Do We Forgive Physical Aggression in the Same Way That We Forgive Psychological Aggression?

Mélanie Gauché[1] and Etienne Mullet[2]*

[1]*Université du Mirail, Toulouse, France*
[2]*Ecole Pratique des Hautes Etudes, France*

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The present study examined variations in the impact of social proximity, apologies, intent to harm, cancellation of consequences, and attitude of others on the willingness to forgive an aggressor as a function of the type of aggression—physical aggression or psychological aggression. The participants were instructed to express their willingness to forgive in two contexts—physical aggression and psychological aggression—which constituted a within-subject factor. Five sets of scenarios corresponding to the five between-subject factors (from social proximity to intent to harm) were used. Participants were 215 adults aged 17–60 years. As hypothesized, the cancellation of the consequences had less impact, and the apologies and the intent to harm had more impact, on the willingness to forgive in the case of physical aggression than in the case of psychological aggression. This result was a robust one; it did not depend on the participant's gender and age. Aggr. Behav. 31:559–570, 2005. © 2005 Wiley-Liss, Inc.

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INTRODUCTION

Early research on forgiveness had shown that multiple types of information are taken into account when people express the willingness to forgive [for a review, see Mullet and Girard, 2000]. Examples of these types of information are: cancellation of the consequences of the aggressive behavior [Enright et al., 1989], presence of apologies for the aggressive behavior [Ohbuchi et al., 1989; Weiner et al., 1991], and social proximity between the aggressor and the victim [Rusbult et al., 1991], to quote only a few.

Girard and Mullet [1997] examined the way these various pieces of information, that is, the various circumstances of the situation, were integrated to form an overall judgment of

willingness to forgive. The method they used was the same as the one used by Hommers and Anderson [1991; see also Anderson, 1991; Wolf, 2001] to examine the integration process of the determinants of blame: it was an application of the Functional Theory of Cognition [Anderson, 1996]. The basic purpose of Anderson's theory is to define the psycho-cognitive laws governing the processing of information and the integration of multiple stimuli, in order to accurately characterize the relationships between the stimulus values presented to subjects and the ensuing judgments. Integration is the process through which information is incorporated into a judgment. The integration process can usually be described by simple algebraic operations.

In Girard and Mullet's [1997] study, this method was applied to samples of adolescents and young, middle-aged, and older adults. The material used consisted of 64 scenarios. One typical scenario is given below.

Gladys and Clémence were colleagues. They both worked in the same firm. Clémence, who had already been working in the firm for several years, asked for a promotion. Gladys, who was extremely jealous about this promotion, deliberately disclosed some information about Clémence's work to her section head who began to doubt Clémence's capabilities. Not only did he refuse the promotion but he also moved her to another section, with a particularly off-putting working climate, located a few miles away from there. From then on, Gladys acted as if nothing had happened. Clémence's best friend, who also knows Gladys well, told Clémence that Gladys' behavior was unforgivable. Clémence asked her new section head for a promotion and also to go back to work in her previous section, but she still has not obtained what she wanted. Right now, do you think that you would forgive Gladys, if you were Clémence?

As shown in the example, each story contains six factors reflecting both reasons to forgive and conditions under which forgiving could be easier: (a) the degree of proximity to the target of forgiveness (brother or sister vs. colleague), (b) the intent of the act (clear harmful intent vs. no intent), (c) the severity of consequences of the act (severe consequences vs. very severe consequences), (d) apologies/contrition for the act (apologies vs. no apologies), (e) attitudes of others (favorable attitude *versus* unfavorable attitude), and (f) cancellation of consequences (consequences still affecting the victim vs. consequences cancelled). In Girard and Mullet's study, each scenario presented to the participants clearly involved a complex stimulus field.

All scenarios were constructed through orthogonal crossing of the six factors. Out of these six factors, four were shown to have a strong impact on willingness to forgive: cancellation of consequences, intent, apologies, and social proximity. More importantly, results supported an additive integration rule that did not vary as a function of the characteristics of the participants. The following formula was proposed as the framework that best suited the majority of participants:

$$\text{willingness to forgive} = w \text{ cancellation of cons.} + w' \text{ intent to harm}$$
$$+ w'' \text{ social proximity} + w''' \text{ apologies.}$$

This result was later replicated in Azar et al. [1999, 2001] among a sample of Lebanese people from different communities (e.g. Sunni, Maronites, Druzes), in Vinsonneau and Mullet [2001] among a sample of French adolescents from two different cultures (Magrhebi and Eropean), in Girard et al. [2002] among a sample of French adults, and in Ahmed et al. [2003] among a sample of Kuwaiti adolescents and adults. In all these studies, willingness to forgive was shown to be a function of a weighted sum of these same four factors.

