Forgiveness at Work, Forgiveness at Home?

Testing the Context-Dependence of Forgiveness-Related Attitudes and Values

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Abstract

Research and theory on forgiveness in the workplace draws considerably on results from the study of close relationships. This paper considers whether forgiveness-related attitudes and perceptions systematically differ in the home versus workplace contexts. Previous work suggests that people may see forgiveness as less appropriate to express at work than at home, and that they may adjust their values or attitudes relating to forgiveness depending on whether the transgression is personal or professional. It is important to understand whether context shapes forgiveness, because it speaks to the appropriateness of generalizing from theory and research in close relationships when studying forgiveness in organizations. Across three studies ($n=944$), we experimentally manipulate context (work versus home), and test its effect on forgiveness, the forgivingness of self and others, attitudes toward forgiveness, the perceived riskiness of forgiveness, the willingness to forgive unconditionally, sources of forgiveness aversion, and reactions to others' forgiveness. In each case, we find no evidence to suggest that forgiveness-related attitudes differ substantively between the home and workplace contexts. We conclude by discussing the implications of this finding for forgiveness as an interdisciplinary topic of study.

Keywords: Forgiveness; forgivingness; close relationships; positive organizational psychology

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Forgiveness describes a transformation in motives that can occur after an interpersonal transgression. When we forgive, we abandon vengeance and avoidance, and turn toward a restoration of benevolence. Such transformations have benefits for individual health and well-being (Lawler et al., 2005; Witvliet, Ludwig, & Laan, 2001).

About a decade ago, Aquino and Thau (2009:732) reported that they “... could not find one published empirical study that explicitly examined forgiveness in the context of workplace victimization”. Since that time, researchers have made substantial leaps forward in considering how forgiveness might enhance organizational processes and performance. In particular, forgiveness has been found to enhance creativity (Fehr, 2010), buffer the negative effects of downsizing (Bright, Cameron, & Caza, 2006), improve productivity (Toussaint et al., 2016), improve organizational learning and job satisfaction (Guchait, Lanza-Abbott, Madera, & Dawson, 2016), and protect employees from the negative effects of workplace stressors (Costa & Neves, 2017). Management scholars have also speculated optimistically about the potential of forgiveness to enhance commitment, extra-role behavior (Fehr & Gelfand, 2012) and leadership effectiveness (Caldwell & Dixon, 2010).

But though the literature on forgiveness in organizations has progressed in the past decade, the bulk of the literature on the topic is found outside of organizational contexts. Of the 3,091 results found on Web of Science for *forgiv**, for instance, fewer than 2% are published in management journals. Our insights into the dynamics of forgiveness in organizations are largely

informed by results from studies conducted *outside* of organizations—most often, from the study of close relationships. Though some employees may claim to be ‘married to their jobs’, we should approach with skepticism the idea that forgiveness dynamics are necessarily similar between spouses versus between coworkers. Forgiving a coworker, for instance, may seem riskier, more aversive, or harder than forgiving a loved one. Or, perhaps, forgiving close others is harder than forgiving at work. But in either case, claims to generalizability from close relationships to organizational relationships merit scrutiny.

While values (like forgivingness) are often assumed to be invariant across situations, some evidence suggests that the hierarchy of values can be reordered by assumptions and situations that are context-specific. Work on “situational values” shows that people often rank their values differently with regard to their work versus home contexts (Chusmir & Parker, 1991). And, individual attitudes are known to be subject to context-induced changes (Bodenhausen & Gawronski, 2013), suggesting that attitudes toward forgiveness might vary between the work and home contexts. And finally, more broadly, values often poorly correspond with actual behaviors (e.g., Maio, Olson, Allen, & Bernard, 2001). Taken together, there is a case to be made that contextual differences between the home and the workplace might lead to markedly different values, attitudes and behaviors related to forgiveness in each context.

In this paper, we investigate whether forgiveness is a “situational value”, and by extension, help to clarify how applicable insights from close relationships might be to the study of forgiveness in the workplace. We describe three empirical tests in which participants are asked about their forgivingness, a range of attitudes toward forgiveness, their enacted forgiveness for transgressions, the forgivingness of others in their surroundings, and their reactions to observed forgiveness. In each study, we randomly assign participants to answer

these questions with respect to either their home life (with friends, family and loved ones) or to their workplace (with colleagues and coworkers). Overall, we do not find evidence to suggest substantial differences in how people prioritize, resist, hold attitudes toward, or enact forgiveness between work and home. This is not the final word on the topic, and in our discussion, we suggest avenues for considering more nuanced distinctions between forgiveness at home and at work. However, we conclude from our data that there appears to be no reason for management researchers to avoid or worry about “importing” theory and empirical insights from the study of close relationships to the organizational context.

