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FORGIVENESS IN CLOSE RELATIONSHIPS: THE ROLES OF
EMPATHY, OFFENSE-SPECIFIC VARIABLES, RELATIONSHIP
CLOSENESS AND PERSONALITY

BY

CHAN, WAI YIN

A Thesis Submitted to
City University of Hong Kong
in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for
the Master of Social Sciences in Applied Psychology
in the Department of Applied Social Studies

April, 2011
ABSTRACT

Objectives: The present study examined when people would forgive their close social partners after actual transgressions. The relationships between forgiveness and 4 main conceptual categories including empathy, offense-specific variables (i.e., offense severity, transgressor’s intent, and apology), relationship closeness (i.e. pre- and post-offense closeness), and personality (i.e., agreeableness and neuroticism) were tested. This study also explored whether empathy would explain a significant variance of forgiveness beyond other main variables and its buffering effect on the robust negative relationship between offense severity and forgiveness. Methods: A total of 162 Hong Kong adults answered questions about the most impressive experience within the past 5 years in which they were offended by a family member, a romantic partner, or the best friend. Results: As predicted, 4 constructs including empathy, offense severity, transgressor’s intent, and post-offense closeness were associated with forgiveness. But no associations were found for forgiveness and other 4 constructs including apology, pre-offense closeness, agreeableness, and neuroticism. Multiple regression analyses confirmed that empathy was the most distinctive predictor of forgiveness even after statistically controlling for other well-established predictors. The results also indicated that the negative association between offense severity and forgiveness was moderated by empathy. For victims with high empathy towards the offenders, the negative relationship between offense severity and forgiveness is smaller than those with low empathy. Conclusion: These findings provided a strong evidence for the robust empathy-
forgiveness link and have implications for the empathy-centered intervention in the practice of counseling services to promote forgiveness following the actual transgressions by close social partners.

**Keywords:** Forgiveness; Empathy; Offense Severity; Relationship Closeness; Personality.
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CITY UNIVERSITY OF HONG KONG
DEPARTMENT OF APPLIED SOCIAL STUDIES

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(✓) All quotations are enclosed in quotation marks and that the source for each quotation has an accurate citation.

Signature: MAGGIE CHAN Date: 28 April 2011
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Human beings are fundamentally social creatures. People have a psychological need to develop and maintain enduring and significant relational bonds (Baumeister & Leary, 1995). Interpersonal relationships can generate positive social outcomes. At the same time, it can be the source of conflicts as well. As human are not perfect, the common imperfection of any relational partners means that individuals are most vulnerable by another person (Fincham, 2000). Rarely people have never experienced ‘hurt’, ‘betrayed’, ‘neglected’ or ‘offended’ by others in their life. When the interpersonal transgressions occur particularly in a close relationship, they can produce strong negative feelings such as sad, anger, or resentment to the person being offended. In serious situations, the transgressions may even interfere with the victim’s daily life and threaten the strong bonds in the relationship. It is therefore important to identify critical factors to minimize destructive responses and react in a more constructive way. One possible way out is for the victim to forgive the wrongdoer.

1.1 Forgiveness and health

Some people may think that it is generous for the victim to forgive the one who wronged them deeply. But the truth is that forgiveness yields benefits not only for the offenders but also for the offended parties. The role of forgiveness in contributing to the victim’s short-term and long-term positive consequences has been widely recognized by social psychologists. Previous studies have consistently demonstrated that forgiveness
Empathy and Forgiveness

was related to victim’s psychological well-being (Hebl & Enright, 1993; Karremans, Van Lange, Ouwerkerk, & Kluwer, 2003), physical health (Lawler et al., 2003; Toussaint, Williams, Musick, & Everson, 2001), and marital and family satisfaction (Gordon, Hughes, Tomcik, Dixon, & Litzinger, 2009; Paleari, Regalia, & Fincham, 2005). In contrast, failure to forgive others was associated with poor mental and physical health such as higher depression and anxiety (Maltby, Macaskill, & Day, 2001), lower life satisfaction (McCullough, Bellah, Kilpatrick, & Johnson, 2001), and higher blood pressure (Witvliet, Ludwig, & Vander Laan, 2001). To forgive others appears to be the personal strength and virtue in dealing with those relationship threatening moments. While the victims have no control on the occurrence of transgressions, they can still control how to react to the harm-doing events. Forgiveness allows the injurers to move on in order to enable or resume their own psychological and physical well-being.

1.2 Conceptualizing forgiveness

With pervasive understanding on the need to forgive, researchers began to give more intensive consideration on the idea of forgiveness in the recent three decades from 1980 but the conceptualizations of forgiveness were quite diverse. Although there is little consensus on its definition in the literature, the ideas of different approaches share the same crucial features. Firstly, to forgive in principle needs the injured to be aware of being hurt by others. Without injury in the wrongdoing event, there is nothing for the victim to forgive (Fincham, 2000). Secondly, forgiveness is a prosocial change in the victim’s motivation towards a transgressor for a specific transgression. Thirdly, when
people forgive, the responses towards the transgressors become less destructive and more constructive (McChullough, Pargament, & Thoresen, 2000).

Since these definitions emphasize victims’ transformation of negative attitudes towards the offenders to positive ones which are interpersonal rather than intrapersonal, it is relevant to the aim of the current study concerning forgiveness in an ongoing and close relationship. These definitions are also served as an objective criterion to determine what forgiveness is. With this understanding, the present study would study factors affecting the real-life examples of forgiving responses and figure out the road to reach forgiveness.

1.3 Overview of the present study

1.3.1 Forgiveness following a real-life and specific transgression

Based on the above definitions, the current study focused on forgiving responses following real-life and specific interpersonal transgressions and excluded dispositional forgiveness. By studying ‘real-life’ forgiveness which is based on those actual encounters, it can help the sufferers to understand in what real situations forgiveness may happen and to deal with their own healing processes after relationship hurts. ‘Real-life’ forgiveness should be studied separately from dispositional forgiveness though they are related at the conceptual level (Allemand, Ambery, Zimprich, & Fincham, 2007). Dispositional forgiveness serves as a personality trait and measures people’s typical responses to hypothetical transgressions. But whether forgiving people can subsequently change attitudes towards the transgressors and offer forgiveness in real term is in question. For example, McCullough and Worthington (1999) reported a robust and positive association between religious involvement and general tendency to forgive but the religious
involvement had no significant effect on real-life and specific forgiveness. As forgiving responses for hypothetical and actual transgressions appeared to be different, it would be more appropriate and direct to examine forgiveness in an actual experience in order to provide more practical information to victims to deal with their own offensive events in real situation.