In Girard and Mullet's [1997] study, as well as in the subsequent Girard et al.'s [2002] study, the aggressive behavior inflicted on the victim was of a psychological nature: a colleague's indiscretion. The factor that appeared as the most important was the cancellation of consequences, followed by presence/absence of apologies and intent to harm. In Azar and Mullet's [2001] study, the aggressive behavior was clearly a physical one: a child was hurt by a bullet during a violent conflict. In this situation, the apology factor was shown to rank first in importance, even before the cancellation of consequences factor. Although the studies of Girard and Mullet and Azar did not allow for direct comparisons between psychological aggression and physical aggression, they offered some indication favoring the idea that the exact impact of each factor may be dependant on the type of aggression considered: psychological or physical.

The present study aims at extending the previous studies and mainly answering the following question: To what extent does the type of aggressive behavior have an effect on the impact of the circumstances on the subsequent willingness to forgive? In the present study, the participants were instructed to express their willingness to forgive in two contexts—physical aggression and psychological aggression—which constituted a within-subject factor. The terms employed—physical aggression and psychological aggression—are meant to strictly refer to the form of behavior manifested, not the consequences of the behavior. It is evident that the consequences of a physical aggression may be physical (e.g. wound), psychological (e.g. anxiety), and financial (e.g. medical and psychological treatment). In Azar's study, for example, the child's parents had to take care of him/her for a long period, during which they suffered from the many uncertainties surrounding the child's recovery, and they had to pay for the child's possible surgical and medical treatment. Symmetrically, the consequences of a psychological aggression may also be physical (e.g. insomnia and subsequent illness), psychological (e.g. shame), and financial (e.g. refusal of a promotion and wage freezing), as in the case of the situation chosen by Girard and Mullet [1997].

Our first hypothesis, mainly based on the findings of Girard and Mullet [1997], Azar and Mullet [2001], and Gold and Weiner [2000] that "people care very much about whether the action will be repeated or not" [Gold and Weiner, 2000, p 299], was that the apologies factor should have more impact in the physical aggression condition than in the psychological aggression condition. Sincere apologies from the aggressor are an essential element indicating that the aggression will not be repeated. As a result, sincere apologies from the aggressor may help the victim to reduce the level of fear he/she feels towards the aggressor [Rogers and Kelloway, 1997]. Mainly for the same reasons, we also hypothesized that the intent factor should have more impact in the physical aggression condition than in the psychological aggression condition. In other words, absence of true intent allows the victim to believe that the harmful act was impulsive and/or accidental, and therefore would not be deliberately repeated [LeBlanc and Kelloway, 2002].

Our second hypothesis, based on the comparison between the findings of Girard and Mullet [1997] and Azar and Mullet [2001], was that in the psychological aggression condition, the cancellation of consequences should have more impact than in the physical aggression condition. One possible reason for such a difference may be found in the fact that a severe psychological aggression is usually not curable in a short period; that is, the cancellation of consequences may not be easily foreseen. The consequences of a psychological aggression may potentially last indefinitely, due to the behavior of the aggressor or due to social circumstances [Zechmeister and Romero, 2002]. By contrast, and except in the extreme case where the individual dies or is permanently handicapped, the victim of physical aggression

usually recovers. As a result, the cancellation of consequences may appear as a more determining factor in the case of psychological aggression than in the case of physical aggression.

Our third hypothesis was that the attitude of others factor and the social proximity factor should have the same impact in both conditions. These two factors are not descriptive of the aggressive act itself and they are merely part of the social or familial context in which the aggression has occurred. They are thus relationship-level variables [McCullough et al., 1998], and there would be no apparent reason for their impact to be altered as a function of the conditions.

METHOD

Participants

The participants were all unpaid volunteers, contacted in the streets of Toulouse (a large town in southwestern France) or at the campus of Toulouse University.

The participation rate was 61%. The final sample comprised 215 French adults aged 17–60 years ($M = 25.5$; SD $= 10.8$), including 98 men and 117 women. They were grouped in two age groups: the younger group ($N = 159$, $M = 20.52$), and the older group ($N = 56$, $M = 40.16$). The reason why some people refused to participate was that they had no free time at the moment they were requested to participate.

