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Forgiveness for intimate partner violence: The influence of victim and offender variables

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Abstract

We examined victim and offender correlates of forgiveness for intimate partner violence. Participants were from couples (132 women, 75 men) in which males were convicted of intimate partner violence and court-ordered into an intervention program. In women, empathy and general religiousness positively related to forgiveness, but attributions of blame were unrelated to forgiveness. Several dispositional variables in men were associated with forgiveness in women. Men who were more dominant were more likely to be forgiven, but men with more psychological problems were less likely to be forgiven. Many offender effects were mediated by women's state empathy.

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1. Introduction

Although forgiveness is often encouraged by theologians and psychologists alike, some offenses may be harder to forgive. One particularly difficult case is intimate partner violence. Despite distinctions researchers make between forgiveness and reconciliation (Fincham, 2000; Worthington

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& Drinkard, 2000) or condonation (Enright & Coyle, 1998), forgiveness of intimate partner violence may be viewed negatively (e.g., Lamb, 2002; Whipple, 1988). Yet some victims do forgive their abusers (Gordon, Burton, & Porter, 2004). Given the serious consequences of intimate partner violence (Arias, Dankwort, Douglas, Dutton, & Stein, 2002) it becomes important to investigate forgiveness and its correlates in this context. The current study expands research in the area of forgiveness for intimate partner violence by examining the association between dispositional variables in the offender, and victim forgiveness. We also examine whether this association is mediated by empathy and attributions, which have been associated with forgiveness in other contexts (e.g., Bradfield & Aquino, 1999; McCullough et al., 1998).

1.1. Forgiveness and intimate partner violence

Intimate partner violence has distinct characteristics relevant to forgiveness. Abusive partners often rationalize their behavior (Cavanagh, Dobash, Dobash, & Lewis, 2001), and expressions of forgiveness might fuel these rationalizations. Forgiveness may also reinforce uneven power distributions in abusive relationships, and may be equated with tolerance of abuse (Lamb, 2002). Others have theorized that forgiveness may have a self-healing effect on survivors of intimate partner violence (Taylor, 2004). Importantly, participants from Taylor's sample were self-identified "survivors" of abuse, and therefore were presumably no longer being abused, thus differentiating forgiveness from tolerance of abuse.

Forgiveness can be studied as a reaction to a transgression (e.g., McCullough, Fincham, & Tsang, 2003) or as a disposition (e.g., Leach & Lark, 2004; Walker & Gorsuch, 2002). The current study examines forgiveness as a reaction to intimate partner violence. Although there are several definitions of transgression-specific forgiveness, most include prosocial change in the victim toward the offender (McCullough, Pargament, & Thoresen, 2000). Importantly, forgiveness is not synonymous with excusing or condoning a transgression, and it is possible and sometimes advisable for forgiveness to occur without reconciliation (e.g., Freedman, 1998).

McCullough et al. (1998) distinguished four levels of determinants of forgiveness: social-cognitive, offense-related, relational, and personality variables. Social-cognitive variables include cognition and affect victims experience toward the transgressor and the offense. Offense variables include offense severity and apology. Relational variables include variables such as relationship closeness and commitment. Personality variables include dispositional variables in the victim that facilitate forgiveness. We discuss three forgiveness variables in the context of intimate partner violence—two at the social-cognitive level, and one at the personality level—and propose a new category of analysis at the offender level.

The social-cognitive variable of attribution (McCullough et al., 1998) is one of the few variables studied in relation to intimate partner violence. Katz, Street, and Arias (1997) found that low self-esteem and self-attributions for abuse were related to increased forgiveness for hypothetical abuse, but only self-attributions were uniquely related to forgiveness. Self-attribution was negatively related to intent to exit the relationship, and this relationship was mediated by forgiveness. This study was limited by its use of hypothetical scenarios and a college student sample. Gordon et al. (2004) found that attributions for abuse predicted intent to return to the abusive partner in a sample of women at domestic violence shelters, and this relationship was again mediated by forgiveness.

Empathy is another social-cognitive determinant (McCullough et al., 1998) with a consistent relationship to forgiveness. Empathy is defined as a set of other-focused “congruent vicarious emotions” such as sympathy, compassion, and tenderness (Batson & Shaw, 1991, p. 113). McCullough, Worthington, and Rachal (1997) theorized that empathy facilitates forgiveness by increasing the victim’s concern for the welfare of the offender. Research using nonclinical samples has supported the importance of state empathy in forgiveness (McCullough et al., 2003, 1997, 1998). Empathy often mediates the relationship between forgiveness and other variables, such as apology (McCullough et al., 1997). Currently, no research exists on the role of empathy in forgiveness for intimate partner violence.

