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## RESEARCH ARTICLE

# When and how forgiving benefits victims: Post-transgression offender effort and the mediating role of deservingness judgements

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## Abstract

For all the well-established benefits of forgiveness for victims, when and how is forgiving more likely to be beneficial? Three experimental studies found that forgiving is more likely to be beneficial when victims perceived reparative effort by offenders such that offenders deserve forgiveness. Deservingness judgements were elicited by manipulating post-transgression offender effort (apology/amends). When offenders apologized (Study 1; recall paradigm) or made amends (Study 2; hypothetical paradigm) and were forgiven—relative to transgressors who did not apologize/make amends but were still forgiven—forgiving was beneficial. These findings—that deserved forgiveness is more beneficial for victims than undeserved forgiveness—were replicated when forgiving itself was also manipulated (Study 3). Moreover, Study 3 provided evidence to indicate that if a victim forgives when it is not deserved, victim well-being is equivalent to not forgiving at all. Of theoretical and practical importance is the mediating effect of deservingness on relations between post-transgression offender effort and a victim's personal consequences of forgiving.

One of life's inevitabilities is that people are transgressed against. One way that victims respond to transgressions is by forgiving. A now large psychological literature demonstrates that forgiveness is a highly effective response to hurt, in particular helping victims to move on so that they no longer bear the emotional burden of the transgression (see, for example, Worthington, 2001). Forgiving restores victim well-being, manifested in a range of outcomes including improved esteem and hope and reduced depression, anxiety, and negative affect (for a review, see Wade, Hoyt, Kidwell, & Worthington, 2014). Yet, forgiving requires victims to make themselves vulnerable again to the person who hurt them. As such, forgiving is a risk, potentially inviting, among other things, recidivism, perceptions and feelings of weakness, a sense that one has relinquished the right to justice, and the ceding of power (e.g., Baumeister, Exline, & Sommer, 1998). Commensurately, the relatively few empirical studies that have examined the forgiveness cost ledger indicate that in certain circumstances forgiving has such deleterious consequences, reducing victim self-respect and relationship satisfaction and contributing to the maintenance of abusive relationships (Gordon, Burton, & Porter, 2004; Luchies, Finkel, McNulty, & Kumashiro, 2010; McNulty, 2011).

When and how, then, can victims be sure that forgiving will be adaptive for them? For people who forgive too readily, what might encourage them to think twice?

For people who retreat from forgiveness, what might reassure them that it is ok to embrace forgiveness? In short, when should forgiving be beneficial for victims and what is the psychological process by which forgiving becomes beneficial? We propose that (a) forgiving is positive for victims when offenders are perceived to have made post-transgression effort and (b) such a relation exists because offender effort indicates to victims that offenders are deserving of forgiveness.

## FORGIVENESS

While there is no single psychological definition of forgiveness, there does appear to be consensus that forgiving means at least not holding a grudge against an offender (e.g., McCullough et al., 1998) and at most having a positive stance towards him or her (e.g., Enright & Fitzgibbons, 2000; Worthington, 2001). Although forgiveness is not always communicated explicitly (e.g., "I forgive you"), it is usually inferred through relationship-specific gestures and words that offending others recognize as conciliatory and inclusive (Finkel, Rusbult, Kumashiro, & Hannon, 2002). Indeed, psychological research on forgiveness is constrained by the absence of an adequate behavioral operationalization, where such an attempt is made, forgiveness is arguably confounded with related constructs such as helping, reciprocity, or reconciliation (although see Dorn, Hook, Davis, Van Tongeren, & Worthington, 2014). That said,

forgiveness does not have to be verbally expressed to offenders in order for it to occur (for example, there may be times when it is imprudent or impossible to do so). Thus, while forgiveness possesses an interpersonal dimension (e.g., Finkel *et al.*, 2002), it also represents, at the very least, an intrapersonal conversion—that is, a victim's thoughts, feelings, and motivations towards an offender are transformed from negative to positive (e.g., Worthington, 2001).

### WHEN FORGIVING IS BENEFICIAL: OFFENDER POST-TRANSGRESSION EFFORT

“Post-transgression effort” refers to a set of offender-enacted responses, following a transgression, that have been demonstrated as strong predictors of transgression-specific forgiveness (for a meta-analysis, see Fehr, Gelfand, & Nag, 2010). Post-transgression effort encapsulates offender actions such as amends, sincere apology, remorse, atonement, and taking responsibility. Each of these (often inter-related) actions is usually perceived by victims as constructive and restorative. Generally speaking, they indicate an attempt by offenders to restore justice by empowering victims with, for example, decision control and moral superiority (for a brief review, see Okimoto, Wenzel, & Hedrick, 2013); they also signal a willingness by offenders to re-validate shared values (Okimoto & Wenzel, 2010) and re-engage in valued relationships (Hannon, Rusbult, Finkel, & Kumashiro, 2010). In turn, the restoration of justice (Strelan & Van Prooijen, 2013) and relationship commitment (Finkel *et al.*, 2002) has been shown to encourage forgiveness.

As discussed earlier, a large literature demonstrates the direct positive effects of forgiving on victim well-being. Conversely, few studies exist testing the extent to which the predictors of forgiveness affect the outcomes of forgiving (if anything, they focus on relations between pre-transgression and post-forgiveness levels of relationship quality; e.g., Karremans & Van Lange, 2004). Only one previous research has explicitly linked a post-transgression effort variable to forgiveness outcomes, albeit through the lens of third parties: Gromet and Okimoto (2014) found that forgiving victims who accept offender amends are more likely to be reintegrated into an organization by peers. Given that post-transgression offender effort has been shown to empower and re-validate victims and restore valued relationships, all things being equal, post-transgression offender effort should make the process of forgiving a positive one for victims. Thus, one of the new contributions of the present research is to explicitly measure victim well-being as a consequence of forgiving offenders who have made post-transgression effort (or not). We hypothesized that when offenders are perceived to have made reparative effort (e.g., by apologizing or making amends), victim well-being as a consequence of forgiving will be greater than when offenders are not perceived to have made effort.

### HOW FORGIVING CAN BE BENEFICIAL: THE MEDIATING ROLE OF DESERVINGNESS JUDGEMENTS

Deservingness<sup>1</sup> refers to a person's judgement that their own or someone else's outcomes are earned because of their actions or qualities. Deservingness theory has been employed to explain responses to a wide range of personal and third-party outcomes, including those relating to success, achievement, wrongdoing, and penalties (for a review, see Feather, 1999). Judgements of deservingness may be positive or negative, and they are assumed to depend upon the evaluative structure of actions and their outcomes. The theory proposes that when actions and outcomes are both evaluated positively or both evaluated negatively, they are in a congruent relation, and the outcome is deserved. When they are incongruent, the outcome is undeserved (for a detailed account of deservingness theory, see Feather, 1999, 2006).

Post-transgression offender effort represents an ‘action’ with the potential to affect victim judgements about the extent to which offenders deserve a particular ‘outcome’, in this case, forgiveness (Feather, 1999). Post-transgression offender effort is presumed to interrupt the fundamental attribution error so that a transgression is less likely to be attributed to negative offender dispositions (Weiner, Graham, Peter, & Zmuidinas, 1991) and may facilitate positive perceptions of the offender's personality (Tabak, McCullough, Luna, Bono, & Berry, 2012). Post-transgression effort also enhances the perception that transgressors feel distressed and regretful about their actions, which subsequently prompts empathy and reduced rumination in victims (McCullough *et al.*, 1998), renewed trust towards the offender (Kim, Ferrin, Cooper, & Dirks, 2004), and reduced blame attributions (Weiner *et al.*, 1991). In turn, positive perceptions of offenders (Tabak *et al.*, 2012), empathy, reduced rumination, and reduced blame attributions (Fehr *et al.*, 2010) all contribute to increased forgiveness.

