



Trait forgiveness as a predictor of state forgiveness and positive work outcomes after victimization



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ABSTRACT

Prior research shows that trait forgiveness impacts interpersonal outcomes, but its impact on state forgiveness and broader work outcomes is less clear. This paper investigated whether trait forgiveness predicts state forgiveness and three work outcomes (job satisfaction, affective commitment, and leave intentions). In studying these relationships, three potential mediators were tested as part of a perceptual model of trait forgiveness. Two hundred and fifty participants described a situation in which they were offended by another person in the workplace. Findings generally supported the perceptual model of trait forgiveness expected in that trait forgiveness predicted state forgiveness and the work outcomes tested. Perceived expectancy violation and offender reconstrual but not perceived transgression severity served as consistent mediators for these relationships. These findings highlight that trait forgiveness shapes people's reactions to victimization and that victim perceptions of the offense and offender at least partly explain why this occurs. These results inform our understanding of trait forgiveness and the processes that contribute to its consequences.

1. Introduction

The study of trait forgiveness has received much attention in interpersonal transgression research. To date, much research shows that trait forgiveness relates to positive outcomes such as reduced revenge intentions (Koutsos, Wertheim, & Kornblum, 2008), social support (Lawler-Row & Piferi, 2006), and psychological well-being (Brown & Phillips, 2005; Maltby, Day, & Barber, 2004). In the workplace literature, trait forgiveness is theorized to help employees restore a working relationship damaged by a past transgression (Palanski, 2012).

The present study tests whether the benefits of trait forgiveness extend beyond offender interpersonal motivations (revenge, forgiveness) and well-being to three novel outcomes in the organizational context: job satisfaction, affective commitment, and leave intentions. Further, *why* dispositional forgiveness shapes positive outcomes may be just as important to understand as *whether* it has positive effects. Although efforts to understand the effects of dispositional forgiveness have flourished, our understanding of the cognitive and affective processes that drive these effects is still in its nascency. As such, this article suggests that trait forgiveness changes how victims perceive and cognitively process an interpersonal offense. In doing so, the study examines how people's perceptions of the offense and offender serve as explanatory mechanisms linking trait forgiveness with state forgiveness and work outcomes.

1.1. Trait forgiveness

To date, forgiveness has been studied on multiple levels – with some scholars operationalizing it as an episodic state in response to interpersonal victimization (Bartholomaeus & Strelan, 2016; Eaton, Struthers, & Santelli, 2006; Furman, Luo, & Pond Jr, 2017; Strelan & Sutton, 2011) that captures giving up negative feelings, thoughts, and motivations towards an offender and replacing them with positive feelings, thoughts, and motivations towards an offender (McCullough et al., 1998). Other scholars have studied forgiveness as a trait or disposition (sometimes called *forgiveness*) that captures how people respond to victimization across time, space, and situations (Braithwaite, Mitchell, Selby, & Fincham, 2016; Kamat, Jones, & Lawler-Row, 2006; Thompson et al., 2005). From a trait perspective forgiveness is typically defined as an individual's tendency or readiness to forgive other people (Brown & Phillips, 2005; Kamat et al., 2006; Thompson et al., 2005) or a general tendency to be benevolent and able to regulate one's resentment (Emmons, 2000). Because of this, higher levels of trait forgiveness should “set people up” to perceive offenses as more benign and their offender's actions as less harmful. Thus, the present study tests a perceptual model of trait forgiveness to examine this idea. The model tested is based on the questions: (1) Do higher levels trait forgiveness trigger higher state forgiveness and more positive work outcomes after victimization? (2) Do interpretations of the offense and offender explain

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the impact of trait forgiveness on these outcomes as part of a perceptual process?