Forgiveness as a situational value

In a nationally representative survey of Americans, a majority agreed that people are generally forgiving, and that more forgiveness is needed in their personal lives and in their communities. However, the same respondents frequently described forgiveness as a value that was less appropriate in the workplace environment, citing a range of obstacles, chief among them that “the workplace is not the setting” for forgiveness (Fetzer Institute, 2010). Their intuition matches some early empirical evidence. In a direct comparison of home and work values, Chusmir and Parker (1991) found that individuals chose forgiveness as their sixth most important ‘home’ (nonwork) value, but as their second-least important workplace value. Business students come to abandon forgiveness as a personal value over the course of their studies more readily than do students in other fields of study (Petrof, Sayegh, & Vlahopoulos, 1982). Though the research is preliminary, there are indications that people may think of forgiveness as a virtue best suited to relationships with friends and family members, rather than coworkers.

Values tend to be described as stable. We integrate them into our identity, and as a result, carry them with us from situation to situation (Hitlin, 2003; Hitlin & Piliavin, 2004). So, if one values forgiveness at home, one also ought to value forgiveness in the workplace. But there is evidence that our values may be contextually-activated. Hoffman (2003) describes employees as operating at the boundary of multiple value systems, simultaneously endorsing professional values and personal ones. While one might think that employees would exert considerable energy trying to reconcile or synthesize these value systems, evidence from social psychology suggests that values are treated as truisms—rarely considered or questioned (Maio & Olson, 1998). We may therefore hold multiple potentially competing values, and those values may be activated or reordered in their hierarchy by situational factors.

Prior research suggests that different contexts can activate different value schemas (Seligman & Katz, 1996; Shah, Domke, & Wackman, 1996). For example, Daniel, Schiefer and Knafo (2012) found that students prioritized certain values (for instance, conformity) when interacting in an ethnic context, but not in an academic context. Chusmir and Parker (1991) show situational (work-home) differences in a wide variety of personal values. The cues, labels, and material environment associated with business can increase the salience and accessibility of competition and self-interest (Kay, Wheeler, Bargh, & Ross, 2004; Liberman, Samuels, & Ross, 2004).

It is possible that the home context activates a different set of values than the work context. The assumed competitiveness of workplace contexts may make people more attuned to the risk of being a ‘doormat’, prone to repeated, undeterred offenses (Luchies et al., 2013). They might resist forgiveness as a way of pursuing security as a personal value (rather than seeing forgiveness as a way of pursuing the values of compassion or care). In short, the research

question we pursue in this paper is whether the simple fact of context—one's personal life versus one's workplace—is sufficient to change values, attitudes and behaviors related to forgiveness.

In our three studies, we test this question, focusing on how the home versus work context shapes, or does not shape, forgiveness for transgressions, forgivingness as a personal trait or value, attitudes toward forgiveness, concerns about the risk of forgiveness, forgiveness aversion, reactions to others' forgiveness, and the perceived forgivingness of others.

Why context-dependence matters

Thus far, we have crafted an argument about why forgiveness and forgiveness-related attitudes might vary systematically between home and work contexts. However, the broader question is why this matters to those who study management and industrial-organizational psychology. We propose that the comparison of forgiveness attitudes in home versus work contexts is illuminating for our field in two ways.