In summary, post-transgression effort by an offender is likely to encourage the perception that the offender deserves forgiveness; the absence of such effort (or perceived recalcitrance) likely encourages the view that the offender is less deserving of forgiveness (e.g., Feather, 1999).

Further, and crucially, deservingness evokes notions of justice. It is well established that positively valenced beliefs about and experiences of justice are associated with enhanced personal responding (e.g., Colquitt,

<sup>1</sup>Deservingness is conceptually similar to entitlement. Deservingness judgements are concerned with a person's positive or negative outcomes that are directly attributable to that person's positive or negative action or personal qualities. Entitlement refers to a frame of reference that is more external to the actor (e.g., social norms, formal and informal rules, and laws). So, for example, a person may be entitled to outcomes but not necessarily deserve them; further, entitlement typically refers only to positive actions and outcomes; we do not usually say that a person is entitled to a negative outcome (Feather, 2003).

Scott, Rodell, & Wesson, 2013; Lucas, Zhdanova, Wendorf, & Alexander, 2013). Accordingly, much empirical evidence indicates that deservingness judgements are associated with positive affect and positive attitudes; the reverse occurs in the case of undeserving judgements (for reviews, see Feather, 1999, 2006). Thus, for victims, when forgiveness is deserved (e.g., the offender apologized), the personal consequences of forgiving will be experienced positively. When forgiveness is undeserved (e.g., the offender did not apologize), the personal consequences of forgiving will more likely be experienced as negative.

### SITUATIONS WHERE UNDESERVED FORGIVENESS IS GRANTED

As noted earlier, the forgiveness literature demonstrates that when offenders do not engage in reparatory behaviours that would ordinarily mark them as “deserving,” forgiveness is less likely to occur. How, then, can we claim that undeserved forgiving does occur? A motivational perspective suggests that there are, in fact, many circumstances in which people forgive when forgiveness is undeserved.

First, forgiveness is often conceptualized as an altruistic response borne of compassion, empathy, and even love for an offender (e.g., Enright & Fitzgibbons, 2000). Thus, undeserved forgiveness may occur when a victim forgives unconditionally. Second, there may be occasions when a victim perceives that forgiving is necessary to help him or her cope with a hurtful event by moving on, emotionally (e.g., Worthington, 2001). In such circumstances, a victim may indicate forgiveness primarily for the sake of the self (Strelan, McKee, Calic, Cook, & Shaw, 2013), even though the transgressor may be undeserving of such forgiveness. Third, individuals may forgive so that they can continue to receive the perceived psychological benefits offered by a valued relationship (Finkel *et al.*, 2002; Luchies *et al.*, 2010; McCullough *et al.*, 1998; Strelan *et al.*, 2013). Indeed, in committed relationships, forgiveness may be granted automatically (Karremans & Aarts, 2007).

While undeserved forgiveness is often symptomatic of dysfunctional relationships (e.g., the abusive spouse who makes non-sincere apologies and takes advantage of subsequent forgiveness), forgiveness can be undeserved in apparently healthy relationships too. People often forgive partners for minor transgressions, for example, saying hurtful things in an argument, not doing one's expected share at home, or embarrassing one in front of others. Yet, these transgressions may be such that transgressors may not perceive that post-transgression effort is even relevant to their actions and therefore do little to address what they have done (McNulty, O'Mara, & Karney, 2008). And, from the victim's perspective, any potential benefits of not forgiving seemingly small transgressions may be outweighed by

the potential costs of not forgiving, in particular, risking the relationship.

In summary, altruistic tendencies, self-focused coping strategies, and/or pragmatism as it relates to valued relationships may motivate victims to forgive even when transgressors would not ordinarily deserve forgiveness. As such, undeserved forgiveness is a very real phenomenon, one with potentially deleterious consequences for the victim (e.g., Gordon *et al.*, 2004; Luchies *et al.*, 2010; McNulty, 2011).

### AIMS AND HYPOTHESES

The present research had two main aims. The first was to test the relation between post-transgression offender effort and victim well-being as a result of forgiving. As such, we addressed the question of *when* forgiving is likely to be experienced as beneficial by victims. We hypothesized that forgiving is most likely to have positive well-being consequences for victims when offenders are perceived to have exerted post-transgression effort to apologize or make amends, compared with when they are not perceived to have made such effort.

The second aim was to address the following question: *how* is it that forgiving can be beneficial for victims? That is, what is the process by which post-transgression offender effort exerts positive effects on victim well-being after victims have forgiven? We hypothesized that offender post-transgression effort encourages victims to judge that offenders deserve forgiveness, which in turn enables victims to experience forgiving as a positive response. Thus, we expected deservingness judgements to mediate between post-transgression offender effort (in conjunction with granted forgiveness) and post-forgiveness consequences. The more that victims perceive offenders deserve forgiveness (e.g., when amends/apology are made), the more beneficial forgiving will be for victims; the less that victims perceive offenders deserve forgiveness (e.g., when amends/apology are not made), the less beneficial forgiving will be for victims.

### OVERVIEW OF STUDIES

We report three experimental studies. Study 1 employed a recall paradigm, in which participants responded on the basis of a personally experienced transgression and recalled a transgression in which the offender did or did not apologize. In Study 2, participants responded to a hypothetical scenario in which they imagined being transgressed against, and amends were manipulated. In both studies, participants had forgiven their transgressors. Finally, Study 3 provided a full test of the different action/outcome configurations posited by deservingness theory. While we again manipulated amends using the recall approach of Study 1, we also manipulated forgiveness by instructing participants to write an email in which they forgave (or did not forgive) their transgressor.



## STUDY 1

### Method<sup>2</sup>

#### Participants

Sixty-four Australian undergraduates participated for course credit (47 women; 17 men;  $M_{\text{age}} = 20$ ,  $SD = 6.23$ ).

#### Procedures

The study (and also Studies 2 and 3) was administered online using SurveyMonkey. Participants were randomly allocated to one of two conditions (apology: *yes/no*). They read: "Please recall an experience you have had in the past six months that led to significant feelings or emotions on your part where someone you were very close with upset you; they apologized (*did not apologize*); and you forgave them." Participants then described the event.

#### Materials

Participants responded to the following items in the following order. Scores for each of the multi-item measures were averaged, with higher scores indicating greater endorsement.

To check that participants followed instructions and were recalling transgressions by *close* others, we employed the item, "How close were you to the person who hurt you?" (*not close/close*).

**Manipulation checks.** Did the person who hurt you apologize?" (*yes/no*) and "How much effort do you think the transgressor went to in order to make amends?" ( $1 = \text{no effort at all}$ ;  $7 = \text{a lot of effort}$ ).

**Deservingness.** How deserving of your forgiveness do you think the person who hurt you was?" ( $1 = \text{extremely undeserving}$ ;  $7 = \text{extremely deserving}$ ).

**Background Variables.** We measured three variables often implicated in forgiveness research (for a meta-analysis, see Fehr *et al.*, 2010) to control for the possibility that apology information might cause them to vary systematically across conditions. One was *perceived harm severity*, measured with two items, "How serious was the event that you experienced?" ( $1 = \text{extremely trivial}$ ;  $7 = \text{extremely serious}$ ) and "Compared to all the other hurtful events in your life, how hurtful was this one?" ( $1 = \text{extremely harmless}$ ;  $7 = \text{extremely hurtful}$ ) ( $r = .72$ ,  $p < .001$ ). A second was relationship *commitment*, measured with three items from the commitment subscale of the Relationship Investment Model (Rusbult, Martz, & Agnew, 1998;  $1 = \text{not true at all}$ ;  $5 = \text{extremely true}$ ;  $\alpha = .63$ ). The third was *time elapsed* since the transgression, subsequently coded into months.

