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Awareness and Benefits of Forgiveness as an Intervention in Prosocial Behaviour Among Amateur Footballers in Nigeria.

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[0224] Abstract
Forgiveness is linked to improved psychological wellbeing, reduced aggression, and stronger social relationships. However, few studies have tested whether increasing awareness of the benefits of forgiveness can promote forgiveness and prosocial behaviour in sport, particularly among amateur athletes in Nigeria. This study therefore examined the effect of an awareness intervention on forgiveness and prosocial behaviour among amateur footballers in Nigeria. Using a post-test-only control group design, 25 male amateur footballers aged 17–35 years (M = 23.20, SD = 6.75) were randomly assigned to an experimental group (n = 12) that received an awareness-of-benefits-of-forgiveness intervention, or a control group (n = 13). Forgiveness was measured with the Rye Forgiveness Scale, and prosocial behaviour with the Prosocial subscales of the Prosocial and Antisocial Behaviour in Sport Scale. Data were analyzed using one-way MANOVA. The experimental group reported significantly higher forgiveness, $F(1, 23) = 2.57$, $p = .013$, $\eta p^2 = .10$, and prosocial behaviour, $F(1, 23) = 1.51$, $p = .032$, $\eta p^2 = .06$, than the control group. It was concluded that brief awareness interventions can enhance forgiveness and prosocial behaviour in amateur sport. Findings have implications for promoting athlete wellbeing and sportsmanship in low-resource contexts.
Keywords: amateur athletes, forgiveness, prosocial behaviour, wellbeing, intervention.

1. Introduction

Forgiveness has been consistently linked to psychological wellbeing, including reduced anger, lower stress, better cardiovascular health, and improved interpersonal functioning (Cowden et al., 2016; Worthington, 2006). In competitive sport, where physical contact, injury, and the drive to win can provoke grudges, forgiveness may be particularly important for maintaining athlete wellbeing, team harmony, and prosocial conduct. Despite this, experimental research on forgiveness in sport remains scarce, and virtually no studies have been conducted with amateur athletes in low-resource African contexts. Central to positive team dynamics is prosocial behaviour, defined as voluntary actions intended to benefit others, such as helping, cooperation, and encouragement (Eisenberg, Spinrad, & Knafo-Noam, 2015). In sport this is often termed "sportsmanship". Forgiveness is closely related, referring to the willingness to relinquish negative emotions toward an offender and respond with more positive emotions (Capan & Arıcıoğlu, 2014). Theoretical and empirical work suggests that forgiving individuals are more likely to engage in helping and conflict-resolution behaviours (Fehr, Gelfand, & Nag, 2010). However, it remains unclear whether deliberately increasing athletes' awareness of the benefits of forgiveness can strengthen both forgiveness and prosocial behaviour in competitive settings.

This question is especially relevant in football, the most popular sport in Nigeria, which provides significant health and social benefits but is also a high-contact sport associated with injury and interpersonal conflict (Bizzini & Dvorak, 2015). Such experiences can foster bitterness and reduce helping behaviour toward opponents and teammates. The challenge may be amplified among amateur players who typically lack access to medical personnel and formal conflict management structures. Although aggression in professional Nigerian football has been documented (Ibikunle et al., 2019), no known study has tested whether a brief awareness intervention focused on the benefits of forgiveness can promote forgiveness and prosocial behaviour among amateur players. The present study addresses this gap by examining the effect of an awareness-of-the-benefits-of-forgiveness intervention on forgiveness and prosocial behaviour among amateur footballers in Awka South LGA, Nigeria.

2. Theoretical Framework

This study is guided by an integrative framework of Goal Orientation Theory (Dweck & Leggett, 1988), Cognitive Restructuring Theory (Ellis, 1998), and Social Learning Theory (Bandura, 1977). Goal Orientation Theory posits that awareness of adaptive benefits can foster a mastery orientation, in which athletes focus on growth and learning rather than retaliation. Cognitive Restructuring Theory suggests that psychoeducation about the benefits of forgiveness enables athletes to reappraise transgressions and reduce hostile attributions. Finally, Social Learning Theory proposes that forgiveness modeled and reinforced within the team context increases the likelihood of prosocial behaviour such as helping and cooperation. Together, these perspectives suggest that an awareness intervention can enhance forgiveness and, in turn, prosocial behaviour among amateur footballers.