1.2. Trait forgiveness consequences and mechanisms

Much research attention has been given to revenge and avoidance in response to interpersonal transgressions (e.g., Braithwaite et al., 2016; Brose, Rye, Lutz-Zois, & Ross, 2005; Koutsos et al., 2008; Neto, 2007). This is not surprising since these variables tie closely to the relationship between the offended party and the offender, and it is the victim-offender relationship that was damaged by the interpersonal transgression. However, two papers published in *Personality and Individual Differences* have examined the relationship between trait forgiveness and state forgiveness but found differing results. Eaton et al. (2006) found that trait forgiveness had non-significant associations with state forgiveness (measured as avoidance and revenge). Conversely, Koutsos et al. (2008) found significant and moderate associations between trait forgiveness with benevolence ($r = 0.40, p < .01$), revenge ($r = -0.48, p < .01$), and avoidance ($r = -0.39, p < .01$). These different findings may be based on the different participant samples used. Eaton et al. (2006) sampled 97 Canadian undergraduate students who were relatively young (mean age = 22.60; 71.3% females and 28.87% males). Conversely, Koutsos et al. (2008) recruited an older sample of 128 participants from Australia and New Zealand using social networking (mean age = 39.02; 61% females and 39% males). Thus, one aim of the present study was to test the relationship between trait forgiveness and state forgiveness in a larger sample of working American adults to help shed some light on these discrepant findings.

Further, less is known about how trait forgiveness influences the trajectory of broader work-related outcomes in responses to harmful behavior in the workplace. Interpersonal offenses are inherently stressful, demeaning, and threatening (Bartholomaeus & Strelan, 2016; Strelan, Karremans, & Kriegel, 2017) and can lead offended parties to feel denigrated and devalued (Scobie & Scobie, 1998). Consequently, this devaluation may spur offended parties to adopt more negative views of their job and organization. However, while past research has explored how transgressions impact job satisfaction, affective commitment, and leave intentions in response to offenses generally (Bowling & Beehr, 2006; Quine, 2001), less is known about how trait forgiveness influences these responses. Based on the reasoning that trait forgiveness influences how people perceive and interpret an offense and offender, trait forgiveness is hypothesized to shape the path of these responses, such that higher levels of trait forgiveness prompt less negative views of the offender and offense, and in turn, higher job satisfaction, higher affective commitment, and lower leave intentions.

Finally, given that research examining the mechanisms that link trait forgiveness to its consequences is relatively nascent, this study examines three perceptual variables that might be important intervening variables—perceived transgression severity, perceived expectancy violation, and offender reconstrual. Perceived transgression severity refers to the victims' subjective interpretation of how harmful an event is (Fincham, Jackson, & Beach, 2005), thereby capturing offended party views of the offense. Perceived expectancy violation refers to a perceived deviation between how victims expected to be treated by the offender versus how they were treated (Afifi & Metts, 1998; Bachman & Guerrero, 2006), capturing offended parties' views of the offender's behavior. Offender reconstrual refers to victims' inability to separate their offender's character from his or her harmful actions (Stackhouse, Jones Ross, & Boon, 2018), thereby capturing offended parties' views of the offender's character. Trait forgiveness should guide these perceptions of the offense and offender and that these interpretations, in turn, should guide offended parties' state forgiveness and work outcomes.

1.3. The present study

In summary, the purpose of the present research is twofold. The first aim is to examine trait forgiveness as a possible positive predictor of state forgiveness the work outcomes job satisfaction, affective commitment, and leave intentions. The second aim of this paper was to examine the roles of perceived transgression severity, perceived expectancy violation, and offender reconstrual as intervening mechanisms for these relationships.

2. Method

2.1. Participants and procedure

Two hundred and fifty complete responses were gathered from working participants recruited through Amazon Turk ($f^2 = 0.25$; $1 - \beta > 0.90$). The sample was 48% female and 52% male, 34.13 years old on average ($SD = 10.61$ years) and had 14.04 years of work experience ($SD = 9.90$). These participants were predominantly Caucasian (73.6%) but also Asian/Oriental (11.2%), African American (8.2%), and other/mixed ethnicity (6.2%). To avoid the possibility that the trait forgiveness questions primed people to be more forgiving of a specific offense, we split our data collection into two time points. At Time 1, participants completed the trait forgiveness measure (described below), unrelated personality scales (e.g., moral attentiveness and moral disengagement), and demographic items (age, gender, position). Two weeks later (Time 2), participants were asked to recall a time in which someone at work hurt or offended them:

In the workplace, many of us have had situations in which someone wronged or offended us. Please spend a few minutes thinking of a such a time in your current workplace and describe it in detail below.