<sup>2</sup>Materials for all three studies, coding information, and anonymized raw data are centrally archived in an electronic depository at the University of Adelaide and are available upon request from the first author.

**Table 1.** Study 1 means (and standard deviations) and *t*-test results for effects of apology on manipulation check, deservingness, personal well-being, and transgression-specific variables ( $N = 64$ )

	No apology ( $n = 32$ ), $M$ ( $SD$ )	Apology ( $n = 32$ ), $M$ ( $SD$ )	$t^a$	$d$
Manipulation check	3.00 (1.48)	4.81 (1.42)	4.99***	1.25
Deservingness	4.13 (1.04)	4.69 (1.20)	2.00*	0.50
Personal well-being	3.05 (0.87)	3.46 (0.69)	2.11*	0.52
Harm severity	3.95 (1.05)	4.03 (1.22)	0.27	0.07
Commitment	6.18 (1.55)	6.33 (0.34)	0.40	0.13
Time elapsed	3.63 (1.95)	3.88 (2.03)	0.50	0.12

<sup>a</sup> $df = 62$ .

\* $p < .05$ ;

\*\* $p < .01$ ;

\*\*\* $p < .001$ .

**Personal well-being.** Items were preceded by variations on the tag, "When thinking about the fact that I forgave the person who hurt me ... I feel better about myself; I took control of the situation; I feel resentful/angry/annoyed (reverse-coded); I was able to get over what has occurred; My longer term well-being has improved; I am carrying less emotional baggage" ( $1 = \text{not true at all}$ ;  $5 = \text{extremely true}$ ) (eight items;  $\alpha = .79$ ).<sup>3</sup>

## Results

**Differences between Apology Conditions.** A series of *t*-tests were conducted to test differences between apology conditions on manipulation check, background variables, deservingness, and personal well-being (for all descriptives and *t*-test results, see Table 1).

First, it may be noted that all participants (100%) recalled transgressions by a close other, as instructed.

**Manipulation Checks.** All participants correctly followed instructions (i.e., 100% agreement in apology condition that transgressors had apologized and 100% agreement in no apology condition that transgressors had not apologized). In addition, participants in the apology condition were significantly more likely to report that their transgressor made an effort to make amends.

**Deservingness and Personal Well-being.** Participants who received an apology were significantly more likely to judge that their transgressor deserved forgiveness and that the personal consequences of forgiving were positive.

<sup>3</sup>A Principal Components analysis with Varimax rotation revealed that the personal wellbeing items loaded onto two factors, with the three affect items representing a separate factor. Thus, we re-ran all the analyses with each of the factors as separate DVs. Results remained unchanged. We found the same loadings in Studies 2 and 3. Once again, treating the two factors as separate DVs in all analyses did not change results.

**The Mediating Effect of Deservingness on Relations between Apology and Personal Well-being.** Bootstrapping was employed to test the main hypothesis, specifically Hayes (2013) PROCESS macro (Model 4; 5000 iterations; bias corrected). The independent variable was apology (contrast coded  $-1 = \text{no apology}$ ;  $1 = \text{apology}$ ), deservingness the mediator, and personal well-being the dependent variable (DV).

As indicated by the *t*-tests, apology was positively associated with deservingness ( $B = 0.28$ ,  $p = .053$ ). Deservingness, in turn, was associated with personal well-being ( $B = 0.41$ ,  $p < .001$ ). Reflecting the *t*-tests, the total effect of apology on personal well-being was significant ( $B = 0.21$ ,  $p = .042$ ) but reduced to non-significance when deservingness was included in the equation (the direct effect [DE];  $B = 0.09$ ,  $p = .29$ ). The indirect effect through deservingness was significant (i.e., zero is not included in the  $CI_{95\%}$ ),  $B = 0.12$ ,  $CI_{95\%} = [0.01, 0.24]$ ,  $z = 0.16$  ( $CI_{95\%} = [0.02, 0.30]$ ), suggesting a medium effect of deservingness (for interpretation of  $z^2$  effect sizes, see Preacher & Kelley, 2011).

**Accounting for Potential Confounding Effects of Transgression-specific Variables.** As shown in Table 1, there were no significant differences between apology conditions on harm severity, current relationship commitment, and time elapsed since the transgression, discounting these variables as potential alternative mediators. In addition, we tested for their potential moderating effects. We employed Model 8 in PROCESS (Hayes, 2013), which mean-centers interaction terms and simultaneously tests for mediated moderation. Across the three separate analyses, there was no evidence of an interaction between apology and any of the transgression-specific variables on personal well-being nor mediated moderation (all  $ps > .26$ ).

**Summary of Findings.** As predicted, victims who received amends and forgave experienced more positive personal consequences compared with those victims who did not receive amends but still forgave. Importantly, deservingness exerted a medium mediating effect on the relation between amends and personal well-being. That is, increased amends encouraged forgivers to judge that offenders deserved forgiveness, such that the personal consequences of forgiveness were experienced more positively.

## STUDY 2

While ecological validity was maximized in Study 1, such that we gained access to personal transgression experiences, the approach employed possessed two inter-related limitations. First, transgressions varied between participants, and therefore, participants' perceptions of apology also varied. In addition, while we were able to discount the potentially moderating effects of some transgression-specific variables on apology, our measures were not exhaustive, and therefore, we cannot be certain that other variables do not exist that, if

measured, would unduly influence the relations observed. Second, the recall nature of the paradigm makes motivated memory potentially problematic—that is, participants may have responded to the DV in order to be internally consistent (e.g., “I am still with him, so perhaps forgiving was beneficial”) rather than on the basis of how they actually felt at the time when they did forgive.

To improve upon Study 1, in Study 2, amends were again manipulated, but within a hypothetical scenario. Although somewhat limited insofar as people do not always behave the way they say they will behave (Nisbett & Wilson, 1977; but see Robinson & Clore, 2001, for counter-evidence), hypothetical scenarios have the advantage of eliminating the sort of noise that dampens the internal validity of recall designs. Moreover, we employed a technique shown in previous research (e.g., Okimoto & Wenzel, 2010) to enhance the personal relevance of the scenario: Participants were instructed to bring to mind an actual person and imagine that person behaving in a standardized transgression situation.

We improved upon Study 1 in two other ways. In that study, the deservingness measure consisted of one item. In Study 2, we developed a five-item index of deservingness. Finally, in Study 1, we employed the manipulation check prior to measures of the mediating variables and DVs, thereby potentially leading participants to respond in a certain way. In Study 2, we were careful to integrate manipulation check items with the other measures.

## Method

### Participants

There were 72 US participants recruited through Crowdfunder, a labor-sourcing online platform similar to M-Turk, paid \$1 each (37 women, 35 men;  $M_{\text{age}} = 36$ ,  $SD = 11.91$ ).

### Experimental Procedures

Participants were instructed to bring to mind a close friend and write his or her name in a textbox. This name would automatically appear where relevant thereafter. Participants were then randomly allocated to one of two conditions (amends: *yes/no*). They read a hypothetical transgression scenario:

*Same information across conditions:* “Imagine that one night you and [X] are out with a group of friends. [X] happens to tell everyone a story about you that he/she and the others think is funny, but which makes you feel embarrassed and humiliated. Later, you take [X] aside and query his/her actions.”