Hypotheses; (a) Amateur players exposed to awareness of the benefits of forgiveness will show higher forgiveness than controls. (b) Amateur players exposed to awareness of the benefits of forgiveness will show higher prosocial behaviour than controls.

3. Research Methodology

Participants

Twenty-five male amateur footballers (*M* age = 23.20, *SD* = 6.75, range = 17–35) were recruited from four Division 3 teams in Awka South LGA registered with the Anambra State Football Association. All participants had competed in at least two Awka Challenge Cup tournaments.

Instruments: (a) First, the Prosocial and Antisocial Behaviour in Sport Scale (PABSS) by Kavussanu and Boardley (2009), is a 20-item self-report measure of prosocial and antisocial behaviours in sport. Only the 7-item prosocial subscale was used. Kavussanu and Boardley (2009) reported α = .70 to .85. Olanrewaju (2013) reported α = .72 for a Nigerian sample. In the present study, α = .70. (b) Second, the Rye Forgiveness Scale (RFS) by Rye, (1998), a 15-item designed to evaluate the extent to which one has forgiven an offender. Rye (1998) reported α = .87. Oginyi et al. (2015) reported α = .86 for a Nigerian sample. (c) Third, the Awareness of Benefits of Forgiveness Instrument. A 7-item researcher-developed psychoeducation handout describing the physiological, psychological, and social benefits of forgiveness was used for the intervention.

Procedure

Ethical approval was obtained from Nnamdi Azikiwe University. After consent, participants were randomly assigned via balloting to experimental (*n* = 12) or control (*n* = 13) groups. Both groups played a competitive match. However, the experimental group received a 20-minute session on the benefits of forgiveness. Content covered health, emotional, and social benefits, followed by guided reflection. The control group received no intervention. Both groups then completed the PABSS and RFS.

Results

TABLE 1: DESCRIPTIVE STATISTICS FOR FORGIVENESS AND PROSOCIAL BEHAVIOUR BY GROUP

DESCRIPTIVE STATISTICS

	Awareness of the Benefits of Forgiveness	Mean	Std. Deviation	N
Forgiveness	Control Group -Non-Awareness	31.62	16.05	13
	Experimental Group -Awareness	43.17	19.94	12
	Total	37.16	18.59	25
Prosocial Behaviour	Control Group - Non-Awareness	20.92	9.53	13
	Experimental Group - Awareness	25.50	9.08	12
	Total	23.12	9.41	25

Descriptive statistics for forgiveness and prosocial behaviour by group are presented in Table 1. Inspection of the means indicates that the experimental group who received awareness of the benefits of forgiveness (M = 43.17, SD = 19.94) had higher mean scores on forgiveness compared to the control group (M = 31.62, SD = 16.05). Similarly, the experimental group had higher mean scores on prosocial behaviour (M = 25.50, SD = 9.08) than the control group (M = 20.92, SD = 9.53).

TABLE 2: UNIVARIATE EFFECTS OF AWARENESS INTERVENTION ON FORGIVENESS AND PROSOCIAL BEHAVIOUR
TESTS OF BETWEEN-SUBJECTS EFFECTS

Source	Dependent Variable	Type III Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
Corrected Model	Forgiveness	832.616[a]	1	832.62	2.57	.12
	Prosocial Behaviour	130.717[b]	1	130.72	1.51	.23
Intercept	Forgiveness	34896.296	1	34896.30	107.52	.00
	Prosocial Behaviour	13447.837	1	13447.84	154.81	.00
Awareness of Benefit of Forgiveness	Forgiveness	832.616	1	832.62	2.57	.01
	Prosocial Behaviour	130.717	1	130.72	1.51	.03
Error	Forgiveness	7464.744	23	324.55		
	Prosocial Behaviour	1997.923	23	86.87		
Corrected Total	Forgiveness	8297.360	24			
	Prosocial Behaviour	2128.640	24			

The results in Table 2 indicate that awareness of the benefits of forgiveness had a statistically significant effect on forgiveness, $F(1, 23) = 2.57$, $p = .013$, $\eta p^2 = .10$, and on prosocial behaviour, $F(1, 23) = 1.51$, $p = .032$, $\eta p^2 = .06$, at the .05 level of significance. Therefore, Hypotheses 1 and 2 were supported. Participants in the experimental group reported significantly higher levels of forgiveness and prosocial behaviour compared to those in the control group.