1.3.2 Forgiveness in close relationships

The current study additionally contributed to the literature on forgiveness in close relationships which covered individual’s major relationship types including family relationship, romantic relationship, and close friendship which are characterized by a shared history in one’s life. Previous studies on forgiveness mainly focused on forgiveness at two extremes, either forgiveness to others who can be anyone around the person (for examples, Eaton, Struthers, & Santelli, 2006; McChullough et al., 2001; McCullough, Worthington, & Rachal, 1997, studies 1 and 2) or forgiveness in intimate couples (for examples, Finkel, Rusbult, Kumashiro, & Hannon, 2002; Paleari et al., 2005). Few studies have assessed forgiveness in close others. It is clear that people’s responses to the offense by significant others (e.g., your parent) and a distant relational partners (e.g., your employer) are different. Unlike a casual acquaintance that individual can simply withdraw the relationship with minimal loss, the mix of love and hurt in the close relationship makes the situation much complicated. While relationship dissolution with the close social partner is not an easy decision, the victim may choose to maintain the relationship with the one who hurts them. Karremans and Aarts (2006) reported that forgiveness was more accessible when participants were thinking of the close others than...
non-close others in a hypothetical transgression through cognitive processes. Thus the
research on these two relationship types should be examined independently. Nonetheless,
previous studies mainly concentrated on forgiveness in marriage or dating partners, the
finding may be specific to love relationship but not other significant relationship partners
such as family members and close friends as individuals may have different levels of
expectation towards different types of significant relational partner. Since interpersonal
forgiveness is a social construct and an individual plays many different major roles in
their life such as a child, a spouse, and a best friend which are all with positive
attachment with the significant others, extending the literature to other close relationships
in addition to romantic partners can offer more insights whether people would respond in
similar ways on forgiveness towards different types of close relationship.

1.3.3 Determinants of forgiveness

To understand the occurrence of forgiveness, the present study attempted to
explore the question of when victims forgive the offenders. Interpersonal forgiveness is
theoretically influenced by four main conceptual categories including empathy, offense-
specific, relational, and personality variables (for a review, see Fehr, Gelfand, & Nag,
2010; Fincham, 2000; McCullough, Rachal, Sandage, Worthington, Brown, & Hight,
1998; McCullough & Witvliet, 2002). Numerous empirical studies have supported the
associations between each of those four categories and forgiveness. However, little is
known about the roles played by different variables to influence forgiveness. The current
study therefore had the following three objectives. Given the McCullough et al.’s (1998)
thoretical understanding of four main determinants of forgiveness, the first objective
was to investigate the relationships between forgiveness and empathy, offense-level, relational, and personality variables. The second objective was to explore which of these four key variables are more salient in predicting forgiveness than other variables. For instances, whether the victim’s empathy towards the offenders, the event, or relationship quality are more influential to forgiveness? The third objective was to investigate the interaction effect of situational factors and dispositional factors in predicting forgiveness. Specifically, the present study explored to what extent victim’s empathy towards the transgressor may moderate the strong link between unchangeable contexts of transgression such as offense severity and forgiveness. Up to now, no study has placed the lens to investigate how victims who are viewed as a passive role in the uncontrollable setting can react to influence the road to forgiveness. The present work drew on the growing forgiveness research to inform on this area. Such investigation has an implication to the intervention program for promoting forgiveness.

1.4 Theoretical and empirical correlates of forgiveness

To address the question of when people forgive, the present work began with McCullough et al.’s (1998) theory of determinants of interpersonal forgiveness. It proposed that forgiveness is conceptually influenced by four main factors: (a) victims’ emotional experience towards the offenders, (b) offense-specific variables, (c) relational variables, and (d) victim’s personality. The next section begins with a review of the theoretical and empirical foundations of these four categories and proceeds with the outline of hypotheses for the relationships of several variables and forgiveness.

1.4.1 Victim’s empathy towards the offender and forgiveness
Victims are directed by their own emotions and ask themselves a question: ‘How do I feel towards the offender?’ According to McCullough et al. (1998), empathic emotions to the transgressors are the central element to facilitate forgiveness. When the victims experience less empathy towards the offenders, it is expected that their motivation to forgive is reduced. Conversely, when the victims experience more empathy towards the offenders, they are more likely to forgive. It is because empathy incorporates concepts like compassion, tenderness, and sympathy (Batson, 1990) and is characterized by the ability to feel and understand the affective and cognitive experiences of another (Worthington & Wade, 1999). Coke, Batson, and McDavis (1978) also proposed that affective and cognitive processes work together to form empathy.

From affective perspective, empathy may cause the victims to care about the offender’s experiences after the offense happened. The victims may worry that the offenders experience isolation, distress, and guilt when they are under social pressure after breaking the social norm. It may change victims’ motivation from pushing the offender away to pulling in the opposite direction. The victims may resume positive contact with the offenders and offer warm and tender to the offenders that may eventually foster forgiveness (McCullough et al., 1997). From cognitive perspective, when people consider the perspective of the person who wronged them, they may identify good reasons behind the offender’s behaviors and find it harder to blame the wrongdoers. As the victims become less guarded, impacts of offenses may seem smaller and more excusable and their negative attitudes towards the offenders are likely to be softened. The offender’s ordinary positive qualities may take place and the victim’s positive attitudes
towards the offenders grow. These shifts in attitude facilitate the occurrence of forgiveness (Exline & Zell, 2009).

Many studies have shown positive correlations between empathy and forgiveness (e.g., Exline, Baumeister, Zell, Kraft, & Witvliet, 2008; Fincham, Paleari, & Reglia, 2002; McCullough et al., 1997, 1998; Paleari et al., 2005). Clinical and counseling approaches have also illustrated that empathy-promoting interventions strengthen the tendency to forgive (Gordon & Baucom, 1999; Greenberg, Warwar, & Malcolm, 2010). Based on this evidence, the first hypothesis of the present study was:

Hypothesis 1: Empathy is positively related to forgiveness.

1.4.2 Offense-specific variables and forgiveness

In response to the transgression, most of victims have a question in mind: ‘what happened in the incident?’ They identify forgiveness-relevant characteristics of the transgression such as offense severity, transgressor’s intent and positive post-offense actions (e.g., apology) and those properties serve as cues for the victims to interpret the nature of the transgression and transgressor’s responsibility for what happened and to decide whether they should forgive the offenders.