Religiousness as a personality-level determinant of forgiveness (McCullough et al., 1998) may be especially relevant to intimate partner violence. Whipple (1988) posited that Christian fundamentalism might increase forgiveness for abuse due to doctrines on the submissive nature of wives and unconditional nature of forgiveness. Research has found that religious and spiritual individuals are more likely to value forgiveness and to possess a forgiving disposition (Brose, Rye, Lutz-Zois, & Ross, 2005; Leach & Lark, 2004; McCullough & Worthington, 1999). Religious orientation may also be important to consider when studying forgiveness. Allport (1966) conceptualized intrinsic religious orientation as a mature, devout religiousness, whereas extrinsic religious orientation was religion used as a means toward nonreligious goals. Batson (e.g., Batson & Schoenrade, 1991) conceptualized quest religious orientation as a cognitively complex, open-minded approach to religion. Tsang, McCullough, and Hoyt (2005) found that intrinsic religiousness was related to increased forgiveness for recent transgressions, but they neglected to examine extrinsic and quest religiousness. Tate and Miller (1971) found that intrinsically religious individuals rated the value of forgiveness higher than did extrinsic individuals. Although there is no research on religious orientation and forgiveness for intimate partner violence, intrinsic religion has been associated with increased tolerance of abuse (Burris & Jackson, 1999). Intrinsic religiousness might therefore be related to more forgiveness of intimate partner violence, and extrinsic and quest religiousness related to less.

1.2. Offender determinants of forgiveness

In addition to victim-related determinants such as social-cognitive and personality variables, there may be offender-related determinants of forgiveness. For instance, offender likableness has been found to facilitate forgiveness (Bradfield & Aquino, 1999). We propose that in the context of intimate partner violence, offenders who are more dominant might elicit more forgiveness from their victims, compared to less dominant offenders. Additionally, we predicted that offenders with more psychological problems would elicit less forgiveness. Relationships with offenders with clinical problems may be seen as more costly, and the offenders more stigmatized, making forgiveness less likely.

These offender variables may work primarily through more proximal social-cognitive variables. A dominant offender may be controlling and persuasive enough to convince his victim to attribute abuse to external circumstances, not himself. Victims may have less empathy for offenders with clinical problems such as depression or substance abuse, especially if these problems have strained the relationship in other ways. This lessened empathy may discourage forgiveness for intimate partner violence.

1.3. The present study

The present study surveyed members of couples in a court-ordered intervention program. We hypothesized that female victims would be more likely to forgive their abusive partners to the extent that they experienced more empathy for them, blamed them less, and were dispositionally more empathic and religious. Additionally, we examined in male partners a number of offender variables that might influence the forgiveness process. Specifically, we hypothesized that men reporting more dominant personalities and fewer psychological problems would be forgiven more by their partners. We further investigated whether relationships between victim forgiveness and offender characteristics were mediated by attributions and state empathy.

2. Method

2.1. Participants

Participants were from couples in which the male was convicted of intimate partner violence and court-ordered to attend a state approved intervention program. Questionnaires were collected from 132 women and 75 of their male partners. Recruitment occurred during the program's initial intake assessment. Participants were asked to anonymously complete a packet of questionnaires and return them to program staff.

2.2. Measures

Male participants were provided the following questionnaires:

Demographic information. Men were asked their age, ethnicity, education level, and marital status.

Personality Assessment Inventory (PAI; Morey, 1991). This self-report measure of adult personality assesses clinical syndromes and contains 344 items based on central components that define each disorder. The PAI items make up 22 non-overlapping scales (4 validity scales, 11 clinical scales [somatic complaints, anxiety, anxiety-related disorders, depression, mania, paranoia, schizophrenia, borderline features, antisocial features, alcohol problems, drug problems], 5 treatment consideration scales [aggression, suicidal ideation, stress, nonsupport, treatment rejection] and 2 interpersonal scales [dominance, warmth]). Items are scored on a four-point scale (1 = *False, not at all true*, 2 = *Slightly true*, 3 = *Mainly true*, 4 = *Very true*). Reliability is consistently high (median alphas of 0.81, 0.86 and 0.82 for normative, clinical and college samples, respectively; Morey, 1991). Careful interpretation of results provides useful information about personality styles and clinical variables.