First, it is important to the stability of the foundation on which our field has built its theories and empirical studies. As one recent example, Thompson and Korsgaard (2018) develop and test a theory of forgiveness' role in relational resilience in the workplace. Each of the hypotheses in their research draws on studies of forgiveness in home contexts. They ground their predictions in studies of transgressions in romantic relationships, in friendships, and among family members (McCullough, Fincham, & Tsang, 2003; Ysseldyk & Wohl, 2012), experiences of home burglary (Witvliet et al., 2001), and negative partner behaviors in newlywed couples (Finkennauer, Wijngaards-De Meij, Reis, & Rusbult, 2010). Their study is not unique in this regard. It is a natural consequence of the fact that the majority of empirical work on forgiveness has been conducted in non-organizational contexts. If forgiveness and forgiveness-related

attitudes are broadly comparable between work and non-work contexts, our field's application of this literature is an example of rich, productive interdisciplinarity. But if these attitudes differ markedly by context, this reliance on research from non-work contexts may be grounds for concern, and researchers may need to draw more cautiously from work across disciplinary boundaries when building theory about forgiveness in organizations. Whether such differences exist is not yet clear. In other areas where organizational psychology has drawn on theory and evidence from close relationships, there are instances where findings from professional and personal contexts diverge. For example, anxious attachment, which increases helping in romantic relationships, reduces it in workplace relationships. This suggests contextual limits to the generalizability of attachment theory from the study of intimate relationships (Geller & Bamberger, 2009). It is important to carefully scrutinize fields of study, like forgiveness, where we similarly borrow from research in close relationships.

A second reason this comparison is needed is that we know very little about the prevalence of forgiveness at work versus at home. Aquino and colleagues speculate that workplace forgiveness may have "... a relatively low baseline relative to revenge" (Aquino, Grover, Goldman, & Folger, 2003: 214). This assumption that workplace forgiveness is a low base-rate phenomenon has guided some recent research in the area: Barclay and Saldanha (2016: 709), for example, describe the need for forgiveness-promoting interventions in the workplace because of a "... tendency for individuals to overlook forgiveness as a possibility or deemphasize the value of forgiveness in organizations". Stone describes organizations across cultures as having "built in structures to avoid the practice of forgiveness" (Stone, 2002: 278-279), and argues that workplaces offer "very few examples or role models" of forgiveness (Stone, 2002: 282). If employees in organizations do in fact have far lower base rates of forgiveness, or far

more skeptical attitudes toward forgiveness, than individuals in their home lives, it changes the task ahead for forgiveness researchers. This is the empirical question that guides our studies.

Study 1

In our first study, with a sample of American adults, we employed an experimental design where participants were randomly assigned to answer questions related to forgiveness in the context of their working lives (with coworkers and colleagues), or in their home lives (with friends and family members). Specific to the assigned context, we asked participants about their forgiveness of a recent transgression, about their general forgivingness, their attitudes toward forgiveness, the forgivingness of others in their social networks, and the perceived riskiness of forgiveness.

Although we could have directly compared attitudes *within* participants (asking them about both contexts), such an approach would have been vulnerable to bias, either from contrast effects (leading to exaggerated differences between contexts), or from consistency-seeking (leading to underreported differences between contexts). Our experimental design avoids these sources of bias by using a between-subjects approach.

Participants

We recruited 200 American adults who were members of Crowdfunder (now called ‘Figure Eight’; www.figureeight.com). Crowdfunder is a crowdsourcing service similar to Amazon Mechanical Turk (AMT), but with a membership base that has little overlap with other crowdsourcing services, and whose membership is more diverse than AMT’s (Peer, Brandimarte, Samat, & Acquisti, 2017). We received complete responses from 168 participants

and removed 46 for blank or unintelligible responses (e.g. “keyboard leaners”, non-English responses, etc.). Our final sample included responses from 122 participants. Participants ranged from 23 to 77 years of age ($M=44.6$ years, $SD=13.06$), and 58% of participants were male.

Manipulation

We randomly assigned participants to context. Participants either responded about “coworkers or people you work with” and “your workplace” (work context), or “friends and family members” and “your personal life” (home context). In each of the measures described below, this context was repeated in the preamble or question text, to ensure that participants were responding with specific reference to the assigned context throughout the study.

Measures

We measured a battery of forgiveness-related attitudes, values, dispositions and behaviors, using, where available, previously validated scales. It was our intention to ensure comprehensive coverage of the conceptual space around forgiveness, to ensure that our findings were not limited to (for example) attitudes alone, or dispositions alone.