*Offense severity.* The negative link between offense severity and forgiveness appeared to be robust (Boon & Sulsky, 1997; Darby & Schlenker, 1982; Fincham, Jackson, & Beach, 2005; McCullogh, Fincham, & Tsang, 2003). In theory, perceived severity can damage the impression of offenders. They are viewed as undeserving of forgiveness (Fehr, Gelfand, & Nag, 2010). Furthermore, it is quite straightforward that the more the severity of the offense, the more the enduring pain generated from the
offensive event. Severe transgressions may even influence the victims’ life more deeply than minor transgressions. The injured would avoid the person who hurt them deeply to heal their wounds and minimize the chance of suffering in the future and thus it is more difficult to forgive (McCullogh et al., 2003). On the basis of the above discussion, the following hypothesis was proposed:

Hypothesis 2a: Offense severity is negatively related to forgiveness.

Transgressor’s intent. Although transgressors’ intended actions to harm do not have a different impact to the victims, it damages victims’ perception of the impression of the offenders. If considered intentional, victims may see it as a hurtful insult (Malle & Knobe, 1997). Individual have more difficulty to forgive offenses that appear more intentional than those unintentional offenses (Boon & Sulsky, 1997; Koutsos, Wertheim, & Kornblum, 2008). The above arguments led to the following hypothesis:

Hypothesis 2b: Transgressor’s intent is negatively related to forgiveness.

Apology. While offense severity and transgressor’s intent lead to victims’ perception of negative images on the offenders, apology initiated by offenders serves as a relationship repair tactics aiming at shifting victims’ negative impression about the offenders to the opposite direction (Fehr, Gelfand, & Nag, 2010). Ohbuchi, Kameda, and Agarie (1989) also pointed out that the functions of apology are to convey the following messages to the victims: (a) giving respect to the victims, (b) reduction of victims’ responsibility, (c) denial of hurtful image, and (d) restoration of social fairness. It should be noted that not only the wrongdoing event but also the subsequent event may be important for forgiveness. Transgressors’ post-offense negative actions (e.g., indicating
the victims’ hurt is an unreasonable response) can reinforce their harm-doing action and demotivate forgiveness. On the other hand, transgressor’s acknowledgement the existence of interpersonal obligations and offering apology can help to relieve the tension in the relationship. Victims may change their view that the offenders are no longer evil-doers and more deserving to forgive. The link between apology and forgiveness has obtained a lot of attention in previous research studies and they have a clear positive association (Darby & Schlenker, 1982; Weiner, Graham, Peter, & Zmuidinas, 1991). It was therefore hypothesized the following point:

Hypothesis 2c: Apology is positively related to forgiveness.

1.4.3 Relationship closeness and forgiveness

Because forgiveness is conceptualized as motivational changes towards the offender following the interpersonal transgression (McCullough, Pargament, et al., 2000), victims would judge ‘who is the transgressor?’ when considering forgiveness and thus one of the essential determinants of forgiveness should be the level of relationship quality between the victims and the offenders, such as relationship closeness, commitment, and satisfaction.

Relationship closeness has been frequently investigated in forgiveness research and posited to perform a key role in forgiveness (Exline, Baumeister, Bushman, Campbell, & Finkel, 2004; Finkel et al., 2002; Tsang, McChullough, & Fincham, 2006). Relationship closeness is defined as interconnectedness or interdependence and consists of love, care and commitment (Tsang et al., 2006). The closeness-forgiveness link is likely to be operated by accommodation theory (Rusbult, Verette, Whitney, Slovik,
Empathy and Forgiveness

Lipkus, 1991) and willingness to sacrifice theory (Van Lange, Rusbult, Drigotas, Arriaga, Witcher, & Cox, 1997). According to the accommodation theory, when close relational partner commits negative act to harm the relationship, people being hurt are still willing to prevent destructive behaviors on the one hand and react constructively on the other hand to maintain the relationship. Similarly, willingness to sacrifice refers to the individual’s motivation to forfeit the immediate own benefits to obtain joint good outcomes for the ongoing close relationship. Derived from the above theories, McCullough et al. (1998) made a notable summary of seven ways to explain the possible link between victim-offender relationship quality and forgiveness: (1) people with higher resources invested in the relationship have greater motivation to retain the relationship; (2) people with high relationship quality tend to overlook short-term hurts and concentrate on long-term goal; (3) high-quality relationship has combined interests of self and partner; (4) people with high relationship quality are more willing to give up their own interests for the benefit of their social partners; (5) people have more shared background, thoughts and feelings with their relational partners experience more empathy for them; (6) people are more likely to accept criticisms from social partners with high relationship quality and see it as positive motivating behaviors; and (7) offenders in high-quality relationship are more willing to take remedy actions such as apology as they greatly suffer from relationship dissolution.

Several studies have repeatedly indicated that people are more willing to forgive their relational partners with a high level of closeness. For example, McCulloguh et al. (1998) surveyed university students who had been injured to assess the association
Empathy and Forgiveness

between pre-offense relationship closeness and forgiveness, and they found evidence to support that victims with high levels of relational closeness with their offending partners were more willing to accept apology and had higher empathy for the offenders that increase forgiveness.

Tsang et al. (2006) had impressive findings on the association between relationship closeness and forgiveness. The study investigated both pre- and post-offense closeness in predicting forgiveness. The longitudinal study has shown a reciprocal relationship between avoidance dimension of forgiveness and closeness and commitment. Most interestingly, partners in high relationship closeness after the transgression showed reduced avoidance motivation at later point of time. Perhaps the phenomenon can be explained by cognitive dissonance and self-perception. According to research on cognitive dissonance (Festinger, 1957), the inconsistency of attitudes of closeness and unforgiving thoughts make the victims feel discomfort. Forgiveness can help to reduce this discomfort and resolve the inconsistency. Similarly, self-perception made the victims to forgive after noticing their own close behaviors towards the transgressors (Bem, 1967).

Given the above arguments, it was hypothesized that:

Hypothesis 3a: Pre-offense closeness is positively related to forgiveness.

Hypothesis 3b: Post-offense closeness is positively related to forgiveness.

1.4.4 Personality and forgiveness

Victims’ personality variables focus on the question of ‘what is my typical response?’ Forgiveness can be accessible through preventing destructive responses and replacing negative responses to positive ones to the offender. Some people can manage
this self-regulation better than others. Numerous studies have assessed how personality associated with forgiveness. Emmons (2000) proposed that the association between personality and forgiveness is easier to understand when personality is classified as higher-order personality dimension such as personality traits. One trait model called the five-factor model of personality (McCrae & Costa, 2007) has been greatly applied in the forgiveness study. Among these five personality factors, agreeableness and neuroticism are repeatedly associated with forgiveness. The results of the previous studies revealed that more forgiving people are more agreeable and less neurotic (Berry, Worthington, Parrott, O’Connor, & Wade, 2001; Brose, Rye, Lutz-Zois, & Ross, 2005; McCullough et al., 2001; McCullough & Hoyt, 2002; Neto, 2007).