*Amends:* “[X] appears genuinely remorseful about his/her behavior. [X] apologizes sincerely for what he/she did and asks if there is anything that can be done in order to make it up to you.”

No amends: “[X] does not appear to be bothered about his/her behavior. He/she makes no attempt to apologize or make amends for his/her actions.”

*Same information across conditions:* “After considering the circumstances and [X]’s response, you make a conscious decision to forgive [X] for his/her behavior. Consider this information in light of the circumstances presented to you earlier in the hypothetical scenario.”

## Materials

Participants responded to the following randomly presented items. Scores for each of the multi-item scales were averaged, with higher scores indicating stronger endorsement. The response scales of all items ranged from 1 = *strongly disagree* to 7 = *strong agree*.

**Manipulation check included the following items.** “[X] made amends”; “[X] apologized”; “[X] was remorseful for his/her behavior” (three items;  $\alpha = .95$ ).

To check that participants perceived they had forgiven in the scenario, we used the item, “I forgave [X].”

**Deservingness was measured with five items.** “[X] deserved to be forgiven”; “[X] earned forgiveness”; “[X] merited being forgiven”; “It is fair to forgive [X]”; “It is justifiable to forgive [X]” ( $\alpha = .95$ ).

**Personal well-being.** Was measured with the same eight items as Study 1 (except that the item “...better about myself” was re-phrased as “...good about myself”) ( $\alpha = .84$ ).

Finally, we further improved upon Study 1 by measuring several more context-specific variables. Following Fehr et al.’s (2010) meta-analysis of forgiveness predictors, these were *closeness* (“[X] and I are good friends/close”;  $r = .94$ ), *projected harm severity* (“If this had really happened to me, I would be upset/annoyed”;  $r = .86$ ), *perceived intentionality* (“[X] meant to embarrass me”), *sympathy* (“I feel sorry/concern/sympathy for [X]”;  $\alpha = .77$ ), and *scenario realism* (“I could imagine [X] telling a story about me”).

## Results

### Differences between Amends Conditions

*t*-Tests were conducted to examine differences between amends conditions on manipulation check, background variables, and deservingness and personal well-being (for all descriptives and results of *t*-tests, see Table 2).

First, participants in each condition were equivalently forgiving with means above the midpoint. This was as expected, given all participants had been instructed to imagine forgiving.

**Manipulation Check.** Ratings of amends were significantly higher in the amends than the no amends condition. Thus, the manipulation was successful.

**Table 2.** Study 2 means (and standard deviations) and *t*-test results for effects of amends on manipulation check, deservingness, personal well-being, and background variables ( $N = 72$ )

	No amends ( $n = 38$ ), $M$ ( $SD$ )	Amends ( $n = 34$ ), $M$ ( $SD$ )	$t^a$	$d$
Manipulation check	2.82 (1.79)	5.91 (0.88)	9.14***	2.19
Forgiveness	5.60 (1.65)	5.88 (1.01)	0.85	0.20
Deservingness	3.88 (1.39)	5.58 (1.22)	5.49***	1.30
Personal well-being	4.47 (1.10)	5.09 (0.94)	2.53**	0.60
Closeness	5.39 (1.72)	5.63 (1.15)	0.68	0.16
Perceived intentionality	2.89 (1.64)	2.73 (1.33)	0.45	0.11
Sympathy	3.10 (1.26)	3.92 (1.19)	2.81**	0.67
Projected harm severity	5.19 (1.54)	5.29 (1.30)	0.29	0.07
Scenario realism	4.31 (1.87)	4.67 (1.66)	0.86	0.20

<sup>a</sup> $df = 70$ ;

\*\* $p < .01$ ;

\*\*\* $p < .001$ .

**Scenario Engagement.** There was no difference across conditions on perceptions of scenario realism or projected harm severity. Further, all means were above the midpoint, suggesting that the scenario was both believable and engaging for participants.

**Deservingness and Personal Well-being.** Participants in the amends condition were more likely to perceive that their offender deserved forgiveness and that forgiving the offender was associated with improved well-being.

**The Mediating Effect of Deservingness on Relations between Amends and Personal Well-being.** We employed the same bootstrapping procedure as Study 1. Reflecting the *t*-tests, amends was positively associated with deservingness ( $B = 0.91$ ,  $p < .001$ ), which in turn was associated with personal well-being ( $B = 0.47$ ,  $p < .001$ ). Also as indicated by the *t*-tests, amends positively predicted personal well-being (total effect  $B = 0.31$ ,  $p = .014$ ) with this relation reducing to non-significance with the inclusion of deservingness (DE  $B = -0.12$ ,  $p = .31$ ). The indirect effect through deservingness was significant,  $B = 0.43$ ,  $CI_{95\%} = [0.25, 0.66]$ ,  $z = 2.03$ ,  $p = .043$  ( $CI_{95\%} = [0.23, 0.52]$ ), suggesting a large effect of deservingness (Preacher & Kelley, 2011).

**Accounting for Potential Moderating Effects of Transgression-specific Variables.** As shown in Table 2, there was no difference between experimental conditions on measures of closeness and intentionality; however, participants in the amends condition were more likely to express sympathy for the offender. We employed Model 8 in PROCESS (Hayes, 2013) to discount, first, sympathy as an alternative mediator and, second, that any of sympathy, closeness, and intentionality moderates the effects of apology. Across the four separate analyses, there was no evidence to support

these possibilities, nor evidence of mediated moderation (all  $ps > .164$ ).

### Summary of Findings

Results were as predicted and mirrored those of Study 1. When forgiveness is granted and perceived as deserved (i.e., amends were made), the personal consequences of forgiveness are more likely to be experienced as positive, with deservingness having a large mediating effect.

## STUDY 3

Study 3 had three aims. The first was methodological. In Study 1, participants recalled forgiving; in Study 2, they imagined forgiving. Study 3 tested the extent to which the results of Studies 1 and 2 generalize to more immediate expressions of forgiveness. Doing so would in turn enable us to capture a real-time (and therefore improved) indication of participants' deservingness judgements and personal well-being.

The second aim of Study 3 was to address the component of deservingness theory not tested in the first two studies: the impact of deservingness judgements when the outcome is negative (i.e., *no* forgiveness). According to deservingness theory (Feather, 1999), tension relating to imbalance is created when there is incongruence between how an action and its outcome are evaluated (i.e., amends are made but forgiveness not granted), leading to poorer consequences relative to when action and outcome are congruent (no amends are made; forgiveness not granted). Related research (e.g., Lucas *et al.*, 2013) indicates that perceptions of unjust processes (as connoted by undeserved outcomes) have negative personal implications. Thus, we tested a new hypothesis: When victims respond to a positive action (amends) with an undeserved outcome (not forgiving), they will experience reduced well-being relative to those who respond to a negative action (no amends) with a deserved outcome (not forgiving).

The third aim of the study was to further establish the utility of applying a deservingness framework to the consequences of forgiving. We have demonstrated thus far that forgiving is experienced more positively when it is deserved (i.e., because amends were made) than when it is undeserved (i.e., because amends were not made). However, to what extent is this difference *relative*? In other words, are the personal consequences of undeserved forgiveness necessarily negative compared with another viable response to a transgression—specifically, *not* forgiving (e.g., Worthington, 2001)? As we have noted, a large literature shows that, all things being equal, forgiveness has positive consequences. Yet, there is also evidence that, in certain circumstances, holding a grudge can be adaptive (e.g., Baumeister *et al.*, 1998). Thus, even if forgiveness is undeserved, is it still more beneficial than not forgiving?