Attitudes toward forgiveness. We measured participants’ context-specific pro-forgiveness attitudes using the Attitudes Toward Forgiveness scale (Brown, 2003), which captures the belief that forgiveness is a virtuous, desirable act. A sample item reads, “I believe that forgiveness is an important virtue in my [*workplace* | *personal life*]”. The six-item scale exhibited poor reliability ($\alpha=.58$). We conducted a factor analysis on the scale, using maximum likelihood extraction and oblique (direct quartimin) rotation. A two-factor solution emerged, with 60% of variance represented in the two factors. The factors were clearly interpretable: The first factor represented

the negatively-worded (anti-revenge) items, while the second factor represented the positively-worded (pro-forgiveness) items. These two three-item subscales, when used separately, each exhibited acceptable reliability ($\alpha_{\text{pro-forgiveness}}=.82$; $\alpha_{\text{anti-revenge}}=.75$).

Forgivingness. We measured participants' general proneness to forgive using a context-adapted version of Berry and colleagues' Trait Forgivingness Scale (Berry, Worthington Jr, O'Connor, Parrott III, & Wade, 2005). The scale, comprised of ten items ($\alpha=.73$), captures the dispositional tendency to forgive with questions like "If someone in my [*workplace* | *personal life*] treats me badly, I treat him or her the same" (reverse-coded). We also used the Tendency to Forgive (TTF) scale, a four-item measure of dispositional forgiveness focused on harbouring versus letting go of grudges (Brown, 2003). However, the reliability was not acceptable ($\alpha=.55$), and thus we chose to use the better-performing TFS as our operationalization of dispositional forgivingness.

State forgiveness. Consistent with McCullough (2001), we measured state forgiveness as a suite of motivational changes, away from revenge and avoidance, and toward the restoration of benevolence. We began by eliciting participants' most recent instance of being hurt, offended, or betrayed (depending on experimental condition, either in the workplace or in their personal lives). Participants rated the characteristics of the transgression, including its type (a breach related to ability, benevolence, or integrity), and its severity and intentionality. They described retrospectively how close they were prior to the breach, and who had more power in the relationship prior to the breach. They also indicated the recency of the breach (from decades ago to hours ago). We then had participants, considering this transgression, report their forgiveness using the TRIM-18 scale, a validated and widely-used measure of forgiveness (McCullough, Root, & Cohen, 2006) consisting of eighteen items measuring revenge motives (reversed),

avoidance motives (reversed), and benevolence motives ($\alpha=.92$). A sample question reads, “even though his/her actions hurt me, I have goodwill for him/her.”

Peer forgivingness. The context of work may shape not only individuals’ own forgivingness and forgiveness, but also (or instead) their perceptions of how forgiving *others* are. In short, the behaviors of others with whom we are interdependent may shape the degree to which forgivingness is seen as a norm (Fehr & Gelfand, 2012). To capture this, we asked participants to list (using initials) the eight people they interacted with most frequently in (depending on condition) their work life or their home life. We then asked them to rate each of those eight peers’ forgivingness using the Forgiveness Single Item measure (FSI; Worthington et al., 2000), adapted to reflect the peer’s forgivingness in general when transgressed against. These ratings were aggregated into a measure of peer-network forgivingness ($\alpha=.89$). In addition, participants rated their closeness to each listed person, and their frequency of interaction with each person, using single-item questions from Morrison (2002).

Riskiness of forgiving. It may be that forgiveness dispositions, attitudes and behaviors do not vary systematically between home and work contexts, but rather that the perceived riskiness of forgiveness differs between the contexts. In order to test this possibility, participants were asked (with reference to their randomly assigned context, personal or professional), to write open-ended responses describing the reactions from others, benefits, and risks or costs associated with forgiving other people in their personal life (or their work life). Following this guided deliberation about the risks and benefits, we asked participants about their perception of the balance of risks and benefits of forgiveness (at either work or home), rating it from costly (1, “many more costs than benefits”) to beneficial (6, “many more benefits than costs”).

Religiosity. Given that religiosity is associated with both state and trait forgiveness (Davis, Worthington, Hook, & Hill, 2013), we measured it as a control variable to be able to guard against the possibility that there are contextual differences between work and home that are masked by the uniformly high forgivingness of those high in religiosity. We measured religiosity with the General Social Survey religious attendance question (previously used as a measure of religiosity by Wuthnow, 2002).

Results

We found that anti-revenge attitudes (ATF-AR), forgivingness (TFS), and state forgiveness (TRIM-18) were all non-redundant but strongly correlated ($r_s=.45$ to $.74$). We therefore tested the effect of our experimental manipulation on these three dependent variables in a multivariate analysis of variance, and tested the other, less highly correlated, variables using independent-samples t -tests. The latter variables included pro-forgiveness attitudes (ATF-PF), forgivingness of peers, and the balance of costs and rewards associated with forgiveness.