Agreeableness appears to show active concern for the welfare of other people. It is defined as the tendency to trust, understand, empathize and cooperate with others (McCrae & Costa, 2007). High agreeable people may be more tolerant and less extreme during conflict leading to more forgiving than less agreeable people (Koutsos et al., 2008). The following hypothesis was therefore formed:

Hypothesis 4a: Agreeableness is positively related to forgiveness.

On the other hand, neuroticism exposes people to instability of affect in negative stimuli. It is defined as the tendency to react impulsively and stressfully to negative life events (McCrae & Costa, 2007). More neurotic persons may be more difficult to let go for negative affect towards the harm-doers and more anxiety and angry and less forgiving than less neurotic people (McCullough & Hoyt, 2002). Following this argument, it was hypothesized that:
Hypothesis 4b: Neuroticism is negatively related to forgiveness.

1.4.5 The roles of empathy in predicting forgiveness

From the above discussion, it appears that forgiveness can be accessible depending on the empathy, the event, the relationship, and the person. However it remains largely unclear which of these four factors is the most distinctive in predicting forgiveness. McCullough et al. (1997) have posited that empathic emotion would be the most distinctive determinant of forgiveness. They argued that forgiveness and empathy share the same feature of attitude changes towards the offenders in the positive way, thus empathy is regarded as a direct facilitator of the forgiveness. It is therefore expected that empathy may account for greater variance in forgiveness and its effect would be over and above other key factors. The event and the relationship variables would also be influential to forgiveness but they are relatively more distant than empathy as they do not possess the shared characteristics of attitude changes towards the offenders in positive ways with forgiveness. Among four factors, personality would be remote to influence people to forgive as individuals need to apply their forgiving personality to specific events. Based on these anticipations, the following hypothesis was formed:

Hypothesis 5: Empathy accounts for additional variance to predict forgiveness even when offense-specific variables, relationship closeness, and personality variables are statistically controlled for.

Among empathy, offense-specific, relational and personality correlates of forgiveness, the current research advanced the investigation to test the moderating effect of empathy on the association between offense severity and forgiveness. It is understood
that both empathic emotion and offense-related variables such as offense severity are the
two most influential determinants of forgiveness and they are viewed as more salient to
influence forgiveness than relationship quality and personality (McCullough et al., 1998).
With the understanding of strong links for these two variables and forgiveness, the
present study attempted to investigate the interaction effect of empathy and offense
severity on forgiveness. As discussed in the previous sections, offense severity is
negatively related to forgiveness while empathy is positively related to forgiveness. Their
relationships with forgiveness are in two opposite direction. Since both empathy and
forgiveness focus on changing negative affects towards the offender and the offense to
positive which are not shared by other factors including offense severity, the question in
concern is whether empathy would lessen the negative effect of offense severity on
forgiveness. If the answer is positive, it implies that intervention by increased victims’
empathy towards the transgressors is supposed to be useful to facilitate forgiveness. The
discussion presented above led to the last hypothesis:

Hypothesis 6: Empathy would moderate the relationship between offense severity
and forgiveness. Specifically, for individuals with higher empathy, the negative
relationship between offense severity and forgiveness is smaller than those with lower
empathy.

It appeared to be clear that interpersonal transgression is problematic and can
generate many negative outcomes. The existing work made an effort to promote the
significance of forgiveness and to advance the literature on factors motivating
forgiveness. It was hypothesized that interpersonal forgiveness is influenced by four main
conceptual categories including empathy, offense-specific, relationship closeness, and personality variables. Among all these variables, empathy was hypothesized as the most distinctive determinant of forgiveness and to have a buffer effect on the robust negative relationship between offense severity and forgiveness. These investigations would contribute to the development of self-help teaching materials for the victims to know how to reach the road of forgiveness. For victims, to forgive is to set free from the victim’s role to become a forgiver. Forgivers have no power to control the occurrence of uncontrollable events but they could proceed on an optimistic way after the transgression by forgiving the offenders.
CHAPTER 2

METHODOLOGY

2.1 Participants

Participants were 162 individuals recruited in Hong Kong by convenience sampling and through a snowball principle. All participants took part in this study voluntarily without monetary reward. Only individuals who were aged 18 and above were invited to participate in the study in order to ensure that the adult participants could report a relevant and significant interpersonal transgression occurred in their daily life.

There were 44 males and 118 females. Thirty six percent of the respondents were between age 18 and 30 years of age, 42% were between 31 and 40 years of age and the remaining 22% were 41 years of age or above. More than half of the participants (58%) were university graduates or above. About half of the participants (48%) were married or cohabitated. Forty three percent participants reported that they had religious affiliation. Table 2.1 displays the summary of demographic information of the participants.

2.2 Procedure

Following university research ethics approval, a pilot study was conducted among five individuals in order to collect their feedback on the questionnaires. Upon incorporation of their comments in the final version of the questionnaire, participants were then recruited from the researcher’s social network and through a snowball principle. First, individuals who were aged 18 and above were invited to participate in a study of ‘association between interpersonal relationship and positive psychology’. They were
Table 2.1
Summary of Demographic Variables

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<tr>
<td><strong>Sex</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td>Male</td>
<td>27.2</td>
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<tr>
<td>Female</td>
<td>72.8</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Age</strong></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>18 – 30</td>
<td>35.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>31 – 40</td>
<td>42.6</td>
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<tr>
<td>41 or above</td>
<td>21.6</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Education</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td>Primary school or below</td>
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<td>F.1 – F.5</td>
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<tr>
<td>F.6 – College</td>
<td>23.5</td>
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<tr>
<td>Degree or above</td>
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<tr>
<td>Married / Cohabitated</td>
<td>47.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Others</td>
<td>52.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Religion</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>With Religion</td>
<td>43.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Without Religion</td>
<td>56.8</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

assured that participation was voluntary in nature and the responses were anonymous, confidential and solely for academic purposes. Second, the participants first read and signed the consent form before the start of the survey. Third, the questionnaire packs were then handed or mailed to the participants with a reply-paid envelope. Participants completed the questionnaires individually at the place they selected. It took about ten minutes to complete the questionnaire. After completion, they returned the questionnaire.
to the researcher by mail. Upon collection of the completed questionnaires, statistical analysis on the participant’s self-reported data were conducted using SPSS software.