In methodological terms, meeting these aims required an experimental design in which, in addition to mani-

pulating amends again, forgiveness was also manipulated. We adapted a paradigm employed by Wenzel and Okimoto (2012). After recalling a transgressor who had made amends (or not), half the participants were asked to write a forgiving email, while the other half wrote an email in which they did not forgive. Thus, we tested a mediated moderation model, expecting that the interactive effect of amends and forgiveness on personal well-being (i.e., well-being should be highest when amends were made and forgiveness granted, as per Studies 1 and 2) would be mediated by deservingness.

## Method

### Participants

A research assistant advertised the study via email and social media, using a snowballing approach. There were 150 participants (115 women, 31 men, 4 did not specify gender;  $M_{\text{age}} = 36$ ,  $SD = 12.38$ ), from Australia (73%), Europe (9%), North America (7%), and Asia (4%); 7% did not indicate residence.

### Overview of Study Design

Participants were randomly allocated to conditions in a 2 (*amends*: yes/no)  $\times$  2 (*forgiveness*: yes/no) experimental design. The study consisted of two phases. In *Phase 1*, participants recalled and described a transgression where the transgressor made amends (or not). In *Phase 2*, participants wrote an email to their offender that was forgiving (or not). Measures of deservingness and personal well-being obtained in this phase were employed in the main analyses.

Because of the recall nature of the amends manipulation (*Phase 1*), participants had likely formed ideas about forgiving and deservingness prior to writing the forgiving (or not) email (*Phase 2*). Thus, at *Phase 1*, we also measured what we labeled preexisting levels of forgiveness and deservingness (plus other relevant transgression-specific variables), to control for the possibility that they could impact on the forgiveness manipulation.

### Procedure and Materials

**Phase 1: Recall and Description of a Transgression.** Participants in the *amends* condition read: "Please recall an incident where somebody did something to significantly upset or offend you and they apologized or made amends for what they did. It must be a person with whom you are still in regular contact."

Participants in the *no amends* condition read: "Please recall an incident where somebody did something to significantly upset or offend you and they did NOT apologize or did NOT make amends [or you were not happy with the effort they made]. It must be a person with whom you are still in regular contact."

All participants then described what their transgressor did, after which they wrote that person's first initial in a



textbox. This initial then appeared where relevant thereafter in the survey, to increase the personal relevance of the subsequent items.

Before participants were exposed to the forgiveness manipulation, owing to the recall nature of the first phase of the design, we needed to measure certain transgression-specific variables that could potentially co-vary with both the amends manipulation and the (forthcoming) forgiveness manipulation. Based on Fehr *et al.*'s (2010) meta-analysis, these were perceived harm severity, perceived intentionality, current relationship quality, and what we termed "preexisting" deservingness and "preexisting" forgiveness. These latter two variables are so labeled to reflect the likelihood that, in our design, victims would have already made judgments about transgressor deservingness and forgiveness *prior* to the forgiveness manipulation, hence the "preexisting" appellation (note, also, that they are *not* dispositional measures).

All items hereafter are 1 = *strongly disagree*, 7 = *strongly agree* unless otherwise indicated. All multi-item measures were summed and averaged, with higher scores indicating greater endorsement. Items were randomly presented in blocks.

Preexisting forgiveness: "I have forgiven [X]."

Preexisting deservingness: "[X] deserves to be forgiven."

Perceived harm severity: "The event is still painful for me" and "Compared to other things that have happened to me in my life, this was the most hurtful" ( $r = .48$ ,  $p < .001$ ).

Perceived intentionality: "What [X] did was intentional."

Current relationship quality: "My relationship with [X] is close," "I am committed to my relationship with [X]," "My relationship with [X] is satisfying," and "I am invested in my relationship with [X]" (four items;  $\alpha = .91$ ).

We also included an *amends manipulation check*: "[X] apologized for what he/she did" and "[X] made amends for his/her actions" ( $r = .82$ ,  $p < .001$ ).

**Phase 2: Participants Write an Email to Their Offender.** Participants then received instructions for the forgiveness manipulation. Those in the *manipulated forgiveness* condition read: "Now we would like you to write an email in which you forgive [X]. Please, take some time to think about what you will write. What will you say to [X] to let him/her know you have forgiven them?"

Participants in the *manipulated no-forgiveness* condition read: "Now we would like you to write an email in which you DO NOT forgive [X]. Please, take some time to think about what you will write. What will you say to express your non-forgiveness to [X]?"

After writing the email, participants completed the following measures. To ensure that participants responded on the basis of the manipulation, they read, "Now some questions about the email you wrote..."

Forgiveness manipulation check: "My email genuinely expressed forgiveness."

We checked the extent to which the instruction to write the email made participants annoyed or resentful towards the researcher, thereby potentially introducing *demand characteristics* into the experiment. We measured this with two items: "I resent/am annoyed that the researcher asked me to write this email" ( $r = .81$ ,  $p < .001$ ).

Having manipulated both amends (via a recall paradigm) and forgiveness (via writing forgiving emails or not), we then measured the extent to which participants judged that offenders deserved their forgiveness (or not). We used the same five items as Study 2 ( $\alpha = .94$ ). This measure was used to test for mediation of amends X forgiveness on personal well-being and was labeled *post-manipulation deservingness* to distinguish it from the preexisting deservingness measure described earlier.

Finally the DV, *personal well-being*, was measured with the same eight items as Study 2 ( $\alpha = .93$ ).

## Results

Two-way ANOVAs were conducted to examine the main and interaction effects for amends and forgiveness manipulations on key and background variables. Descriptive statistics for all analyses below are reported in Table 3. Inferential statistics are reported in Table 4.

### Manipulation Check—Amends

Participants in the amends condition were more likely to perceive that amends had been done, compared with those in the no-amends condition. The forgiveness conditions did not differ on amends, and there was no interaction.

### Manipulation Check—Forgiveness

Participants in the forgiveness condition were more likely to report that they had communicated forgiveness to their transgressor compared with those in the no-forgiveness condition. Not surprisingly, participants who had received amends were more likely to say that they had communicated forgiveness than those in the no-amends condition. There was also an interaction. *Post hoc* analyses indicated that participants in the forgiveness condition were more likely to communicate forgiveness than those in the no-forgiveness condition, in both the amends ( $p < .001$ ) and no-amends ( $p < .001$ ) conditions.

### Differences across Experimental Conditions on Transgression-specific and Background Variables

Understandably, given the recall nature of this particular aspect of the design, participants assigned to recall transgressors who had made amends were more likely to recall someone with whom they are in a high-quality relationship, whom they had forgiven and whom they perceived deserved forgiveness and downplay their intentions to hurt.

