants filled the survey on voluntary basis. The link to the survey was made available on a web page known by only those people who accepted to participate. The survey was written in English, it means that only those participants with the requested language skills were involved in the survey.

However, the minimum level of the affected stereotype reported by Dutch people was of 4.50 on a 10-point scale while that reported by other members was of 3.50 point, suggesting that everyone considered that the vandalism acts had a salient negative impact on the Dutch population stereotype. However, in order to investigate how and if both the stereotype threat and willingness to forgive may have changed across time (second hypotheses), we conducted another study, one year after the vandalism facts occurred in Rome.

3. Study 2

In this second study, we asked participants—different from the previous study—to complete the same survey. We suggest that the deviant members would have less of an effect on the stereotype of the Dutch population since memory of the transgression is weakened by the time passed after the misdemeanour.

Conducting a study one year after the first one—which was done one day following the misdemeanour—allowed us to (a) overcome limitations concerning sample size (in Study 1) and (b) test the idea that after a significant amount of time ingroup members are more willing to forgive given that a threat to the reputation of the group is no longer salient.

3.1. Method

Participants

One year after the episode, 148 participants² (38.5% female) were recruited through Prolific academic. The sample was comprised of 77 Dutch people and of 71 people from other countries (non-Dutch people) with a mean age of 28 years ($SD = 8.7$). Among the participants, 57 (38.5%) declared to support a football team. As well as in the previous study, before completing the survey, participants were invited to watch a video in a local online newspaper where Feyenoord vandals damaged the “Barcaccia”, the same video used in Study 1 (Giannoli 2015).

3.2. Materials

The material and the procedure used in this study were the same as those used in Study 1. The forgiveness scale revealed a good reliability ($\alpha = 0.84$). The correlation between the two items concerning the affected stereotype was $r = -0.32$, $p = 0.000$.

4. Results and Discussion

Results showed that willingness to forgive and perception of the negative impact on the group stereotype had a negative and significant correlation ($r = -0.24$, $p < 0.01$). Age and “being a football fan” had no relation with the willingness to forgive the transgressors (respectively: $r = 0.56$, $p = 0.38$; $r = 0.08$, $p = 0.92$). Only gender showed a significant correlation with forgiveness, demonstrating that females tend to be more forgiving than males ($r = 0.17$, $p = 0.04$).

Also in Study 2, two ANOVAs were performed using the nationality of participants (Dutch vs. Non-Dutch) as an independent factor and forgiveness as well as the perception of affected stereotype as dependent measures.

Affected stereotype. Results of the ANOVA showed a non-significant, main effect of nationality ($F(1, 136) = 2.84$, $p = 0.09$, $\eta^2 = 0.02$) with Dutch people showing a similar threat to the stereotype of the Dutch population ($M = 7.80$, $SD = 1.55$) compared to people from other countries ($M = 7.29$, $SD = 1.29$).

² Eleven participants failed in filling all questions of the survey, thus they were excluded from the analysis.

Willingness to Forgive. Results of the ANOVA showed a non-significant main effect of nationality ($F(1, 136) = 0.05, p = 0.81, \eta^2 = 0.00$) with Dutch people showing similar levels of forgiveness ($M = 2.59, SD = 0.80$) compared to people from other nationalities ($M = 2.56, SD = 0.83$).

Moderation hypothesis. In order to test the predictions of Study 2, we tested the moderation effect of stereotype on the relationship between group membership and forgiveness with PROCESS macro developed by (Hayes 2012) Model 1. All predictors were centred on the respective means before entering the equation. The overall fit of the model was significant ($R^2 = 0.12, F(3, 133) = 6.08, p < 0.001$). Overall, the effect of the affected stereotype on forgiveness was negative and significant ($b = -0.13, SE = 0.03, p < 0.001$) while the membership (being Dutch) was not ($b = 0.06, SE = 0.07, p = 0.36$). However, the interaction term was relevant ($b = -0.07, SE = 0.03, p = 0.03$). Simple slopes analysis showed that when the perception of negative impact on the group stereotype is low ($-1 SD$) Dutch people forgive significantly more ($b = 0.20, SE = 0.097, p = 0.03$) than people from other countries. However, when the perception of the negatively affected stereotype is high, both Dutch people and people from other countries forgive ingroup transgressors ($+1 SD$) ($b = -0.08, SE = 0.094, p = 0.38$). In conclusion, one year after the news reports, the ingroup favouritism for forgiveness toward transgressors emerges only for those who do not perceive a salient negative impact on the group's positive stereotype (Figure 1).