2.3 Measures

The current study made use of a self-report questionnaire. It consisted of the following five sections:

2.3.1 Contextual information of the interpersonal transgression

*Characteristics of the transgression.* At the beginning of the questionnaire, participants were instructed to recall the most impressive experience within the past five years prior to the time of study when they were offended or hurt by a close other such as family member, romantic partner, or best friend. The time frame of the past five years was set because it allows sufficient time for substantial offensive events to emerge. To facilitate a recall of the details of the happening, they were asked to give a brief description on the cause, process, result, and feeling of the offensive event. Also, they answered three items to indicate the relationship type with their transgressor, type of transgression, and how long since the incident happened (in numbers of months). Additional questions specified to the transgression followed.

*Transgression-specified variables.* The features of the transgression which are in forgiveness-relevant nature were asked. All items were derived from Koutsos et al.’s (2008) study of the role of the transgression’s context in predicting forgiveness following the actual offense. First, two questions were used to measure offense severity, including severity and hurt of the incident on a 5-point scale ranging from 1 (not much) to 5 (very). The two questions are: ‘do you think the offense was serious?’ and ‘how deeply were you
hurt when the incident occurred?’ Higher score indicates higher offense severity. Coefficient alpha for offensive severity was .84. Next, one question was used to assess the victim’s perception of the transgressor’s intent. The question is: ‘do you think the transgressor intended to offend you?’ (‘no’ – 0 point or ‘yes’ – 1 point). Higher score indicates higher transgressors’ intent. Finally, one item indicated transgressor’s apology. The question is: ‘did the transgressor actively offer you an apology after the incident?’ (‘no’ – 0 point or ‘yes’ – 1 point). Higher score indicates more transgressors’ apology.

*Relationship-specified variables.* Relationship closeness before and after the offensive incident were measured. The items measured the relationship closeness in the study of Tsang et al. (2006) were employed. Two questions were ‘how close you were to the transgressor before the incident / after the incident?’ measured on a 5-point scale ranging from 1 (not much) to 5 (very). Higher score indicates higher relationship closeness between the victims and the offenders.

### 2.3.2 Empathy

Batson’s eight-item empathy scale was employed to assess participant’s state empathy towards the transgressor (Coke et al., 1978). It consisted of eight adjectives including compassionate, concerned, empathic, moved, softhearted, sympathetic, tender, and warm. Participants rated to what extent they had the feeling towards the transgressor immediately after the incident happened on a 6-point Likert-type scale ranging from 0 (not at all) to 5 (extremely). Back translation was performed for the eight empathy adjectives. Higher score indicates greater empathy. Coefficient alpha for this measure was .88.
2.3.3 Personality

The Chinese version of two subscales of the Big Five Inventory (John, Naumann, & Soto, 2008) measured agreeableness and neuroticism were used. There were nine items for agreeableness such as ‘I tend to find fault with others’ and ‘I am helpful and unselfish with others’. For neuroticism, there were eight items such as ‘I am depressed and blue’ and ‘I am relaxed and handle stress well’. All items were scored on a 5-point Likert-type scale ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree). Higher score indicates higher degree of agreeableness or neuroticism. The two subscales of the big five inventory had satisfactory internal consistency (Cronbach’s alpha for agreeableness = .74 and neuroticism = .82).

2.3.4 Forgiveness

Interpersonal forgiveness was measured using a questionnaire constructed by Tse and Cheng (2006) in the previous study of Hong Kong people. It consisted of six items to assess the victim’s cognition, emotion and behavior towards the transgressor in both positive and negative sides. Examples of the items are ‘I wish that he/she gets punished’ and ‘I will avoid further contact with him/her’. Items were rated on a 6-point Likert-type scale ranging from 1 (completely disagree) to 6 (completely agree). Back translation was performed for the forgiveness scale. Higher score indicates greater forgiveness. The measure demonstrated high internal reliability with coefficient alpha of .80.

2.3.5 Demographic information

At the end of the questionnaire, participants were asked to provide information about sex (male and female), age (18 - 30 years, 31 - 40 years, and 41 years or above),
education level (primary school or below, Form 1 to 5, Form 6 to college, and degree or above), marital status (married/cohabited and others), and religion (with and without religious belief).
CHAPTER 3
RESULTS

3.1 Descriptive statistics

Similar to the previous studies on real-life single interpersonal transgression (Allemand et al., 2007; McCullough, Bono, & Root, 2007; McCullough et al., 2003), the types of relationship between the victim and transgressor and the transgression types were diverse. Most respondents reported that they had experienced transgression committed by close friends of same gender (31%), boyfriends or girlfriends (25%), and spouse (12%). Lesser were reported on transgressions by siblings (8%), parents (7%), close friends of opposite gender (7%), and others close relational partners (10%). The most frequently reported transgression types indicated by the participants were inconsideration (49%) and betrayals (41%). Respondents specified the time passed since the incident occurred to the time of study averagely for 26 months (SD = 20.3; range = .03 to 60 months).