Next, participants responded to control measures (e.g., offender closeness) and the Time 2 measures described below. We also included the data quality question “How serious were you in completing this survey?” anchored from 1 (*not at all*) to 7 (*very much so*). Participants were compensated \$1.50 for their Time 1 responses and \$1.50 for their Time 2 responses.

2.2. Measures

The scales used a 7-point rating (7 = *higher agreement*) unless indicated otherwise.

2.2.1. Trait forgiveness (T1)

The 33-item forgiving personality scale (Kamat et al., 2006) was used to assess trait forgiveness. A sample item is “I have genuinely forgiven people who have wronged me in the past”; $\alpha = 0.97$.

2.2.2. Perceived transgression severity (T2)

We used two items to assess perceived transgression severity based on previous research (e.g., Fincham et al., 2005; Harper et al., 2014) including “How severe was this event?” and “How hurtful was this event?” (1 = *not at all*; 5 = *very much*); $\alpha = 0.80$.

2.2.3. Perceived expectancy violation (T2)

Items from the Psychological Contract Violation scale (Robinson & Morrison, 2000) were adapted from the organizational referent to the offender referent as a measure of perceived expectancy violation. The revised scale included three items including “My expectations of this person have not been met”, “I feel that this person violated the contract between us”, and “I feel betrayed by this person”; $\alpha = 0.83$.

2.2.4. Offender reconstrual (T2)

Participants responded to a three-item offender reconstrual measure

(Stackhouse et al., 2018). A sample item is “It’s hard to separate the person who wronged me from what he/she did”; $\alpha = 0.83$.

2.2.5. State forgiveness (T2)

In line with prior research, state forgiveness was measured using the 18-item revenge and avoidance subscales of the Transgression-Related Interpersonal Motivations scale (McCullough et al., 1998; e.g., Fatfouta, Gerlach, Schröder-Abé, & Merkl, 2015; Rey & Extremera, 2014). A sample item is “I cut off the relationship with him/her” (reverse coded); $\alpha = 0.93$.

2.2.6. Job satisfaction (T2)

We included two commonly used items to assess job satisfaction including “How satisfied are you with your job?” and “How much do you like your job?” (Scarpello & Campbell, 1983; 1 = not at all; 7 = very much so); $\alpha = 0.92$.

2.2.7. Affective commitment (T2)

Affective commitment was measured using Allen and Meyer’s (1990) 8-item scale. A sample item is “This organization has a great deal of personal meaning for me”; $\alpha = 0.90$.

2.2.8. Leave intentions (T2)

We measured leave intentions using the three-item scale created by Cammann, Fichman, Jenkins, and Klesh (1979). A sample item is “I often think about quitting”; $\alpha = 0.94$.

2.2.9. Control variables

Participants reported the following: Age in years (centered for regression), ethnicity (coded as 1 = Caucasian/European descent; 2 = Asian/Oriental descent; 3 = African American/African descent; 4 = East Indian/Middle Eastern descent; 5 = South American descent; 6 = Mixed/other descent), hierarchical position (1 = worker/administration/service; 2 = unit supervisor; 3 = upper management), whether they had received an apology for the offense (coded as 1 = yes and 0 = no), and their closeness with the offender prior to the offense (anchored from 1 = not at all close to 5 = very close).

3. Results

Participants reported a high mean response to the data quality check item (mean = 5.88; SD = 0.38; range = 4 to 6; anchored from 1 to 7 with higher scores indicating better quality responses). Thus, all respondent data were retained in the final dataset. Table 1 presents the correlations and descriptive statistics for all the variables. As shown,

Table 1
Descriptive statistics, Cronbach’s alpha estimates, and correlations among the variables.