Material

Two physical aggression situations were created. The first situation referred to physical aggression in the workplace, a frequent occurrence [Baron and Neuman, 1996; see also Kaukiainen et al., 2001; LeBlanc and Kelloway, 2002]. The second physical aggression situation referred to physical aggression during a soccer match, another frequent occurrence [Conroy et al., 2001; Folkesson et al., 2002; Gardner and Janelle, 2002]. Two psychological aggression conditions were created, and both referred to psychological aggression in the workplace. The first one was borrowed from Girard and Mullet' study [1997, see above], and the second situation was about harassment in the workplace, an issue that has been extensively studied [Cowie et al., 2002; Lee, 2002; Mikkelsen and Einarsen, 2002a,b; Quine, 2002; Stein et al., 2002].

The test material was made up of five sets of 12 vignettes describing a situation in which one person was aggressed, in either a physical or a psychological way by another person. In each vignette, five pieces of information were provided: social proximity between the victim and the aggressor, intent to harm, apologies, cancellation of consequences, and attitude of others.

First set of vignettes: attitude of others. In this set, the four different aggression situations—two physical aggression situations and two psychological aggression situations—were presented in the three following scenarios: (i) in the first scenario, the victim was encouraged (by close friends and relatives) to forgive the aggressor, (ii) in the second scenario, the victim was neither encouraged nor discouraged to forgive the aggressor, and finally, (iii) in the third and last scenario, the victim was discouraged to forgive the aggressor. In these 12 vignettes the value taken by the four other factors (social proximity, intent, apologies, and cancellation of consequences) was intermediate (friends, no clear intent to harm, indirect apologies, and partial cancellation of consequences; see below).

Second set of vignettes: social proximity. The social proximity factor had three levels: (i) in the first scenario, the victim and the aggressor were siblings, (ii) in the second scenario, they were friends since childhood, and finally, (iii) in the third and last scenario, they were simply colleagues.

Third set of vignettes: cancellation of consequences. The cancellation of consequences factor had three levels: (i) in the first scenario, the consequences were totally cancelled; that is, the victim was no longer affected by the consequences, (ii) in the second scenario, the consequences were not totally cancelled but they were expected to be cancelled in the near future, and finally, (iii) in the third and last scenario, the consequences were not cancelled, and they were not expected to be cancelled in the near future.

Fourth set of vignettes: apologies. The apologies factor had three levels: (i) in the first scenario, the aggressor had presented sincere apologies to the victim, (ii) in the second scenario, the aggressor had apologized only through a third person, and finally, (iii) in the third and last scenario, the aggressor had not apologized to the victim and had acted as if nothing had happened.

Fifth set of vignettes: intent to harm. The intent factor had three levels: (i) in the first scenario, the aggressor had no intention to harm, (ii) in the second scenario, the aggressor was more or less intentionally harmful, and finally, (iii) in the third and last scenario, the aggressor had clear harmful intentions.

Four typical scenarios, one for each of the aggression situations, are given in Appendix A. Each scenario was printed on a separate sheet of paper. A question appeared below each text: "If you were (name of the victim), to what degree would you be inclined to forgive (name of the aggressor), now?" Under each scenario was a 25 cm response scale with "Definitely NOT" on the left and "Definitely YES" on the right.

Procedure

Each participant responded individually, usually in his/her home or in a quiet room at the university. As recommended by Anderson [1982], each participant went through a familiarization phase, during which he/she was given explanations by the experimenter. For example, the participant was asked to read a certain number of scenarios in which a person committed an aggression involving serious consequences for another person and was asked to express his/her opinion about the appropriateness of forgiveness in each case. Each participant was then presented with the series of 12 scenarios, in random order. Each scenario was read aloud by the participant, following which the experimenter reminded the participant of the items of information it contained (e.g. social proximity and aggression during a match). Participants then provided the requested ratings. After the completion of the 12 ratings, the participant was allowed to compare his or her responses and modify them if needed.

During the following, or experimental phase, the 12 scenarios were presented (in a different order for each participant). Each participant provided his/her ratings at his/her own pace. In this phase, it was no longer possible to compare responses or to go back and make changes as in the familiarization phase. Each participant was presented with one and only one set of vignettes.