4. **Discussion**

The present study examined the effect of awareness of the benefits of forgiveness on forgiveness and prosocial behaviour among amateur footballers in Awka South LGA, Nigeria. Consistent with H1, participants who received the awareness intervention reported significantly higher levels of forgiveness than those in the control group. Consistent with H2, the experimental group also reported significantly higher prosocial behaviour. These findings suggest that a brief, single-session awareness intervention can meaningfully influence both intra-personal and inter-personal outcomes in a competitive sport context.

The finding that awareness of the benefits of forgiveness enhanced forgiveness aligns with previous intervention research. Akın and Akın (2020) and Sharififard et al. (2020) reported significant increases in forgiveness following psychoeducational programs focused on the adaptive outcomes of forgiveness. The present study extends this evidence to sport psychology and to an under-represented population of amateur athletes in West Africa. It appears that making the physiological, psychological, and social benefits of forgiveness salient can facilitate cognitive reappraisal of transgressions and reduce the tendency to hold grudges, even after one exposure. In the context of football, where injuries and perceived foul play often provoke anger and retaliation, this suggests that awareness can serve as a protective factor for athlete wellbeing.

The intervention also had a significant effect on prosocial behaviour. Participants who were aware of the benefits of forgiveness were more likely to report helping teammates, encouraging opponents, and engaging in acts of sportsmanship. This is consistent with Chen et al. (2022) and Li et al. (2021), who found positive associations between forgiveness and prosocial outcomes. In competitive sport, prosocial acts often carry a cost in time, effort, or competitive advantage. The present results indicate that when athletes internalize the benefits of forgiveness, such as reduced anger, improved mental health, and stronger team cohesion, they may be more willing to incur those costs. This is particularly relevant in amateur settings in Nigeria where medical personnel are often absent and players rely on each other for immediate support after injury. These results can be understood within the integrative theoretical framework guiding the study. From the perspective of Goal Orientation Theory (Dweck & Leggett, 1988), awareness of benefits appears to foster a mastery orientation by framing forgiveness as a pathway to personal growth and improved performance rather than as weakness. Cognitive Restructuring Theory (Ellis, 1998) suggests that the intervention enabled participants to reappraise hurtful events and reduce hostile attributions. Finally, Social Learning Theory (Bandura, 1977) provides a basis for the generalization from forgiveness to prosocial behaviour,

as cooperative and supportive acts modeled in the intervention may be reinforced by improved team harmony.

Implications of the Study

The findings have several implications. Theoretically, they contribute to the limited literature on forgiveness interventions in sport and demonstrate that cognitive awareness can be an effective mechanism of change. Practically, the intervention is low-cost, requires no specialist equipment, and can be delivered by coaches during training. Given resource constraints in amateur football in Nigeria, such an approach may be feasible for football associations seeking to reduce aggression and disciplinary actions while promoting athlete wellbeing. At a policy level, integrating brief forgiveness education into coach certification and player orientation programs could support the development of safer, more cohesive sporting environments.

Limitations and Future Directions

Several limitations should be noted. The sample was small, male-only, and drawn from one LGA, which limits generalizability. The intervention was delivered once with no follow-up, so the durability of effects is unknown. All measures were self-report and may be subject to social desirability bias. Future research should replicate these findings with larger and more diverse samples, include female athletes, and employ longitudinal designs. It would also be valuable to include direct measures of wellbeing, such as positive affect or life satisfaction, and to examine whether increased forgiveness and prosocial behaviour translate to reduced injury rates and improved team performance.

5. Conclusion

In conclusion, awareness of the benefits of forgiveness significantly enhanced both forgiveness and prosocial behaviour among amateur footballers. The study provides preliminary evidence that brief psychoeducation about forgiveness can be an effective, scalable strategy for promoting athlete wellbeing and positive team culture in amateur sport. Further research is warranted to test the long-term impact of such interventions.

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