	M	SD	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	13
1. Age	34.13	10.61	–												
2. Ethnicity	–	–	–0.07	–											
3. Hierarchical position	–	–	0.09	–0.04	–										
4. Apology	–	–	0.13*	–0.01	–0.08	–									
5. Relationship closeness	1.58	1.01	–0.10	–0.09	0.05	0.05	–								
6. Trait forgiveness	4.87	1.07	0.20**	0.10	0.01	0.19**	0.02	–							
7. Perceived transgression severity	3.08	0.94	0.14*	0.15*	–0.06	–0.06	–0.15*	0.04	–						
8. Perceived expectancy violation	4.31	1.62	0.09	–0.03	–0.05	–0.12	0.13*	–0.29**	0.39***	–					
9. Offender reconstrual	3.98	1.50	0.02	0.03	0.01	–0.27***	0.03	–0.44***	0.37***	0.62***	–				
10. State forgiveness	4.61	1.40	0.10	–0.04	0.07	0.23***	0.30***	0.55***	–0.28***	–0.66***	–0.69***	–			
11. Job satisfaction	4.56	1.58	0.06	0.02	0.03	0.15*	0.22***	0.29***	–0.18**	–0.32***	–0.45***	0.38***	–		
12. Affective commitment	3.75	1.38	0.11	–0.08	0.07	0.14*	0.32***	0.29***	–0.19**	–0.32***	–0.42***	0.44***	0.76***	–	
13. Leave Intentions	3.82	1.89	–0.20***	0.08	0.03	–0.19**	–0.13*	–0.30***	0.20**	0.31***	0.46***	–0.41***	–0.73***	–0.71***	–

*** $p < .001$.
 ** $p < .01$.
 * $p < .05$.

Table 2
Summary of tests of mediation effects.

Outcomes	Trait forgiveness			
	B ^a	SE	Low CI	High CI
State forgiveness				
Direct effect	0.426	0.057	0.314	0.538
Indirect via PTS	0.0002	0.008	–0.018	0.015
Indirect via PEV	0.191	0.040	0.113	0.273
Indirect via OR	0.095	0.029	0.043	0.158
Job satisfaction				
Direct effect	0.165	0.095	–0.022	0.352
Indirect via PTS	0.0002	0.008	–0.019	0.017
Indirect via PEV	0.060	0.035	0.0002	0.134
Indirect via OR	0.174	0.053	0.086	0.291
Affective commitment				
Direct effect	0.180	0.084	0.014	0.346
Indirect via PTS	0.0003	0.009	–0.021	0.020
Indirect via PEV	0.071	0.034	0.012	0.148
Indirect via OR	0.095	0.036	0.030	0.170
Leave intentions				
Direct effect	–0.179	0.110	–0.395	0.036
Indirect via PTS	–0.0004	0.014	–0.027	0.030
Indirect via PEV	–0.068	0.043	–0.165	0.006
Indirect via OR	–0.203	0.059	–0.331	–0.101

Note: “Low CI” and “High CI” values represent bias corrected 95% confident intervals (CI) around the mediation effect based on 5000 bootstraps. PTS = Perceived transgression severity; PEV = Perceived expectancy violation; OR = offender reconstrual.

^a Unstandardized bootstrapped coefficients controlling for age, ethnicity, hierarchical position, apology, and relationship closeness.

trait forgiveness was significantly associated with state forgiveness, job satisfaction, affective commitment and leave intentions, as expected (effects sizes ranged from a large to medium). Three hierarchical regression analyses were conducted to examine these relationships controlling for age, ethnicity, hierarchical position, apology, and relationship closeness (based on prior research; e.g., Bowling & Beehr, 2006; Fehr, Gelfand, & Nag, 2010). Trait forgiveness significantly predicted state forgiveness ($\beta = 0.53, t = 10.49, p < .0001$), job satisfaction ($\beta = 0.26, t = 1.23, p < .0001$), affective commitment ($\beta = 0.26, t = 4.25, p < .0001$), and leave intentions ($\beta = –0.251, t = 4.10, p < .0001$) in the directions expected.

To evaluate the mediating role of perceived transgression severity, perceived expectancy violation, and offender reconstrual, we used the PROCESS macro for SPSS with 5000 bootstrapped samples (Hayes,