Female partners of men participating in the intervention program completed the following questionnaires:

Demographic and relationship information. Female participants provided their age, ethnicity, and relationship duration.

Information about intimate partner violence. Participants indicated the time elapsed since the last episode of abuse (participants were free to interpret what constituted the "last episode"), and

answered questions related to this episode. Attribution items asked “How responsible do you think your spouse is for what he/she did to you?” and “How intentional do you think his/her behavior was? To what extent did he/she do it on purpose?” Items were rated on a seven-point Likert-type scale (0 = *Not at all responsible*, 6 = *100% responsible*, $\alpha = .73$).

Dispositional and relationship empathy. Empathic disposition was measured with the Empathic Concern and Perspective-Taking subscales of the Interpersonal Reactivity Index (Davis & Oathout, 1987). These subscales have shown adequate reliability ($\alpha_{phas} = .73$ and .71, respectively, Davis & Oathout, 1987), and are used often to measure empathic disposition. Participants rated items on a 1–5 Likert-type scale (1 = *Strongly Disagree*, 5 = *Strongly Agree*). State empathy was assessed by having participants rate the extent to which they felt *sympathetic, empathic, concerned, moved, compassionate, warm, softhearted, and tender* toward their partner. Similar adjectives have been used in research on altruism (e.g., α_{phas} from .85 to .87; Batson, Lishner, Cook, & Sawyer, 2005) and forgiveness (α_{phas} from .87 to .92; McCullough et al., 1998, 2003) to measure state empathy. In contrast to previous research utilizing 1–6 (McCullough et al., 2003) or 1–7 scales (Batson et al., 2005), we utilized a nine-point Likert-type scale (1 = *Not at all*, 9 = *Extremely*).

Transgression-Related Interpersonal Motivations Inventory (TRIM; McCullough et al., 1998). We conceptualized forgiveness as low levels of revenge and avoidance, and high levels of benevolence. Revenge and avoidance were assessed using McCullough et al.’s (1998) Transgression-Related Interpersonal Motivations (TRIM) Inventory. Benevolence was assessed with a scale of five positively-worded items used in previous forgiveness research (McCullough et al., 2003). All items were rated on a five-point Likert-type scale (1 = *strongly disagree*, 5 = *strongly agree*). Participants were instructed to “indicate your current thoughts and feelings about your spouse (husband/wife, boy/girlfriend); that is, we want to know how you feel about the person right now.” All three subscales have shown good reliability ($\alpha_{phas} \geq .85$; McCullough et al., 2003).

Religiousness. Participants indicated their religious interest and frequency of participation in religious activities. Participants also completed the Intrinsic and Extrinsic Religious Orientation Scales (Allport & Ross, 1967), and the Quest Religious Orientation Scale (Batson & Schoenrade, 1991). These scales have shown acceptable reliability and have been used successfully in previous research in the psychology of religion (intrinsic $\alpha_{pha} = .83$, extrinsic $\alpha_{pha} = .72$, quest $\alpha_{pha} = .78$; Batson, Schoenrade, & Ventis, 1993). Religious interest and religious orientation were rated on 1–9 Likert-type scales (1 = *Strongly disagree*, 9 = *Strongly agree*), whereas religious participation was rated on a 1–6 scale (1 = *Never*, 6 = *More than once a day*).

Participants completed additional questionnaires unrelated to the current study.

3. Results

3.1. Demographic information

Women ranged from 18 to 71 years of age ($M = 32.87$, $SD = 10.76$ years). Most were African-American ($n = 80$, 60.6%) or European-American ($n = 31$, 23.3%), with some Asian-American ($n = 3$, 2.3%), Latina/Hispanic ($n = 1$, 0.8%), Native-American ($n = 3$, 2.3%), bi-racial ($n = 6$, 4.5%), or “other” ($n = 2$, 1.5%). The relationship duration ranged from 5 months to 33 years

Table 1
Means and standard deviations for Victim Variables

Scale	Mean	SD	Potential range	N
Benevolence	3.96	.88	1–5	127
Avoidance	1.99	.84	1–5	130
Revenge	1.74	.79	1–5	130
Attributions	3.28	1.97	0–6	112
State Empathy	5.65	2.09	1–9	100

($M = 6.59$, $SD = 6.34$ years). Reported time elapsed since the last incidence of abuse ranged from 1 day to 4.5 years ($M = 9.3$ months, $SD = 11.93$ months).