3.2 Relationships between major variables

Mean, standard deviations, and correlations among the major variables are presented in Table 3.1. Consistent with hypothesis 1, empathy was positively correlated to forgiveness ($r = .49, p < .001$). Also consistent with hypotheses 2a and 2b, both the offense-related variables including offense severity ($r = -.45, p < .001$) and transgressor’s intention ($r = -.42, p < .001$) were negatively moderately correlated to forgiveness as
### Table 3.1
*Means, Standard Deviations, and Correlations*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>M</th>
<th>SD</th>
<th>1</th>
<th>2</th>
<th>3</th>
<th>4</th>
<th>5</th>
<th>6</th>
<th>7</th>
<th>8</th>
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<th>11</th>
<th>12</th>
<th>13</th>
<th>14</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1.</td>
<td>Sex (female)</td>
<td>73%</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.</td>
<td>Age</td>
<td>---</td>
<td>---</td>
<td>-.01</td>
<td>---</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>3.</td>
<td>Education</td>
<td>---</td>
<td>---</td>
<td>-.36***</td>
<td>-.22**</td>
<td>---</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>4.</td>
<td>Marital Status (married)</td>
<td>48%</td>
<td>---</td>
<td>-.09</td>
<td>.36***</td>
<td>-.02</td>
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<tr>
<td>5.</td>
<td>Religion</td>
<td>43%</td>
<td>---</td>
<td>.03</td>
<td>.08</td>
<td>.11</td>
<td>-.06</td>
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<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>6.</td>
<td>Forgiveness</td>
<td>3.62</td>
<td>1.11</td>
<td>-.14</td>
<td>.15</td>
<td>.11</td>
<td>.17*</td>
<td>-.03</td>
<td>---</td>
<td></td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>7.</td>
<td>Empathy</td>
<td>2.19</td>
<td>1.09</td>
<td>-.03</td>
<td>.01</td>
<td>.14</td>
<td>-.03</td>
<td>.13</td>
<td>.49***</td>
<td>---</td>
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<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>8.</td>
<td>Offense Severity</td>
<td>3.85</td>
<td>1.06</td>
<td>.14</td>
<td>-.20*</td>
<td>.13</td>
<td>-.16*</td>
<td>-.02</td>
<td>-.45***</td>
<td>-.05</td>
<td>---</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9.</td>
<td>Transgresor’s Intent</td>
<td>40%</td>
<td>---</td>
<td>.04</td>
<td>.00</td>
<td>-.13</td>
<td>.07</td>
<td>-.04</td>
<td>-.42***</td>
<td>-.26***</td>
<td>.19*</td>
<td>---</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10.</td>
<td>Apology</td>
<td>33%</td>
<td>---</td>
<td>.10</td>
<td>-.01</td>
<td>.04</td>
<td>.05</td>
<td>-.10</td>
<td>.08</td>
<td>.18*</td>
<td>.08</td>
<td>.06</td>
<td>---</td>
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<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11.</td>
<td>Pre-offense Closeness</td>
<td>3.78</td>
<td>1.10</td>
<td>.04</td>
<td>-.08</td>
<td>.07</td>
<td>-.02</td>
<td>-.02</td>
<td>.10</td>
<td>.41***</td>
<td>.22**</td>
<td>-.13</td>
<td>.23**</td>
<td>---</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12.</td>
<td>Post-offense Closeness</td>
<td>2.56</td>
<td>1.41</td>
<td>.10</td>
<td>.00</td>
<td>.00</td>
<td>.08</td>
<td>-.07</td>
<td>.53***</td>
<td>.50***</td>
<td>-.29***</td>
<td>-.25***</td>
<td>.24***</td>
<td>.36***</td>
<td>---</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>13.</td>
<td>Agreeableness</td>
<td>3.56</td>
<td>.54</td>
<td>.03</td>
<td>.19*</td>
<td>.10</td>
<td>-.01</td>
<td>.19*</td>
<td>.14</td>
<td>.14</td>
<td>-.06</td>
<td>-.07</td>
<td>-.05</td>
<td>.05</td>
<td>.17*</td>
<td>---</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>14.</td>
<td>Neuroticism</td>
<td>3.00</td>
<td>.69</td>
<td>.15</td>
<td>-.23**</td>
<td>.01</td>
<td>-.12</td>
<td>-.11</td>
<td>-.04</td>
<td>.05</td>
<td>.15</td>
<td>-.07</td>
<td>.00</td>
<td>.05</td>
<td>.03</td>
<td>-.48***</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Note:* *p < .05, **p < .01, ***p < .001.
expected. However, apology was correlated with empathy \((r = .18, p < .05)\) but not forgiveness \((r = .08, ns)\). Hypothesis 2c was not supported. On the other hand, only post-offense closeness with the transgressor were positively correlated to forgiveness \((r = .53, p < .001)\) but not for pre-offense closeness \((r = .10, ns)\). That means only hypothesis 3b was supported but not for hypothesis 3a. None of the personality variables, that is, neither agreeableness nor neuroticism, were significantly correlated with forgiveness. Both hypotheses 4a and 4b were not supported. In addition, marital status was found to be associated with forgiveness \((r = .17, p < .05)\), thus it would be statistically controlled for in the subsequent analyses.

### 3.3 Predictors of forgiveness

Before conducting the analyses, an independent-samples t-test was conducted to explore the impact of sex on the level of forgiveness. The independent-samples t-test demonstrated no significant difference in the forgiveness scores between the two sexes \((t(160) = 1.81, ns)\). In addition, a one-way between-groups analysis of variance (ANOVA) was conducted to explore the impact of relationship types between victims and offenders on forgiveness \((F(6, 155) = 2.13, ns)\). There was no significant difference in the forgiveness scores across different relationship types. Thus, all participants were pooled together for the subsequent analyses.

To test hypothesis 5, a hierarchical regression analysis was performed to include all four main theoretical correlates in the model and test whether empathy would significantly contribute an additional variance of forgiveness over and beyond all other variables. Variables were entered into the hierarchical regression analysis in five steps.
On block 1, marital status as a demographic variable was entered as a control variable because it had a significant correlation with forgiveness \( (r = .17, p < .05) \). This block of variable significantly predicted forgiveness, \( R^2 = .03, F(1, 160) = 4.78, p < .05 \). On block 2, personality variables (i.e., agreeableness and neuroticism) were added. The second block did not significantly account for the variance of forgiveness, \( R^2 \text{change} = .02, F \text{change}(2, 158) = 1.99, ns \). On block 3, relationship-level variables (i.e., pre- and post-offense relationship closeness) were entered. They provided a significant amount of additional explained variance of forgiveness, \( R^2 \text{change} = .26, F \text{change}(2, 156) = 29.68, p < .001 \). Offense-related variables (i.e., offense severity, transgressor’s intent and apology) were entered into block 4 of a hierarchical regression. This block of variables also emerged as significant predictors, \( R^2 \text{change} = .15, F \text{change}(3, 153) = 13.97, p < .001 \). Adding empathy into block 5 explained an additional variance of forgiveness, \( R^2 \text{change} = .07, F \text{change}(1, 152) = 22.06, p < .001 \), even when offense and relational-level variables, personality, and demographic variables were significantly controlled for. The overall model accounted for 53% of the variance in forgiveness. Hypothesis 5 received support. Table 3.2 shows the summary of the findings for hypothesis 5 in the rows from Blocks 1 to 5.