**Table 3.** Study 3 means and standard deviations for amends and forgiveness conditions on manipulation checks, deservingness, personal well-being, and background variables ( $N = 150$ )

	Amends condition		Forgiveness condition	
	No, $M$ ( $SD$ )	Yes, $M$ ( $SD$ )	No, $M$ ( $SD$ )	Yes, $M$ ( $SD$ )
Manip. check—amends	1.96 (1.49)	4.79 (1.82)	3.72 (2.21)	3.35 (2.16)
Perceived harm severity	4.18 (1.78)	3.79 (1.68)	4.10 (1.73)	3.81 (1.73)
Perceived intentionality	5.30 (1.89)	4.28 (2.06)	4.69 (2.03)	4.78 (2.06)
Current relationship quality	3.37 (1.81)	4.58 (1.83)	4.01 (1.91)	4.08 (1.93)
Pre-existing forgiveness	3.79 (1.99)	5.36 (1.65)	4.61 (2.03)	4.72 (1.89)
Pre-existing deservingness	4.26 (1.88)	5.53 (1.61)	5.00 (2.00)	4.93 (1.66)
Manip. check—forgiveness	3.41 (2.13)	4.01 (2.38)	2.43 (1.72)	5.23 (1.91)
Demand characteristics	2.18 (1.47)	2.48 (1.82)	2.50 (1.71)	2.18 (1.63)
Post-manip. deservingness	3.79 (1.83)	4.71 (1.89)	3.61 (1.90)	5.10 (1.61)
Personal well-being	4.44 (1.15)	4.63 (1.37)	4.10 (1.21)	5.05 (1.17)

**Table 4.** Summary of inferential statistics for main and interaction effects of amends and forgiveness on manipulation checks, background variables, deservingness, and personal well-being (Study 3;  $N = 150$ )

	Amends			Forgiveness			Interaction		
	$F$	$p$	$partial \eta^2$	$F$	$p$	$partial \eta^2$	$F$	$p$	$partial \eta^2$
Amends manip. check	102.29	.001	.41	0.72	.40		1.78	.18	
Perceived harm severity	1.96	.16		1.02	.31		0.09	.76	
Perceived intentionality	9.40	.003	.06	0.03	.87		0.09	.77	
Relationship quality	16.00	.001	.10	0.22	.64		0.54	.46	
Pre-existing forgive	27.92	.001	.16	0.26	.61		0.13	.72	
Pre-existing deserving	19.19	.001	.12	0.01	.93		2.78	.10	
Manip. check—forgive	6.02	.015	.04	86.70	.001	.38	5.69	.018	.04
Demand characteristics	1.08	.30		1.19	.28		0.03	.86	
Post-manip. deserving	12.05	.001	.08	28.51	.001	.16	0.23	.63	
Personal well-being	1.77	.18		20.91	.001	.13	13.48	.001	.09

More importantly, as Table 4 shows, none of these (or any other) variables differed across the manipulated forgiveness conditions. It is particularly notable that preexisting levels of forgiveness and deservingness did not affect levels of manipulated forgiveness, nor did demand characteristics (in particular, being asked to write an email that could have been inconsistent with one's feelings). The equivalent distribution of these variables across the manipulated forgiveness conditions enabled us to proceed, more confident in the knowledge that the effects of explicitly communicated forgiveness (or not) on post-manipulation deservingness and personal well-being were due to the communication of forgiveness itself and not due to preexisting information relating to the transgression, the offender, the relationship with the offender, or demand characteristics.

Finally, and most importantly, there was no significant interaction effect of Amends  $\times$  Forgiveness on any of the transgression-specific or background variables.

#### Effects of Amends and Forgiveness Manipulations on Personal Well-being

As Table 4 shows, there was a main effect for forgiveness, such that participants in the manipulated forgiveness condition were more likely to report positive

personal consequences of forgiving. There was no main effect for amends, but as expected, there was an interaction. We subsequently broke down the interaction, enabling us to begin to address the three main aims of the study.

First, we compared between amends and no amends within each of the manipulated forgiveness conditions. As illustrated in Figure 1, when victims granted forgiveness, those who received amends reported greater personal well-being than those who did not receive amends ( $p < .001$ ). This result lays a platform for replicating Studies 1 and 2. However, when forgiveness was not granted, there was no difference between amends and no amends on personal well-being ( $p = .11$ ), providing no initial support for the new hypothesis of this study.

Second, we compared personal well-being scores for forgiveness and no-forgiveness conditions within each of the amends conditions. As illustrated in Figure 1, when amends were made, personal well-being was higher among forgivers than non-forgivers ( $p < .001$ ). However, when no amends were made, personal well-being was the same regardless of forgiving or not ( $p = .55$ ). This latter result speaks to the third aim of the study, specifically, the question of whether undeserved forgiveness (i.e., forgiving following no amends) is more beneficial than not forgiving at all.

### Effects of Amends and Forgiveness Manipulations on Post-manipulation Deservingness

Participants in the manipulated forgiveness condition scored higher on post-manipulation deservingness than those in the no-forgiveness condition. Similarly, participants in the amends condition scored higher on post-manipulation deservingness than those in the no-amends condition. There was no interaction.

The absence of an interaction was not entirely unexpected. It is consistent with theorizing that offenders' post-transgression effort implicitly affects victims' immediate judgements about offenders' deservingness of forgiveness. As reported earlier, offenders who made amends were judged as more deserving of forgiveness (i.e., on the preexisting deservingness measure) even before the forgiveness manipulation was employed. In addition, there was a moderate positive correlation between preexisting deservingness and post-manipulation deservingness ( $r = .53$ ,  $p < .001$ ). Thus, it was likely that preexisting deservingness was acting as a suppressor variable, obscuring the potential interactive effect of amends and forgiveness on post-manipulation deservingness.

Accordingly, we reran the analysis inserting preexisting deservingness as a covariate. By controlling for preexisting deservingness judgements, a significant interaction now emerged for Amends  $\times$  Forgiveness on post-manipulation deservingness,  $F(1, 145) = 4.20$ ,  $p = .042$ , partial  $\eta^2 = .028$ . A simple effects analysis indicated no difference between no-amends ( $M = 3.54$ ,  $SE = 0.92$ ) and amends ( $M = 3.55$ ,  $SE = 0.25$ ) conditions on post-manipulation deservingness judgements when manipulated forgiveness was not granted ( $p = .97$ ). However, amends ( $M = 5.40$ ,  $SE = 0.19$ ) relative to no amends ( $M = 4.58$ ,  $SE = 0.21$ ) increased post-manipulation deservingness judgements when manipulated forgiveness was granted ( $p = .005$ ). Thus, we were now able to proceed with the main aim of the study, which was to test a mediated moderation model.

### The Mediating Effect of Post-manipulation Deservingness on the Interaction between Amends and Forgiveness on Personal Well-being

We used bootstrapping, specifically Hayes (2013) PROCESS technique, to test a mediated moderation model (5000 iterations, bias corrected). We employed Model 8 in PROCESS, which enables the simultaneous testing of interaction effects on DVs and mediators, decomposition of simple effects, and mediation of the primary interaction effect.

Forgiveness was the independent variable; amends, the moderator; post-manipulation deservingness, the mediator; personal well-being, the outcome variable; and pre-existing deservingness entered as a covariate.

Reflecting the ANOVAs, there were significant interactions between amends and forgiveness on personal well-being ( $B = 0.29$ ,  $p = .002$ ) and post-manipulation

deservingness ( $B = 0.24$ ,  $p = .045$ ). Post-manipulation deservingness, in turn, was positively associated with personal well-being ( $B = 0.26$ ,  $p < .001$ ). The indirect effect of the Amends  $\times$  Forgiveness interaction through post-manipulation deservingness on personal well-being was significant ( $B = 0.06$ ,  $CI_{95\%} = [0.009, 0.15]$ ). An examination of the conditional direct effects of forgiveness confirmed the follow-up analyses of the ANOVA (as illustrated in Figure 1). That is, when amends are not made, forgiving (or not) has no impact on personal well-being ( $B = -0.06$ ,  $p = .67$ ,  $CI_{95\%} = [-0.34, 0.22]$ ). However, when amends are made, forgiving results in increased personal well-being relative to not forgiving ( $B = 0.53$ ,  $p = .001$ ,  $CI_{95\%} = [0.26, 0.80]$ ). Most importantly, this latter conditional effect occurs through post-manipulation deservingness ( $B = 0.26$ ,  $CI_{95\%} = [0.12, 0.45]$ ).<sup>4,5</sup>