RESULTS

The participants took, on average, approximately 20 min to complete the experiment. In total, 42–45 participants were tested under each of the five conditions. Each rating by each participant in the experimental phase was then converted to a numerical value expressing the distance (measured in cm with a ruler) between the marked point on the response scale and the left anchor, which served as the initial point. These numerical values were then subjected to graphical and statistical analyses. These distances indicated that the participants had used the entire range of the response scales when rating their willingness to forgive in each subset of the 12 scenarios. The highest means (16.09 cm) were reasonably far from the maximum (25 cm), which suggests that there was no ceiling effect.

An ANOVA was performed with a design of gender × age (younger vs. older) × type of aggressive behavior (physical vs. psychological) × concrete situation × dimension (from attitude of others to intent to harm) × favorableness (from the more unforgivable to the more forgivable), $2 \times 2 \times 2 \times 2 \times 5 \times 3$. Five separate ANOVAs were also performed on these same data, one for each dimension considered. Their design was gender × age × type of aggressive behavior × concrete situation × favorableness level, $2 \times 2 \times 2 \times 2 \times 3$.

Figure 1 shows the combined effect of two between-subjects factors (gender and dimension) and of two within-subjects factors: the type of aggressive behavior (physical or psychological), and the level of favorableness for each dimension. On the horizontal axis are the three degrees of favorableness: unfavorable (e.g. no apologies offered), intermediate (e.g. indirect apologies), and favorable (e.g. complete apologies). On the vertical axis is the mean judgment of the willingness to forgive. The two curves in each panel correspond to the two types of aggressive behavior. The five panels correspond to the five dimensions considered: attitude of others, social proximity, cancellation of consequences, apologies, and intent to harm. The top panels show the results for the female subgroup and the bottom panels show the results for the male subgroup.

As shown in Figure 1, the position of the five sets of curves in relation to the vertical axis is more or less the same; that is, the five means observed in each of the five conditions were very close to each other (from 8.84 to 10.20). The effect of the dimension factor was not significant, $F(4, 194) = 0.56$, $P = .69$. This means that the choice of the five sets of scenarios was appropriate. If considerable differences in mean results had been found on this factor, subsequent comparisons would have been compromised.

As shown in Figure 1, the three sets of curves were ascending. The favorableness effect was significant, $F(2, 388) = 244.22$, $P < .001$. Willingness to forgive was higher when the dimension considered had a favorable value (e.g. presence of apologies) than when the dimension considered had an unfavorable value (e.g. intent to harm). The physical aggression curve was almost always higher than the psychological aggression curve. The type of aggressive behavior factor had a significant effect, $F(1, 194) = 54.50$, $P < .001$. Willingness to forgive was higher when the aggression was physical than when it was psychological.

As also shown in Figure 1, the slopes of the curves were steeper in the intent to harm and apologies panels than in any other panel. The dimension × favorableness interaction was significant, $F(8, 388) = 20.21$, $P < .001$. Additional analyses showed that the favorableness factor was nevertheless significant in all five conditions; $F(2, 74) = 3.69$, $P < .03$ (attitude of others), $F(2, 82) = 19.43$, $P < .001$ (social proximity), $F(2, 78) = 71.80$, $P < .001$ (cancellation of consequences, $F(2, 76) = 71.56$, $P < .001$ (apologies), and $F(2, 78) = 138.89$, $P < .001$ (intent to harm).
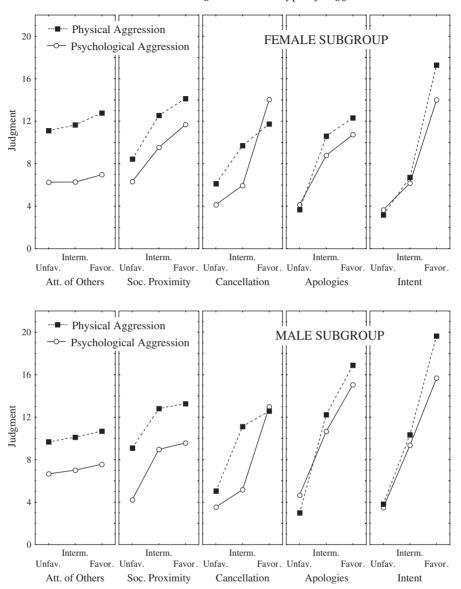
Fig. 1. Combined effects of Gender, Type of aggressive behavior (Physical aggression versus Psychological aggression), Favorableness Level (from Unforgivable to Forgivable), and Dimension (from Attitude of others to Intent to harm) on Willingness to forgive.