3.4 Moderation of empathy on offense severity and forgiveness

To test whether the negative association between offense severity and forgiveness would be weakened when the victims’ empathy for the offender is higher, a separate hierarchical multiple regression was conducted. Hypothesis 6 was examined by entering the set of data in the same manner as hypothesis 5 in blocks 1 to 5. After those main
### Table 3.2

*Summary of Hierarchical Regression Analysis for Testing Variables Predicting Forgiveness and Testing Moderating Effect of Empathy on the Relationship between Offense Severity and Forgiveness*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Predictors</th>
<th>β</th>
<th>ΔR²</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Block 1: Control variables</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Marital Status</td>
<td>.03*</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Block 2: Personality variables</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Agreeableness</td>
<td>.04</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Neuroticism</td>
<td>-.01</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Block 3: Relational variables</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pre-offense relationship closeness</td>
<td>-.07</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Post-offense relationship closeness</td>
<td>.26***</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Block 4: Offense-specified variables</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Offense severity</td>
<td>-.28***</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Transgressors’ intent</td>
<td>-.22***</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Transgressors’ apology</td>
<td>.02</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Block 5: Emotional variables</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Empathy</td>
<td>.31***</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Block 6: Interaction term</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Offense severity x Empathy</td>
<td>.16**</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Adjusted R²</strong></td>
<td>.53</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>F</strong></td>
<td>18.83***</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Note. β denotes standardized coefficient; ΔR² denotes the variance explained by each block of variables. * p < .05, ** p < .01, *** p < .001.*
effects were entered, an interaction term between empathy and offense severity was entered in Block 6 to test the moderation effect of empathy on offense severity and forgiveness. The interaction term was significant ($\beta = .16, p < .01$), indicating that empathy moderates the relationship between severity and forgiveness. The summary of hierarchical regression analysis for testing hypothesis 6 is presented in Table 3.2. Additionally, a simple slope test was performed to explain the interaction effect. To plot the graph for two distinct empathy groups, participants were first divided into high and low empathy groups (i.e., one standard derivation above and below the mean score of empathy respectively where $M = 2.19, SD = 1.09$). Figure 3.1 reveals the pattern of

![Figure 3.1. Moderating Effect of Empathy on the Relationship between Offense Severity and Forgiveness](image-url)
association between those with higher and lower levels of empathy. It indicated that the negative association between offense severity and forgiveness was stronger for people with lower level of empathy than did those with higher level of empathy. In other words, compared with those with low empathy, participants with high empathy tended to show higher forgiveness even the offense severity was high. As there was a moderation effect found for empathy on the association between offense severity and forgiveness, hypothesis 6 was supported.
CHAPTER 4
DISCUSSION

Transgressions in close social relationship partners are unavoidable and can generate interpersonal hurts. To maintain a high-quality ongoing relationship, it is more realistic to cope with the challenge rather than avoid it. Forgiveness would be an effective solution to overcome the interpersonal conflicts. Many previous studies have investigated factors contributing forgiveness but there were a few studies integrated multiple factors in a single study and concentrated on the roles of different factors in predicting forgiveness. The central purpose of the current work was therefore to advance the literature on these areas. Findings demonstrated that empathy, offense severity, transgressor’s intent, and post-offense closeness were related to forgiveness while apology, pre-offense closeness, agreeableness and neuroticism were not significantly related to forgiveness. The present study also indicated that the four conceptual influencing factors including empathy, offense-specific variables, relationship closeness, and personality variables accounted for 53% of the variance of forgiveness and found evidence that empathy played a significant and distinct role in forgiving. In addition, the negative relationship between forgiveness and offense severity was moderated by empathy. The salient relationship between empathy and forgiveness as revealed in the present study underscores the essence of increased empathy in helping people to forgive.

4.1 Correlates of forgiveness
The first purpose of this study was to investigate when people forgive their significant others (not only romantic partners but also family members and best friends) after a real-life and specific transgression. The associations between forgiveness and four main conceptual categories including empathy, offense-specific variables (i.e., offense severity, transgressor’s intent, and apology), relationship closeness (i.e., pre- and post-offense closeness) and personality (i.e., agreeableness and neuroticism) were examined. As predicted, empathy, offense severity, transgressor’s intent, and post-offense closeness were related to forgiveness. The four hypotheses 1, 2a, 2b, and 3b were supported by these results. The findings were consistent with other studies of forgiveness research. Consistent with McCullough et al.’s (1997, 1998) findings, people forgive others when they experience empathy for them. It could be due to the fact that people find forgiveness to be an effective mean to reduce the distress of self and others when they concern the offenders are remorse and upset. Furthermore, forgiveness was negatively correlated with offense severity and transgressor’s intent which were similar to the findings of Koutsos et al. (2008) on interpersonal forgiveness of others in actual incident. Apparently, victims are unwilling to offer a concession to the offenders when they are disappointed with the transgression and the relationship. The result for post-offense closeness was also consistent with Tsang et al.’s (2006) findings of reciprocal causal relationship between forgiveness and closeness. Indeed, the closer the relationship between victims and offenders, the more reliable on their relationship and the more they are ready to forgive. The post-offense closeness provides a good relational climate that may foster forgiveness.
One could also argue that forgiveness may promote relational restoration and post-offense relationship closeness.

However, findings of the present study demonstrated that apology, pre-offense closeness, agreeableness and neuroticism were not significantly related to forgiveness. The hypotheses 2c, 3a, 4a and 4b were not supported. Apology was only correlated to empathy but not forgiveness. The findings were inconsistent to some previous research (e.g., Darby & Schlenker, 1982; McCullough et al., 1998). It may be due to the fact that apology is not always effective. As pointed out by Fehr and Gelfand (2010), an effective apology must contain specific components that the listeners expect to hear. For example, highly relational people expect an apology to cover the expression of empathy to maintain the relationship quality. When the apology only contains compensation of the loss of the victims, it is only a kind of mismatch of demand and supply. If the content of the apology is not what the victims need to hear, it cannot successfully elicit victims’ empathic emotion and thus it is not likely for the victims to forgive.

Unexpectedly, while pre-offense closeness related to post-offense closeness, it did not relate to forgiveness. The regression analysis also revealed that there was no predictive power for pre-offense closeness in forgiveness. This finding was similar to what observed in the study done by Koutsos et al. (2008). They argued that victims may change their views on the relationship after the transgression and the post-offense closeness was more essential to decide whether to forgive.