### Summary of Results

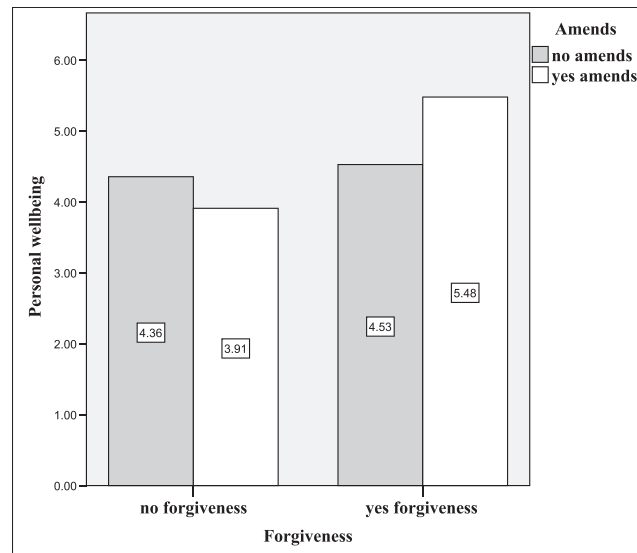
The first aim of the study was to replicate the results of the recall and hypothetical paradigms of Studies 1 and 2. This aim was met: consistent with Studies 1 and 2, victims who received amends and wrote forgiving emails were more likely to judge that the offender deserved forgiveness (compared with those who did not receive amends but still forgave) and subsequently were more likely to experience the personal consequences of forgiveness as beneficial.

The second aim was to test a new hypothesis that the well-being of victims who do not forgive despite receiving amends will be lower than those who do not forgive when amends are not made. This hypothesis was not supported.

The third aim was to contrast the consequences of forgiving or not forgiving when amends are not made. In the case of the former, being forgiven is an undeserved outcome for offenders; in the case of the latter, not being forgiven is a deserved outcome. The results of the no amends condition across forgiveness conditions indicate that when offenders have not made amends, the personal well-being of victims who forgive is the same as the personal well-being of victims who do not forgive. Conversely, when victims do make amends, forgiveness is a deserved outcome for offenders whereas not being forgiven is an undeserved outcome. The results of the amends conditions across forgiveness conditions reveal that when offenders deserve forgiveness (e.g., they

<sup>4</sup>In each study, we tested alternative causal models, swapping the mediator and DV. There was no evidence that personal well-being mediated between amends and deservingness (Studies 1 and 2) or that personal well-being mediated the interaction of Amends  $\times$  Forgiveness on deservingness (Study 3).

<sup>5</sup>A priori power analyses using G\*Power 3 (Faul, Erdfelder, Buchner, & Lang, 2007) based on large effect sizes, power of .8, and  $\alpha = .05$  indicated minimum required  $N$ s of 52 for Studies 1 and 2 and  $N = 111$  for Study 3. Thus, power in each of the three studies was  $> .8$ . Given the potential for attrition and to stay on the safe side, our stopping rule for data collection was when power reached approximately .9.



**Fig. 1:** Interaction between manipulated amends and manipulated forgiveness on personal well-being (Study 3)

have amends), victims feel better about forgiving compared with those victims who do not forgive.

## GENERAL DISCUSSION

### When Forgiving Benefits Victims

When offenders make reparative effort—for example, through apologizing or amends—they signal, among other things, a willingness to re-validate shared values, restore victim power, and that the victim is valued (see, for example, Okimoto *et al.*, 2013). Across three studies employing three different experimental paradigms, we found consistent evidence that, to the extent that victims perceive that offenders have engaged in post-transgression effort and victims subsequently forgive, the personal consequences for victims are likely to be positive.

The results of all three studies are consistent with the only other research explicitly linking post-transgression offender effort to victim well-being following forgiveness (see Gromet and Okimoto's, 2014, studies on victim reintegration in organizational settings). Moreover, one of the best-established findings in the forgiveness literature is that post-transgression offender effort predicts forgiveness. Our results suggest that offender effort has implications beyond predicting forgiveness itself. That is, victims may grant forgiveness, but in order for victims to experience forgiveness as positive, victims must perceive that offenders engaged in post-transgression reparative effort.

### How Forgiving Benefits Victims

Among forgivers, deservingness mediated relations between post-transgression effort and personal well-being in all three studies. As such, we provide evidence for the process by which post-transgression offender effort translates into victim well-being following forgiveness: that is, offender effort indicates to victims that offenders

*deserve* to be forgiven. A judgement that another deserves his or her outcome is, in turn, associated with positive affect and attitudes (Feather, 1999, 2003, 2006).

### Deservingness and the Consequences of Not Forgiving

Further, Study 3 applied the full deservingness model to the context of forgiveness. While we have confirmed that congruence between a positive action (amends) and a positive outcome (forgiving) encourages deservingness, perceptions and subsequently increased victim well-being, this pattern was not replicated when action and outcome were congruently negative (i.e., no amends, no forgiveness).

Taken on face value, the results for no forgiveness suggest that the possibility for enhanced personal well-being resonates less when victims do not forgive. As such, the findings are consistent with previous research indicating the deleterious effects of grudge holding (e.g., Witvliet, Ludwig, & Vander Laan, 2001) and further illuminate the well-established liberating effects of forgiving. That is, not forgiving even when that is the deserved response is not as personally beneficial as granting deserved forgiveness. In fact, these initial data suggest that deserved non-forgiveness is no more beneficial than undeserved non-forgiveness.

That said, one should be cautious about reading too much into these initial no-forgiveness results. Two methodological issues in particular should be clarified. First, inconsistent with deservingness theory, unforgiving victims who did not receive amends perceived the offender as no less deserving of forgiveness than those who did receive amends. One explanation is that participants were asked to recall a transgression by someone with whom they are still close, but it is quite uncommon for individuals to not forgive a currently close other, particularly



after that close other has made amends. Thus, deservingness judgements may have been elevated in the no-amends/no-forgiveness condition, such that they were no different to the amends/no-forgiveness condition. As a result, the effects on personal well-being were dampened (we elaborate on the implications of relationship closeness for deservingness theory later in the discussion).

Second, personal well-being may not be the most appropriate measure of consequences of not forgiving. Not forgiving connotes no action and is a negatively valenced response to wrongdoing. As such, heightened well-being may not be as relevant when victims do not forgive. Presuming that a state of non-forgiveness effectively means no change in well-being following a transgression (e.g., Worthington, 2001), future researchers may implement a measure of affective states relating more directly to the consequences of undeserved non-forgiveness, such as guilt and anxiety.

### Is Undeserved Forgiveness Better Than Not Forgiving at All?

Study 3 also provides an insight into the effects of undeserved forgiveness, relative to deserved non-forgiveness. Given that forgiveness is generally associated with positive consequences, is undeserved forgiveness still better than not forgiving, even if not forgiving is deserved? The short answer is that if victims grant undeserved forgiveness, they may as well not forgive because the personal consequences, at least, are the same.

This conclusion challenges a large literature demonstrating that, all things being equal, forgiveness is necessarily positive. As some other studies now demonstrate (e.g., McNulty, 2011) and as theorists have suspected (e.g., Baumeister *et al.*, 1998), there are limits to forgiveness. Moreover, and relatedly, choosing to not forgive—particularly when forgiveness is *not* deserved—may not necessarily be detrimental.

In summary, all things being equal, if we want to know the process by which forgiveness becomes beneficial, we should concentrate on the extent to which forgiveness is deserved. If forgiveness is undeserved, the best we can say is that the personal consequences will be no worse than not forgiving.