Finally, the slope of the physical aggression curve was either steeper than (e.g. intent to harm, apologies), not as steep as (e.g. cancellation of consequences), or of equal steepness as (e.g. attitude of others, social proximity) the slope of the psychological aggression curve. The dimension $\times$ type of aggressive behavior $\times$ favorableness interaction was significant, $F(8, 388) = 10.80$, $P < .001$. Additional analyses showed that the type of aggressive behavior $\times$ favorableness interaction was significant in the three conditions depicted on the

three right-hand panels (cancellation, apologies, and intent), $F(2, 78) = 21.15$, $P < .001$, $F(2, 76) = 11.51$, $P < .001$, and $F(2, 78) = 8.69$, $P < .001$, and non-significant in the situations depicted on the two left-hand panels (attitude of others and proximity), $F(2, 74) = 0.42$, $P = .66$, and $F(2, 82) = 0.11$, $P = .89$. The dimension × concrete situation × favorableness interaction was not significant. The gender × dimension × type of damage × favorableness interaction was not significant.

From one age group to the other, the only difference was that the effect of type of aggressive behavior in the attitude of others and social proximity contexts were higher among the older subgroup than among the younger subgroup, $F(1, 37) = 6.54$, $P < .02$, and $F(1, 41) = 12.01$, $P < .002$.

DISCUSSION

The present study examined the variations of the impact of social proximity, apologies, intent to harm, cancellation of consequences, and attitude of others on the willingness to forgive an aggressor as a function of the type of aggressive behavior—physical aggression or psychological aggression.

The first hypothesis was that the apology factor and the intent factor should have more impact in the physical aggression condition than in the psychological aggression condition. This is what was observed. First, apologies and intent were shown to be important determinants of willingness to forgive in both conditions, a result that is consistent with previous findings [Darby and Schlenker, 1982; Fukuno and Ohbuchi, 1998; McCullough et al., 1997, 1998; Ohbuchi and Sato, 1994; Ohbuchi et al., 1989; Takaku et al., 2001; Weiner et al., 1991]. Second, as hypothesized, a person who has been physically aggressed gives more importance to the intent of the act and to the presence of apologies than a person who has been psychologically aggressed. This result is apparently a robust one; it does not depend on the participant's gender and age.

The second hypothesis was that the cancellation factor should have more impact in the psychological aggression condition than in the physical aggression condition. This is also what was observed. First, the cancellation factor was an important determinant of willingness to forgive in both conditions, a result that is consistent with many previous studies [Azar et al., 1999; Azar and Mullet, 2001; Girard and Mullet, 1997; Girard et al., 2002]. Second, as hypothesized, a person who has been psychologically aggressed gives more importance to the cancellation of the consequences of the harmful act than a person who has been physically aggressed. This result does not depend on the participant's gender and age.

The third hypothesis was that the attitude of others factor and the social proximity factor should have the same impact in both conditions. This is again what was observed. As hypothesized, a person who has been psychologically aggressed gives as much importance to the social proximity of the aggressor and to the attitude of others as a person who has been physically aggressed does.

In summary, four factors—social proximity, intent to harm, cancellation of consequences, and presence of apologies—were shown to be important factors impacting on the willingness to forgive. Furthermore, the differences as a function of the type of aggression were variations around a basic scheme, the one that is depicted in the equation shown in the introduction. They do, however, add credibility to this basic rule by showing that it can adjust (by changing the weights w), in a meaningful way, to changes in the nature of the

aggressive behavior. As a result, the following new rule may account for the way these factors are integrated:

$$\text{willingness to forgive} = w \text{ social proximity } + w' \text{ type of aggressive behavior}$$
$$\text{(cancellation of cons.} + \text{intent to harm} + \text{apologies)}$$

It would be important in future studies to examine the impact of these four dimensions in situations involving other physical and psychological aggressive behaviors that the ones that were included in the present studies: sexual aggression [Marshall and Holtzworth, 2002; Tracy, 1999], mockery and derision, yelling, swearing, and slamming doors [Glomb, 2002], threats of physical harm and death threats [Dietz et al., 1991], and infidelity and disloyalty [Boon and Sulsky, 1997; Gordon and Baucom, 1999; Shackelford et al., 2002]. It will also be important to examine the impact of these dimensions in situations involving material and financial aggressions: robbery of possessions and money, non-restitution of loans and objects, and deliberate shattering of common business projects. It will finally be important to gather information about group aggression [Neto et al., 2004; Staub, 2000; Staub and Pearlman, 2001] and organizational aggression (e.g. abusive lay-off) [Skarlicki and Folger, 1997]. Based on the present results, it may be hypothesized, for example, that in the case of infidelity—one of the more painful forms of psychological aggression [Rye and Pargament, 2002], the impact of the cancellation of consequences factor would be extremely important.