Men ranged in age from 19 to 71 years ($M = 36.22$, $SD = 11.23$ years). Most were African-American ($n = 52$, 69.3%) or European-American ($n = 18$, 24.0%), with some Asian ($n = 2$, 2.7%) or Native-American ($n = 1$, 1.3%). Twenty percent ($n = 15$) reported completing college, with 29% ($n = 22$) reporting a high school diploma or G.E.D., 39% ($n = 29$) reporting some high school, and seven percent ($n = 5$) reporting less than a ninth-grade education. Forty-three percent of men reported being married ($n = 32$), 27% reported never being married ($n = 20$), and fewer numbers reported being divorced ($n = 9$, 12%), separated ($n = 4$, 5.3%), or living with partners ($n = 8$, 10.7%).

Analyses of victim-related variables and victim forgiveness utilized data from 132 female participants, whereas analyses including both offender and victim variables utilized only the 75 women and 75 men for which we had matching couple data.

Women reported feeling fairly benevolent toward their spouses, with low levels of avoidance and revenge. They blamed their spouses a moderate amount for abuse and experienced modest amounts of empathy toward them. Means and standard deviations for several victim variables appear in Table 1.

3.2. Bivariate correlations

Victim variables. We examined the extent to which forgiveness dimensions (benevolence, avoidance, and revenge) were related to attributions and state empathy experienced by female participants. Correlations between forgiveness and victim variables appear in Table 2. Empathy was correlated positively with benevolence and negatively with avoidance and revenge. Women who felt more empathic toward their abusive spouses were more forgiving toward them. Contrary to predictions, attributing blame to one's partner for abuse was not significantly correlated with any forgiveness dimensions.

Forgiveness was related to several victim personality variables (see Table 2). Empathic concern was related positively to benevolence and negatively to avoidance and revenge. Perspective taking was positively related to benevolence. Religiousness was also related to forgiveness in different ways. Religious interest was positively related to benevolence and negatively to revenge, whereas religious participation was negatively related to avoidance and revenge. In individuals who reported at least a moderate interest in religion (Religious Interest = 4 or higher on a 1–9 scale), those with higher Extrinsic religious orientation reported more revenge, and those with higher Quest orientation felt more avoidance and revenge toward their abusive partner.

Table 2
Correlations between Forgiveness and Victim Variables

Scale	Benevolence	Avoidance	Revenge
Attributions	.13 (109)	.13 (110)	.03 (110)
State Empathy	.52 *** (97)	−.27 ** (99)	−.20 * (99)
Empathic Concern	.43 *** (105)	−.26 ** (108)	−.37 *** (108)
Perspective Taking	.44 *** (105)	−.14 (108)	−.18 (108)
Religious Interest	.30 *** (121)	−.16 (122)	−.31 *** (122)
Religious Participation	.10 (124)	−.19 * (125)	−.34 *** (125)
Intrinsic	.17 (102)	−.04 (103)	−.11 (103)
Extrinsic	−.04 (102)	.06 (103)	.21 * (103)
Quest	−.11 (88)	.29 ** (89)	.38 *** (89)

Note. Sample sizes appear in parentheses. Correlations for Intrinsic, Extrinsic and Quest scales are selected for Religious Interest \geqslant Moderate (4).

* $p < .05$.

** $p < .01$.

*** $p < .001$.

Offender variables. Correlations between offender variables and victim forgiveness appear in Table 3. Victims were less forgiving toward offenders with psychological problems, but more forgiving toward offenders with dominant personalities. For example, benevolence was related

Table 3
Correlations between Forgiveness and Offender Variables

	Benevolence	Avoidance	Revenge
Somatic Complaints	−.11(63)	.09(64)	.12(64)
Anxiety	−.19(63)	.40 **(64)	.33 **(64)
Anxiety-Related Disorders	−.08(63)	.30 *(64)	.22(64)
Depression	−.33 **(63)	.45 *** (64)	.31 *(64)
Mania	.04(63)	.03(64)	.08(64)
Paranoia	−.31 *(63)	.46 *** (64)	.40 **(64)
Schizophrenia	−.32 *(63)	.43 *** (64)	.35 **(64)
Borderline	−.09(63)	.26 *(64)	.12(64)
Antisocial	−.06(63)	.15(64)	.25 *(64)
Alcohol Problems	−.02(63)	.14(64)	.16(64)
Drug Problems	−.19(63)	.27 *(64)	.28 *(64)
Aggression	.11(63)	−.02(64)	.08(64)
Suicidal Ideation	−.23(63)	.41 **(64)	.36 **(64)
Stress	−.09(58)	.45 *** (59)	.31 *(59)
Nonsupport	−.25 *(63)	.30 *(64)	.15(64)
Treatment Rejection	.12 (63)	−.39 **(64)	−.27 *(64)
Dominance	.39 **(63)	−.29 *(64)	−.26 *(64)
Warmth	.11 (63)	−.19 (64)	−.10 (64)

Note. Sample sizes appear in parentheses.