### Strengths, Limitations, and Future Research

By themselves, each of the designs of the three experiments possesses shortcomings. However, as a package, the strengths of each account for the others' apparent limitations (Fehr *et al.*, 2010). The recall design in Study 1 has limited internal validity but possesses strong ecological validity, allowing insight into keenly felt experiences that is not possible in the laboratory or via hypothetical scenarios. The hypothetical scenario in Study 2 possesses reduced external validity but allowed us stricter control over all variables extraneous to our hypotheses. Finally, Study 3 improved upon recalled (Study 1) and imagined (Study 2) forgiveness by

manipulating forgiveness such that it was explicitly communicated (or not). Of course, participants had already made decisions about forgiving prior to the manipulation, but, importantly, preexisting levels of forgiveness did not affect the forgiveness manipulation (and neither did any other transgression-specific variable, including demand characteristics associated with being instructed to write a forgiving [or non-forgiving] email). As such, participants' emails allowed a reasonably proximal insight into more immediate deservingness judgements and personal consequences. Thus, a strength of our findings is that they are consistent across three different yet complementary designs.

Nonetheless, these designs remain limited by their cross-sectional nature; that is, none can account for the issue of temporality. Certainly, there is negligible evidence that participants' interpretations of transgression-specific information, offender responses, and relationship status unduly affected relations between post-transgression effort and forgiveness consequences in any of the studies. However, longitudinal studies are required to confirm the extent to which post-transgression effort and forgiveness at Time 1 predicts the consequences of forgiveness at Time 2. Such a design would be especially useful for establishing the boundary conditions of our findings. For example, on one hand, our results show that at a cross-sectional level of analysis, undeserved forgiveness seems to be less beneficial than deserved forgiveness and equivalent to not forgiving. On the other hand, there may be benefits to undeserved forgiving that only reveal themselves with time. To illustrate, future research may test the idea that undeserved forgiveness may help preserve an important relationship so that some mending *can* be done in the future.

A second limitation concerns the fact that we endeavored, through our instructions in each study, to keep closeness constant between victim and offender. Although this is somewhat of a strength, insofar as we were able to minimize the impact of this variable on key relations, it also means that we can only generalize our results to close relationships. Would the same effects be observed when transgressions are enacted in non-close relationships? Reduced closeness could dampen the motivating effects of post-transgression effort, insofar as a transgressor who is not close is less likely to be perceived in a positive light (Murray, Holmes, & Griffin, 2003) and therefore less likely to be perceived as deserving, regardless of his or her reparative efforts.

To this end, future research should consider the interactive effect of possibly the most salient "action" variable after post-transgression effort: relationship quality (more specifically, in the parlance of deservingness, relationship quality associated with a partner's past positive actions). Relationship quality is not only a well-established predictor of forgiveness (Fehr *et al.*, 2010) but also an important predictor of post-forgiveness victim well-being (e.g., Karremans & Van Lange, 2004). In functional relationships, partners build "reputational

credit" through valued psychological contributions that they make to the relationship (e.g., demonstrating trustworthiness). Accumulated credit inoculates partners against the occasions when they, inevitably, behave contrary to relationship-relevant norms and expectations (Finkel *et al.*, 2002). Deservingness theory proposes that in-group/out-group perceptions and also offender like-ability have the potential to moderate deservingness judgements (Feather, 1999, 2006). Applied to the interpersonal context, deservingness theory would predict that if Mary and John (for example) are in a committed relationship but John transgresses, Mary is likely to recognize and take into account John's previously valued contribution to the relationship. Similarly, Mary probably likes John, as he is her committed partner. All things being equal, Mary is therefore more likely to judge that John deserves forgiveness (ironically, and as we noted earlier, it is also precisely in committed relationships where undeserved forgiveness may occur—indeed, such as those reported in Study 1, where the mean commitment rating was very high).

Finally, deservingness levels in the no-apology or no-amends conditions were on or just below the midpoint, suggesting that victims in these conditions also perceived their offenders as deserving. Two inter-related explanations are apparent. First, in Studies 1 and 2, for example, participants who did not receive an apology or amends had still forgiven and therefore may have been motivated to maintain cognitive consistency by elevating their deservingness scores. Indeed, it is relevant to note that the lowest deservingness mean was where one would expect it: in Study 3 in the condition where neither apology nor forgiveness had occurred. Second, deservingness was measured in the context of close (Studies 1 and 2) and ongoing (Study 3) relationships. As we have discussed, people build up reputational credit in such relationships. Thus, even in the absence of amends or apology, the offender's prior (Studies 1 and 3) or perceived (Study 2) relationship history may have encouraged higher deservingness ratings. Most importantly, though—and consistent with theorizing—deservingness scores were always significantly higher in the apology or amends conditions.

### Compatibility with and Extension of Other Theoretical Approaches to Predicting Forgiveness Consequences

Our results speak to two related research programs. Drawing from interdependence and evolutionary theories, Luchies *et al.* (2010) found that forgiveness bolsters victim self-respect when offenders exhibit pre-forgiveness characteristics and behaviors that deem them potentially non-exploitative. Viewed through the lens of deservingness, it could be said that such positive offender actions/characteristics (amends; acting agreeably) were congruent with the positive outcome (forgiveness); thus, forgiveness was deserved, leading to bolstered victim self-respect. As such, our studies may extend upon the Luchies *et al.* (2010) work by

providing insight into the *process* linking victim appraisals of offender actions and characteristics with forgiveness consequences.

In another program of research (e.g., McNulty, 2011), operant learning theory was applied to explain why repeated forgiving can encourage recidivism and subsequently increased psychological and physical aggression by offending partners. Deservingness theory can also account for these particular findings: forgiving despite repetitious transgressive behavior renders the forgiveness undeserved (i.e., negative action/positive outcome), hence the deleterious effects of forgiving.

As such, deservingness potentially provides an overarching theoretical framework for explaining the extent to which forgiving in any particular situation may be beneficial or not. Deservingness theory essentially proposes that as long as the *action* (e.g., amends) is positive then, all things being equal, the outcome (forgiveness) is deserved. When positive action and outcome are ongruent, positive consequences are more likely to eventuate. Thus, while we have focused on amends/apology, deservingness potentially accounts for the effects of any number of variables that provide information about an offender's actions or characteristics—including, as discussed earlier, relationship quality (for a meta-analysis of the main variables, see Fehr *et al.*, 2010).

Finally, our results resonate with theorizing about relations between justice and forgiveness, two constructs highly relevant when a transgression occurs. Justice is vitally important to humans, yet forgiveness is often conceptualized as the foregoing of justice (e.g., Enright & Fitzgibbons, 2000). Our data suggest that people's concerns about forgiving in the absence of justice are well founded. As Feather (1999, 2006) points out, deservingness is a justice-related concept. An undeserved outcome violates perceptions of justice. If justice has not prevailed, then victims are less able to forgive (Strelan & Van Prooijen, 2013). But, if they *do* forgive when forgiveness is perceived to be undeserved, the personal consequences are experienced less positively compared with when forgiveness is perceived to be deserved.

### Practical Implications

When and how can anyone be sure that forgiving—a response requiring victims to make themselves vulnerable *again* to the person(s) who hurt them—will not simply lead to more abuse, whether domestic or institutional, that lessons are not learnt, that justice is not (seen to be) done, that power is not simply ceded, and that victims are not left looking and feeling weak? Alternatively, when and how can one recognize that forgiving is a safe response, such that victims experience the well-established personal benefits associated with forgiveness? These initial data suggest, first, that forgiveness should be beneficial when offenders are perceived to have made reparative effort following a transgression. Such effort signals restorative and constructive

intent by offenders. As such, and second, reparative effort indicates to victims that offenders deserve forgiveness. When these psychological conditions are present, all things being equal, victims should feel that forgiving is not only the right thing to do, it is the best thing to do.

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