In future studies, it would be wise to clearly distinguish the effect of the type of aggressive behavior (physical aggression, psychological aggression, aggression to property) and the effect of the type of consequences of the aggressive behavior (physical harm, distress, financial losses) on the way the characteristics of the situation (intent, apologies) impact on the willingness to forgive. Also, more levels of each factor should be considered. As regards the social proximity factor, interesting additional levels may be those of spouse [Fincham, 2003; Murphy and O'Leary, 1989], parents [Freedman, 1999], clients, subordinates, and bosses [Aquino et al., 2001; LeBlanc and Keloway, 2002]. As regards the apology factor, interesting additional levels may be those of written apologies, and complete denial of responsibility. As regards the cancellation of consequences factor, interesting additional levels may be those of spontaneous reparation and financial compensation. The effect of the concrete setting in which the behavior has occurred [at work, Thompson and Shahen, 2003; at home, Pollard et al., 1998; during a sport meeting, Wyylleman, 1999], and the effect of the organizational support [Schat and Kelloway, 2003] on willingness to forgive might also be investigated.

As they stand, the present findings have implications concerning the practice of counseling for people who have been victims of physical aggression. They suggest that a victim who has been physically aggressed may not evolve in the same way toward forgiveness as a victim who has been psychologically aggressed [see also Freedman, 2000]. For the physically abused person, cues showing a strong determination in the aggressor not to repeat the harmful act may be essential for taking the first steps towards forgiveness (a finding consistent with Gold and Weiner's [2000] results), while for the psychologically abused person, time and progressive restoration of psychological well-being seem to be essential for taking the first steps in rebuilding empathy towards the aggressor [Carstensen et al., 1999; Worthington, 1998; Worthington et al., 2000].

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APPENDIX A: FOUR TYPICAL VIGNETTES

Fight in the Workplace

Michelle and Gaétane are old friends. Following a work-related disagreement (regarding the manner of carrying out an important task), a dispute erupted between Michelle and Gaétane. The dispute deteriorated and Gaétane struck (more or less intentionally) Michelle's head against a wall. As the direct result of this, Michelle fell down completely unconscious and had to be transported to the emergency room.

During Michelle's hospital stay, Gaétane asked a friend they have in common to visit Michelle and tell her how sorry she was. At present, Michelle is still at the hospital, but she expects to be discharged in the near future. *Michelle's parents, who know Gaétane well, told Michelle that Gaétane's behavior was unforgivable.*

Fault in a Sport

Suzelle and Fabienne are sisters. They practice soccer together even though they belong to two different teams. During a match between the two teams, Fabienne, more or less intentionally, kicked Suzelle's leg. Suzelle fell down, and she was hospitalized for a leg fracture.

During Suzelle's hospital stay, Fabienne asked a common friend to visit Suzelle and tell her how sorry she was and that she wanted to apologize. At present, Suzelle is still at the hospital, but she expects to be discharged in the near future. Suzelle's parents did not express any opinion.

Rumors in the Workplace

Aude and Beatrice are old friends. They work in the same firm. Beatrice, who had been working in the firm for several years, asked for a promotion. *Aude, who is talkative but not a bad person, unintentionally revealed to Beatrice's manager some peculiarities about Beatrice's character and work habits.* Consequently, Beatrice's manager started to doubt Beatrice's capabilities and refused the promotion. Aude was informed of what happened to her colleague. She asked a common friend to meet and tell her how sorry she was. At present, Beatrice has still not been promoted but she has serious hopes of obtaining a promotion in the near future. Beatrice's parents, who know Aude well , did not express any opinion.

Harassment in the Workplace

Geraldine and Lucienne are old friends. They work in the same office. Every day, Lucienne, more or less intentionally, criticizes Geraldine's working methods and character. As a result, Geraldine is stressed, and she works in a less and less effective manner.

Lucienne, who finally has been told why Geraldine is so stressed, has sent flowers to Geraldine and apologized for her bad habits. *Despite Lucienne's apologies and because of previous pressure, Geraldine still presents many symptoms of stress such as insomnia and irritability.* Geraldine's parents, who know Lucienne well, did not express any opinion.

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