In our multivariate analysis of variance, we found that the context (work versus home) had no significant effect on the dependent variables (Wilks' $\lambda=.98$; $F(3,118)=.64$, $p=.59$). There were also no univariate effects on any of the individual dependent variables (F 's ranged from $.29$ to 1.20 , p 's $.28$ to $.59$).

The forgivingness of participants' eight closest peers was tested using an independent-samples t -test. We found no significant difference in the perceptions of peers' forgivingness between participants asked about their coworkers, and participants asked about their friends and family, nor did we find any significant difference in the variance in each condition; $t(118)=.73$, $p=.68$. We found that participants' peers in their personal lives were rated as significantly closer,

on average ($M=2.71$, $SD=.91$), than their peers in the workplace ($M=2.31$, $SD=.80$), $t(116)=2.25$, $p=.01$. So, to test for contextual effects controlling for closeness as a potential confound, we ran a linear regression, entering closeness in the first step, then adding a dummy-coded variable representing the contextual manipulation. We found that context was still not predictive of peers' perceived forgivingness when controlling for closeness, $B=.11$, $SE=.20$, $p=.59$.

We also found no effects of work-versus-home context on pro-forgiveness attitudes (ATF-PF), with a mean difference of 0.04 points on a 7-point scale; $t(119)=.16$, $p=.87$. Similarly, there was no context effect on the balance of costs versus rewards of forgiveness: Those thinking about their workplace rated the benefits of forgiveness no higher ($M=3.41$, $SD=1.24$) than those thinking about their personal life ($M=3.14$, $SD=1.37$); $t(120)=-1.14$, $p=.26$.

To ensure that there were no contextual effects that were being masked or suppressed by religiosity, we reran the analyses, adding religiosity as a covariate. In the MANCOVA analysis, religiosity had a significant multivariate effect on the dependent variables (Wilks' $\lambda = .82$; $F(3,117)=8.49$, $p<.001$), and was positively associated with each of the three univariate forgiveness-related variables. However, the multivariate effect of home versus work context remained nonsignificant (Wilks' $\lambda = .98$; $F(3,117)=.68$, $p=.57$). We also reran the test of the effect on peer forgivingness. We tested the partial correlation between the (dummy) context variable and peer forgivingness, the balance of costs and rewards, and pro-forgiveness ATFs, controlling for religiosity. Each correlation was non-significant: $r_{\text{peer}}=-.06$, $p=.53$; $r_{\text{rewards}}=.12$, $p=.19$; $r_{\text{ATF-PF}}=.00$, $p=.96$.

Discussion

Though some previous work suggests that forgiveness may be a situational value, endorsed and enacted less in the workplace than in close relationships, our first study finds no support for this perspective. Across a range of forgiveness-related constructs (attitudes, dispositions, motives, perceptions of peer attitudes), we found no differences between the endorsement or enactment of forgiveness at work versus at home. There are, of course, factors influencing forgiveness that are uniquely organizational (e.g. leadership; see Fehr & Gelfand, 2012, for a broader list). However, our null result is promising for the integration of interdisciplinary insights around forgiveness. It provides no evidence to suggest that forgiveness is somehow markedly different in organizational life than in personal relationships.

Our finding raises the question of the role of null results in advancing knowledge (Landis & Rogelberg, 2013). As Landis and colleagues note, the interpretability and importance of null results are strongly methods-bound: We do not want to draw theoretical conclusions from null findings that are easily attributed to “measures with poor reliability, [inappropriate] research designs, low statistical power, and a litany of other methodological flaws” (Landis, James, Lance, Pierce, & Rogelberg, 2014). Overall, our first study is adequately powered (and, given the minute mean differences, any of these differences would be *practically* trivial even if they crossed the threshold of significance in a more highly powered study). Our experimental design improves on prior work-home value comparisons (Chusmir & Parker, 1991), which suffer from the potential for contrast effects from direct comparisons within subjects. And, with an exception that we discuss next and address in Study 2, we used a range of well-validated, reliable measures that tap different dimensions of forgiveness.