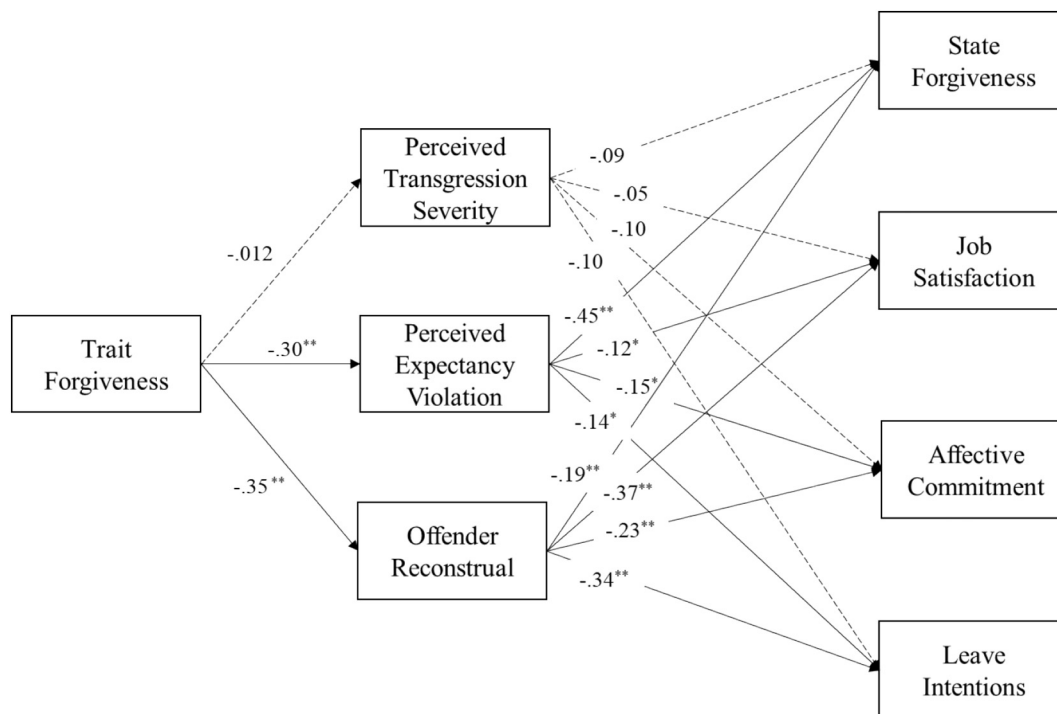


Fig. 1. Mediation results with three mediators. The values presented are standardized bootstrapped coefficients. ** $p < .01$, * $p < .05$. Dashed lines indicate a non-significant path.

2012) and included the control variables. The three intervening variables were tested simultaneously to isolate their unique effects. Table 2 and Fig. 1 present the results. Contrary to our theorizing, perceived transgression severity did not significantly explain the relationships between trait forgiveness and state forgiveness or trait forgiveness and the work outcomes tested; these relationships were, however, explained via perceived expectancy violation and offender reconstrual. Namely, perceived transgression severity did not significantly mediate the relationship between trait forgiveness with state forgiveness (95%CI [-0.018, 0.015]), job satisfaction (95%CI [-0.019, 0.017]), affective commitment (95%CI [-0.021, 0.020]), or leave intentions, (95%CI [-0.331, -0.101]). Conversely, perceived expectancy violation served as a significant intervening variable between trait forgiveness and state forgiveness (95%CI [0.113, 0.273]), job satisfaction (95%CI [0.0002, 0.134]), and affective commitment (95%CI [0.012, 0.148]), but not leave intentions (95%CI [-0.027, 0.030]). Finally, offender reconstrual explained the relationship between trait forgiveness and state forgiveness (95%CI [0.043, 0.158]), job satisfaction (95%CI [0.086, 0.291]), affective commitment (95%CI [0.030, 0.170]), and leave intentions (95%CI [-0.331, -0.101]). The results are depicted graphically in Fig. 1. Together, these results highlight that perceptions of the offender rather than the offense explain most of the relationships between trait forgiveness with state forgiveness and work outcomes.

4. Discussion

The present study advances research on trait forgiveness to better understand its impact on state forgiveness and explore its understudied impact on work outcomes. Offering a perceptual view of trait forgiveness (Fiske & Taylor, 2013), trait forgiveness was hypothesized to positively predict state forgiveness and work outcomes. As hypothesized, trait forgiveness was significantly associated with state forgiveness and the work outcomes tested. Our study therefore helps clarify past findings in the literature on trait and state forgiveness (Eaton et al., 2006; Koutsos et al., 2008) and highlights that the benefits of trait forgiveness extend beyond interpersonal outcomes and well-being to meaningful

work consequences in organizations that face interpersonal transgressions between organizational members.