* $p < .05$.

** $p < .01$.

*** $p < .001$.

negatively and avoidance and revenge positively to depression, paranoia, and schizophrenia. Additionally, avoidance and revenge were positively related to anxiety, drug problems, suicidal ideation and stress. In contrast, dominance in offenders was associated positively with benevolence and negatively with avoidance and revenge in victims.

3.3. Empathy as a mediator between forgiveness and offender variables

Empathy was tested as a mediator, following Baron and Kenny's (1986) recommendations. For each relationship, we computed three regression equations: the mediator regressed on the independent variable, the dependent variable regressed on the independent variable, and both the dependent and independent variables regressed on the mediator. Because attributions were not related to forgiveness, mediational tests for attributions were not conducted.

Regression analyses indicated that empathy was significantly related to depression ($R^2 = .11$, $F[1, 48] = 5.92$, $p < .05$), paranoia ($R^2 = .08$, $F[1, 48] = 4.07$, $p < .05$), drug problems ($R^2 = .08$, $F[1, 48] = 4.19$, $p < .05$), suicidal ideation ($R^2 = .08$, $F[1, 48] = 4.03$, $p = .05$), and nonsupport ($R^2 = .21$, $F[1, 48] = 12.61$, $p < .01$). Sobel tests indicated that empathy mediated the effects of depression ($z = -2.18$, $p < .05$) and nonsupport ($z = -2.76$, $p < .01$) on benevolence, but failed to mediate the relationship between drug problems and benevolence ($z = 1.44$, $p = .15$). Empathy partially mediated the relationship between paranoia and benevolence ($z = -1.86$, $p = .06$). Empathy did not mediate the effects of any variables on avoidance ($zs < 1.45$, $ps > .15$) or revenge ($zs < 1.00$, $ps > .31$).

Offender dominance was also significantly associated with empathy ($R^2 = .16$, $F(1, 48) = 8.92$, $p < .01$). When both empathy ($\beta = .56$, $p < .001$) and dominance ($\beta = .13$, $p = .30$) were regressed on benevolence, dominance was unrelated to benevolence ($R^2 = .39$, $F(2, 45) = 14.61$, $p < .001$). A Sobel test indicated that empathy mediated this relationship ($z = 2.48$, $p < .05$). When both empathy ($\beta = -.30$, $p = .05$) and dominance ($\beta = -.10$, $p = .49$) were regressed on avoidance, dominance was unrelated to avoidance. A Sobel test indicated that empathy partially mediated the relationship between dominance and avoidance ($z = -1.65$, $p < .10$). Empathy did not mediate the relationship between dominance and revenge ($z = -1.17$, $p = .24$).

4. Discussion

Personality characteristics and psychological problems in the offender predicted forgiveness by the victim for intimate partner violence. Victims were more forgiving toward offenders with dominant personalities, and less forgiving toward offenders with psychological problems such as depression, schizophrenia, or drug problems. Empathy mediated many of these relationships, especially with the forgiveness dimension of benevolence.

Although it is not possible to determine causality in the present study, we suggest that offender personality affected empathy in victims, which affected forgiveness. There are at least two subtypes of individuals who commit intimate partner violence, and these subtypes may elicit different reactions from victims. The dominant, controlling individual is calculating in his abuse. This type of offender has been referred to as antisocial (Holtzworth-Munroe & Stuart, 1994) and/or proactive (Chase, O'Leary, & Heyman, 2001). They tend to be more involved in criminal activity and exhi-

bit more antisocial/narcissistic personality characteristics compared to other abusers. They are also more adept at manipulating their wives' emotions in laboratory interactions (Gottman et al., 1995). This more charismatic offender may therefore be better able to convince victims to empathize with and forgive him. In contrast, the impulsive, explosively aggressive individual often has other psychological problems along with intimate partner violence. This type of offender has been referred to as borderline/dysphoric (Holtzworth-Munroe & Stuart, 1994) or reactive (Chase et al., 2001). Their violence is predominately focused within the family. They are typically psychologically distressed, depressed, emotionally volatile, show borderline or schizotypal personality characteristics and have problems with substance abuse. These individuals tend to lose emotional control in laboratory interactions with their wives, and their relationships have a higher rate of divorce compared to those of dominant offenders (Gottman et al., 1995). Because these less manipulative individuals are functioning worse psychologically, it may be more difficult for women to empathize with and forgive them.