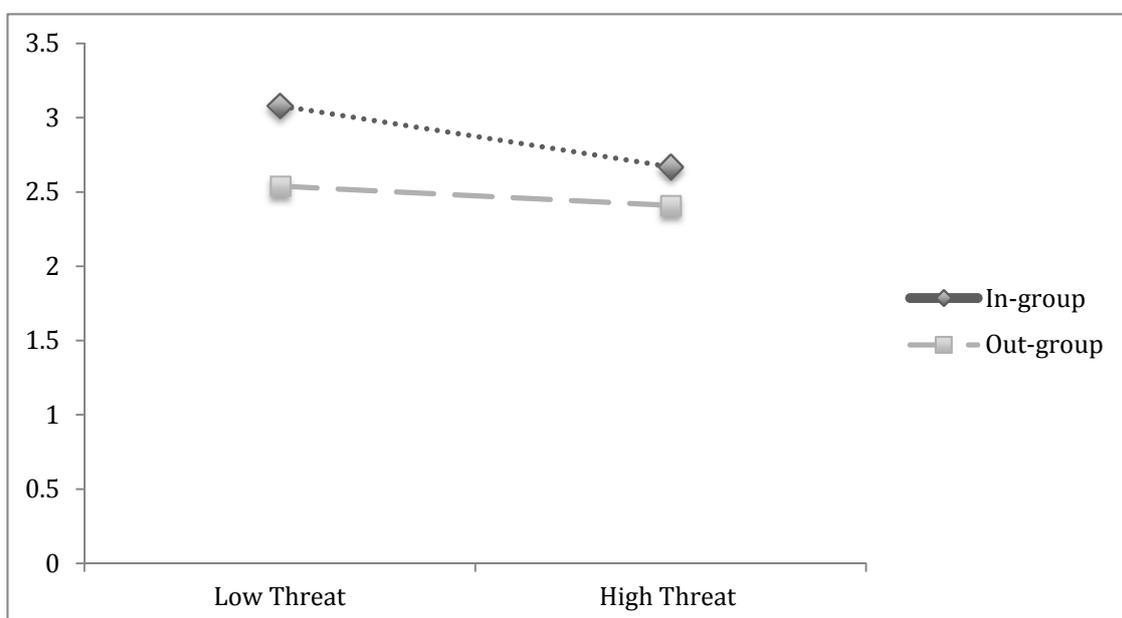


Figure 1. The effect of group membership on forgiveness moderated by the threat to the stereotype.

Results from Study 2 confirm our expectations: when the perception that deviant members negatively affected the group stereotype is no longer salient, an ingroup favouritism rather than a black sheep effect occurs. In Study 2, the minimum degree of the affected stereotype reported by Dutch people was 1.50 on a 10-point scale, different from Study 1 in which the minimum was 4.50. This result suggests that, for some participants, the impact of deviant members on the stereotype was not salient, while for other ingroup members it is still salient. Indeed, when the positive stereotype of the Dutch population was not affected by deviant members, Dutch people showed higher willingness to forgive ingroup transgressors compared to that shown by outgroup members; on the other side, Dutch people who continued to perceive a negative impact of deviant members on the group stereotype showed a low desire to forgive the transgressor, as also showed by outgroup members. As a matter of fact, the simple slopes analysis revealed that for a high level of affected stereotype, there are no differences in forgiveness between ingroup and outgroup members.

5. General Discussion

Although the black sheep effect has been extensively investigated, this topic continues to attract researchers trying to extend the known findings using different perspectives and exploring other related issues (Levine and Marques 2016). Thus far, studies considering the black sheep effect have not investigated the willingness to reconcile with the ingroup transgressors (Bettencourt et al. 2015). To the best of our knowledge, there are only few studies in this field that used real occurring transgressions (Begue 2001; Coleman et al. 2016).

The findings of the current study verify the occurrence of the black sheep effect in a real life transgression whilst showing an overall higher willingness to forgive ingroup as compared to outgroup transgressors. Moreover, Study 2 shows that second-hand forgiveness of ingroup transgressors increased over time when the threat to the ingroup stereotype was not no longer salient. This means that a relevant threat to the group stereotype is at the heart of the black sheep effect or the ingroup favouritism bias.