This study also advances the literature on trait forgiveness by showing that perceptual and cognitive mechanisms mediate the linkage between trait forgiveness and state forgiveness as well as trait forgiveness and work outcomes. Three intervening mechanisms were tested in this research: perceived offense severity, perceived expectancy violation, and offender reconstrual—the latter two reflective of perceptions of the offender's behavior and character with the former reflective of perceptions of the offense itself. Unexpectedly, however, only perceived expectancy violation and offender reconstrual consistently explained these relationships, whereas the relationships were not explained via perceived transgression severity. Together, these findings support a perceptual view of trait forgiveness and suggest that trait forgiveness triggers more benign perceptions of an offender (not an offense). These findings suggest that the importance of trait forgiveness may be in how it triggers perceptions of an offender's harmful actions in the wake of his or her harmful behavior. This is notable as it is cognizant of findings that trait forgiveness and offender perspective-taking are positively associated (Giammarco & Vernon, 2014). Such findings are also cognizant of findings in the state forgiveness literature that offender-oriented perceptions, such as offender empathy, are important in shaping people's state forgiveness (Wohl, Kuiken, & Noels, 2006).

The present findings also have important implications that extend beyond our understanding of trait forgiveness for interventions aimed as facilitating forgiveness and reconciliation in interpersonal relationships. Some forgiveness researchers have proposed that offenders and offended parties must create a 'relationship covenant' or agreement to reconcile and move past a transgression (Hargrave, 1994; Waldron & Kelley, 2005). Given the present research findings that offender-oriented perceptions are key to linking trait forgiveness with state forgiveness and work outcomes, such an agreement should be helpful following a harmful offense. Establishing a relationship covenant post-transgression should establish new expectations about an offender's future behavior (Waldron & Kelley, 2005). In doing so, these new behavioral expectancies could facilitate state forgiveness and help repair

damaged feelings in the wake of a harmful offense.

There are a couple of limitations that should be considered when interpreting the results of the present research. First, while a strength of the present study is the time-lagged design to avoid the trait forgiveness measure priming responses to the offense recall, the design nevertheless relied on self-report recall. While self-report measurement was used because it allows for meaningful comparisons to extant forgiveness research (e.g., Brose et al., 2005; Koutzos et al., 2008; Neto, 2007), this meant that individuals differed in the types of offenses they recalled (e.g., some participants received an apology from their offender whereas others did not). As such, future studies may wish to use vignette designs to further explore how trait forgiveness shapes how transgressions are perceived and interpreted. Further, it might be helpful for future research to consider behavioral metrics for trait forgiveness to further understand individuals' responses to transgressions. For example, the trust game designed by Berg, Dickhaut, and McCabe (1995) could be used to understand people's general tendency to forgive when trust is breached repeatedly through time. We also need to note that our sample is predominantly Caucasian and North American; thus, it is unclear whether our results generalize among individuals with different demographics. Nevertheless, we believe that our community sample that is more gender balanced, older, and having greater work experience compared to typical student samples gives a clearer picture of the association between trait forgiveness and state forgiveness. It also provides a preliminary understanding of how and why trait forgiveness may shape perceptions of a victims' job and organization. Finally, we acknowledge that the contextual situation might shape an individuals' perceptions of an offense, rather than individuals' trait characteristics alone (Fiske & Taylor, 2013). Thus, future research could explore the interaction between trait forgiveness and the context to help clarify victim responses to offenses. For example, researchers have proposed that some contexts emphasize the importance of forgiveness and benevolence more so compared to other contexts (Palanski, 2012). In such contexts, offended parties may be less inclined to view an offender's actions negatively, regardless of their personal dispositions, and this would be an interesting avenue for future researchers to test.

In conclusion, the present study offers a perceptual view of how trait forgiveness shapes state forgiveness and work outcomes. Our findings show that trait forgiveness is positively related to state forgiveness, job satisfaction, and affective commitment, while negatively related to leave intentions. Our findings further show that these linkages are partly explained via perceptions of the offender operationalized as perceived expectancy violation of the offender's behavior and offender reconstrual of the offender's character. Together, these results highlight that trait forgiveness is an important factor in understanding the trajectory of responses to an interpersonal offense because it shapes victims' views of the offender.

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