In support of these speculations, offender dominance was negatively correlated with anxiety ($r = -.34, p < .01$), depression ($r = -.38, p < .01$), schizophrenia ($r = -.28, p < .05$), suicidal ideation ($r = -.26, p < .05$), and nonsupport ($r = -.38, p < .01$). Additionally, victim empathy was related positively to offender dominance ($r = .40, p < .01$), but negatively to depression ($r = -.33, p < .05$), paranoia ($r = -.28, p < .05$), drug problems ($r = -.28, p < .05$), suicidal ideation ($r = -.28, p = .05$), and nonsupport ($r = -.46, p < .01$). Thus, it seems the women in our sample had more empathy for dominant than impulsive abusers. It is also possible, however, that women with more empathic and forgiving personalities may be attracted to more dominant men. Regardless of the causal direction, these data illustrate a vicious cycle between dominant batterers who continually elicit empathy from forgiving women, raising the possibility of tolerance for sustained abuse.

This information may be useful to clinicians treating couples for intimate partner violence. The data suggest that forgiveness is in part affected by the etiology of the husband's aggression. If clinicians are aware of the type of aggression displayed by abusers, they might better understand potential motivating factors related to forgiveness in spouses. Clinicians may help partners of dominant abusers think more critically about forgiveness, which may be influenced more by partners' charismatic personality rather than by any mitigation of abuse. Clinicians might also use this data to help partners of impulsive abusers, who may be hesitant to forgive given the abuser's wide range of problems without realizing that impulsive abusers are more likely than dominant abusers to respond to treatment (Barratt, Stanford, Felthous, & Kent, 1997; Houston & Stanford, 2006).

Contrary to predictions, attributions for abuse were unrelated to forgiveness. Other forgiveness studies that examined both empathy and attributions have found a similar lack of effects for attributions (McCullough et al., 2003). We conceptualized attributions differently from other intimate partner violence studies. Whereas Katz et al. (1997) examined self-attributions for abuse and Gordon et al. (2004) examined malicious partner attributions, we looked more generally at attributional internality. It may be that at this general level, attributions are unrelated to forgiveness, but at more specific levels attribution may facilitate forgiveness for abuse. Differences in sample composition may also explain our lack of attribution effects. Other research on forgiveness for partner violence utilized undergraduates (Katz et al., 1997) or women in shelters (Gordon et al., 2004). The current sample was women who experienced intimate partner violence but likely

were still with their abusive partner. Further research is needed to ascertain variables that may moderate the relationship between attributions for intimate partner violence and forgiveness.

The association between religion and forgiveness depended on the dimension of religiousness: Religious interest and participation were associated positively, and quest and extrinsic religious orientations negatively with forgiveness. These differences likely reflected the fact that individuals with higher religious involvement are more likely to conform to religious norms, including norms valuing forgiveness. Religious interest and participation are likely positively correlated with religious involvement, whereas quest and extrinsic religious orientations are related to independence from religious doctrine (Batson et al., 1993; Burris, Jackson, Tarpley, & Smith, 1996).

4.1. Limitations and future directions

Similar to much research in both forgiveness and intimate partner violence (e.g., Strube, 1988) the present study used self-report measures, which are prone to social desirability effects. Social desirability may be particularly strong in the context of an intervention program. Women may have portrayed themselves as more forgiving, believing this would protect their partners from further legal punishment.

It is also important to emphasize the cross-sectional nature of the present data. When conceptualizing forgiveness in terms of prosocial change, longitudinal rather than cross-sectional designs are preferred to better capture the temporal dynamics of forgiveness (e.g., McCullough et al., 2003). Longitudinal studies might lend additional support to the role of empathy and offender characteristics in forgiveness for abuse, and may better uncover causal relationships between variables.

These results point to the importance of examining both offender and victim variables in forgiveness. Although forgiveness is often conceptualized as intrapersonal (Freedman, 1998), it is also inherently *interpersonal* (Fincham, 2000): the need for forgiveness arises because of an interpersonal transgression, and forgiveness is often communicated between individuals. Therefore, interventions would do well to treat the *relationship* between victim and offender, rather than treating them in isolation. Whether or not forgiveness is appropriate in the particular context, both relationship partners need to be addressed to best respond to intimate partner violence.

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