More specifically, in two studies, using different samples, participants (Dutch, Italian and people from other countries) read about the acts of vandalism carried out by some Feyenoord hooligans in February 2015 which attracted great interest from both Dutch and international media. This allowed us to collect reactions of Dutch people facing a “flock” of black sheep the day after the episode. Consistent with our hypotheses, in Study 1, we found that Dutch people (as compared with people from other countries; i.e., outgroup members evaluating Dutch transgressors) show less willingness to forgive the transgressors (i.e., ingroup members). These results extend previous research by showing that the black sheep effect is visible not only in terms of higher negative attitudes toward deviant ingroup (vs. outgroup) members, but it expresses itself also through the lower willingness to forgive ingroup (vs. outgroup) transgressors. This result seems to suggest that forgiveness is one of the mechanisms through which psychological exclusion of deviant members is realized, and it supports the idea that the desire “to exclude” deviant members serves to protect the overall group stereotype (Castano et al. 2002). Indeed, severe transgressions committed by ingroup members are perceived as a direct attack to the positive ingroup stereotype and, for this reason, they are not easily forgiven by fellow group members.

However, in Study 1 we assessed the state forgiveness and the threat to the group stereotype immediately after the transgression took place. For this reason, the results derived from Study 1 did not take into account how the willingness to forgive evolved over time. Forgiveness is considered as a suite of pro-social change (Enright et al. 1998; McCullough et al. 1997), thus it could vary over time after the transgression. Starting from this idea and considering the role of perceived threat to the group stereotype in unforgiving responses, in Study 2 we repeated the same procedure as in Study 1, this time however, using a different sample, and measuring the perceived threat to the group stereotype and the willingness to forgive one year after the transgression. We hypothesized that the target membership of the transgressors could affect the increase in willingness to forgive one year after the transgression. In other words, we suggested that ingroup members—as compared with outgroup members—would be more lenient toward ingroup transgressors over time as the threat that deviants posed to their ingroup stereotype decreases. Therefore, in those circumstances, we expected ingroup favouritism, rather than the black sheep effect, to occur (Brewer 1991; Tajfel and Turner 1979). Results confirmed our predictions, showing that Dutch people—compared to outgroup members—who did not perceive a salient threat to the group stereotype, showed a higher degree of forgiveness. On the other hand, Dutch respondents who perceived a salient threat to the group stereotype, instead, showed a lower level of forgiveness, similar to the level shown by outgroup members.

Admittedly, this last result was unexpected as in this condition one may have hypothesized the insurgence of the black sheep effect, that is a lower forgiveness toward ingroup than outgroup transgressors. However, even though participants’ perception of the threat was reported as moderately salient, the actual transgression was distant in time (i.e., the episode occurred one year before participants were asked to respond to the questions), thus probably being less of a threat to the

group identity. In other words, the time passed since the transgression occurred might have influenced the responses of ingroup deviants, thus becoming less severe even for those who still perceive a salient social identity threat. Future studies should address this issue.

Furthermore, the conclusion that time has a role in increasing forgiveness toward ingroup transgressors raises some caution, for one main reason: our two studies used different samples. This means that the results of the two studies are not directly comparable. Still, we believe that the notion that the perceived threat to the ingroup stereotype decreases over time, thus enhancing the forgiveness propensity toward ingroup (vs. outgroup) transgressors, may be theoretically valid. In fact, time may clearly render the transgression episode less accessible and thus salient for ingroup members' identities. Consistent with this reasoning, the subjective group dynamics theory suggests that the negative reaction toward ingroup deviants is due to the salience of the threat they pose to the social identity of the ingroup members (Abrams et al. 2000). Future studies may benefit from addressing this possibility using a longitudinal design.

Finally, future studies may also investigate the mediating role of time on the relationship between the affected stereotype and forgiveness over time, using different populations and bigger samples. In conducting such studies, our theory regarding the effect of time on the group identity threat may receive further evidence.

In conclusion, the present research showed that the black sheep effect is also visible in the lower willingness to forgive ingroup transgressors, as they constitute a threat to the ingroup stereotype. Forgiveness may be intended as a psychological mechanism that helps to keep deviants, as long as they constitute a threat to the group, distant from it in order to maintain the group's positive stereotype. Over time, however, the threat to the ingroup stereotype decreases and consequently the willingness to forgive ingroup transgressors increases. At this point, consistent with the subjective group dynamics theory, ingroup favouritism emerges as an adaptive way to protect one's own group.

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