Neither agreeableness nor neuroticism was significantly related to forgiveness. These findings were inconsistent with the previous research in the individualistic Western
Empathy and Forgiveness

culture (e.g., Berry et al., 2001; Brose et al., 2005), but a study using Chinese samples conducted by Fu, Watkins, and Hui (2004) provided a different view on personality-forgiveness link in a typical collectivistic culture that may help to explain the findings in the current study. In their study, results showed that social harmony was the major motive for people to forgive and the influence of personality such as agreeableness and neuroticism to forgiveness generally reported in the Western literature was discounted. It may be due to typical Chinese view forgiveness as cultural values. Those place high values in relationship harmony and face tend to forgive others in their daily lives. But there was little correlation between forgiveness and individualistic personality constructs such as agreeableness, self-esteem and anxiety in the Chinese culture (Fu et al., 2004). Perhaps less agreeable or high neurotic Chinese people who also highly care the relationship harmony might weight in-group stability on top of their own personal feelings when considering interpersonal forgiveness. It appears that the personality-forgiveness link varies across cultures. Further research should consider adding other personality variables which are commonly observed in the collectivistic culture when studying forgiveness in Chinese people. Cheung, Cheung, Zhang, Leung, Leong, and Kuang (2008) proposed the revised Chinese Personality Assessment Inventory (CPAI-2) which consists constructs specific to Chinese culture. The constructs related to interpersonal relationships include harmony, relationship orientation, and face. These personality constructs may be relevant to forgiveness as they are characterized as social favors and can be considered to add in the forgiveness study in Chinese society.
To date, there were limited studies to test the multi-factorial model of forgiveness. The second objective of this study therefore included major theoretical correlates of forgiveness in the model in order to determine which variables are the most influential to forgiveness. Specifically, the current study sought to determine whether empathy contributes to a significant amount of additional explained variance of forgiveness even when offense-level, relational-level, personality-level and demographic factors are statistically controlled for. Result revealed that empathy significantly accounted for additional 7% of the variance. Hypothesis 5 was supported. This result points to victims’ empathy for the offenders as distinctive, robust and consistent predictor of forgiveness beyond other well-established predictors. The strong evidence for the empathy-forgiveness link provides a greater confidence to support that empathy plays an essential role to reach forgiveness and should be integrated into forgiveness theory. This finding was consistent with the ideas promoted by McCullough et al. (1998) that forgiveness is an empathy-driven motivational consequence.

The third purpose of this study was to put together two theoretically-opposite variables, empathy and offense-severity in predicting forgiveness. This finding was particularly interesting because it presented the interaction effect of stable and unstable factors in the harm-doing event on forgiveness. Result showed that the more empathy for the offender the less the effect of offense severity on forgiveness. Hypothesis 6 was supported. This suggests that those with higher empathy for the partner are able to overcome their negative feeling, regardless of the offense severity, and response constructively to the offenders and reach forgiveness more easily. It may be because both
empathy and forgiveness focus on the transformation of negative feeling to positive towards the offenders. This characteristic points to the core feature of forgiveness which is not shared by other individual-difference and situational constructs (McCullough et al., 1998). Therefore, this tendency inclines to push high empathic people in the direction of forgiveness even in severe transgression.

4.2 Implications

The findings have potential implications for the practice of counseling that promote forgiveness. The findings suggest that empathy-centered intervention may help people to forgive. For example, patients suffering from severe transgression problems in close relationships may be systemically invited to express their positive feeling for the close relationship as a whole and take the perspective of the offenders in the event in order to raise people’s empathy for the offenders. Hill (2010) viewed empathy as an effective tool to discover forgiveness in the process of therapy. Forgiveness can be accessible when victims have courage to discover themselves, the relationship between the offending person, and the injured parties and their own emotional life in more positive and constructive ways. While victims’ efforts of increased empathy can transform negative feeling for the offenders to positive after the transgression, the sufferers can take an active role in the hurtful event to affect the outcomes.

4.3 Limitations and future studies

Several limitations should be addressed for the current study. First, the self-report data in this study is useful but may influence the findings. As suggested by McCulloguh, Hoyt, and Rachal (2000), forgiveness research should include behavioral measures (e.g.,
experimental study) and observer report (e.g., partners’ or third parties’ reports) in addition to the self-report measures in order to gain a more comprehensive knowledge on forgiveness study. Second, the direction of causation is still uncertain in the current study. Retrospective reporting by participants cannot confirm causal influence between forgiveness and those main variables. A longitudinal design such as measurement of relationship closeness, empathy, forgiveness at different points of time could help to determine direction of effects on forgiveness. Third, the issue of cross-culture applications of personality assessment should be addressed. Instead of adapting the personality inventory used in the Western culture, it would be more appropriate to apply personality constructs which are relevant to forgiveness and specified to Chinese culture when studying forgiveness in Chinese people. For example, the constructs related to interpersonal relationships such as harmony, relationship orientation, and face in the CPAI-2 (Cheung et al., 2008) can be added as personality variables for Chinese people when studying forgiveness.

The current study contributes to forgiveness research by identifying different variables related to the event, the person, and the relationship in the model of determinants of forgiveness. Future studies can proceed in specific ways. A first direction is to add other forgiveness-relevant variables in the multi-factorial model of forgiveness specified in the Chinese culture, such as social harmony and face. Another direction is to have a more thorough investigation on the nature of forgiveness. Exline and Baumeister (2000) suggested that there are two dimensions of forgiveness including internal forgiveness (i.e., silent forgiveness without any behavioral expression) and expressed
forgiveness (i.e., social forgiveness without any internal transformation). Given the understanding that Chinese people who are more keen to keep social stability are more willing to forgive, it is questionable whether the forgiveness they offered are internal forgiveness or expressed forgiveness. Further study can go on this track to explore these two dimensions of forgiveness in a greater detail.

4.4 Conclusions

People usually do not want to believe that the angel and the devil are the same person. When the conflicts occur in the close relationships, the injured are usually not prepared to be attacked and are particularly hurt. Forgiveness can help the sufferers to heal the wounds. The present work yielded several findings that can contribute to our understanding of forgiveness. First, forgiveness in close relationships is related to the event, the relationship and specific emotion of the victims. Second, the current study is consistent with other studies of forgiveness research that empathy is considered to be the most influential to forgiveness. Third, this study also contributes to the literature by suggesting how the unstable factors (i.e. empathy) controlled by victims affect the stable factors (i.e. offense severity) in the transgression incident. These findings provide insight on how people play attention to their emotions and recover from the hurtful incidents.

The preceding pre-eminent political leader of India Mahatma Gandhi has been quoted as saying that “The weak can never forgive. Forgiveness is an attribute of the strong” (American Psychological Association, 2006). The core idea is that forgiveness allows individual to overcome the difficult time by own self and to act constructively and bravely. Forgiveness cannot change the past (partner initiated) but it can change the
future (self initiated). As many important and interesting questions in relation to forgiveness remain not discovered, it is expected to see more work on forgiveness in the future that can enrich our understanding on this personal strength and virtue.
REFERENCES


Empathy and Forgiveness