One exception to our use of previously-established measures was our approach to measuring the riskiness or benefits of forgiving in each context. We had participants reflect on

the responses from others, risks, and benefits of forgiving in their work (or home) lives, then asked them using a single-item, 6-point measure whether, on balance, forgiveness had more benefits than costs or vice versa. While we feel this measure has reasonable face validity, it may not fully reflect differences in how people deliberate about the risks and benefits of forgiveness at work. In Study 2, therefore, we turn to better established ways of understanding the degree to which forgiveness might be offered with greater restrictions, or seen as riskier, in the workplace context. In particular, we use measures of forgiveness aversion and conditionality.

Study 2

In our second study, using the same experimental approach, we broaden our scope to consider two pertinent forgiveness-related variables not directly considered in the first study. We expand our consideration of the risks and costs of forgiveness, and also consider the nature of the forgiveness offered (i.e., whether it is offered unconditionally, or contingent on amends, apologies, and other transgressor-initiated efforts at repair).

Participants

We recruited 200 American adults from Crowdfunder. We used Crowdfunder's "level two" contributors (crowdworkers with higher approval rates, with the aim of reducing the number of inattentive or automated responses that had to be screened out in Study 1). We ended up with a final sample slightly larger than our recruitment target ($n=203$), and did not need to remove any participants for "keyboard leaning" or non-English open-ended comments. Participants ranged from 18 to 64 years of age ($M=37.8$ years, $SD=10.84$), and 54% of participants were male.

Manipulation

The same manipulation was used as in Study 1. Participants were randomly assigned to either answer questions about their work context (“your coworkers”; “your workplace”) or their home context (“your friends and family”; “your personal life”). This context was presented both prior to the questions and in the text of the questions themselves.

Measures

Forgiveness aversion. Forgiveness aversion describes a multidimensional motivational state. It captures factors that might inhibit the willingness to forgive, or concerns about the risks of forgiving, including self-protection (whether they will be reexploited if they choose to forgive), unreadiness (concerns that forgiveness may be too difficult), or face concerns (that others will perceive them unfavourably for forgiving). We adapted Williamson and colleagues’ offense-specific measure to capture general concerns about forgiving in the wake of transgressions (Williamson, Gonzales, Fernandez, & Williams, 2014). The adapted 8-item scale asked participants to think about their sources of reluctance about forgiving coworkers (friends and family) who hurt, offended, or wronged them in the workplace (in their personal lives). An example item reads, “I would worry that [*coworkers* | *friends and family*] who hurt me may think that forgiveness gives them permission to do it again.” The scale exhibited acceptable reliability ($\alpha=.75$).

Unconditional forgiveness. We measured the willingness to provide unconditional forgiveness. Our first study looked only at forgiveness as a motivational transformation, but failed to consider whether forgiveness was offered in a more limited set of circumstances in the

work context versus the home context. We followed Exline and colleagues (Exline, Baumeister, Bushman, Campbell, & Finkel, 2004) in their approach to measuring unconditional forgiveness. They asked whether participants favoured forgiveness, for instance, “only if the offender apologizes”. Their other items, however, were more general (e.g. “only in certain conditions”; “only in certain types of relationships”). We adapted this approach by asking participants to think about being betrayed in their workplace (or their personal life), and whether they would forgive without the transgressor (1) expressing apology, (2) making promises for the future, (3) receiving punishment, (4) offering amends, (5) expressing regret, (6) providing explanations, and (7) accepting responsibility. These capture a range of transgressor strategies for post-transgression repair (see Lewicki, Polin, & Lount, 2016; Tomlinson & Meyer, 2009; Tucker, Turner, Barling, Reid, & Elving, 2006). Maximum-likelihood factor analysis with oblique rotation (direct quartimin) extracted a single factor (eigenvalue=3.92; 56% of variance). The scale exhibited acceptable reliability ($\alpha=.90$).

Results

Since aversion and the willingness to unconditionally forgive were significantly correlated ($r=-.44, p<.001$), we conducted a multivariate analysis of variance to test the effect of our context manipulation on both attitudes. We found no multivariate effect; Wilks' $\lambda = .99$; $F(2,199)=1.11, p=.33$. There was no univariate effect of work versus home on either forgiveness aversion ($F(1,200)=2.14, p=.15$) or on the willingness to engage in unconditional forgiveness ($F(1,200)=.13, p=.71$). Like Study 1, our findings suggest that attitudes about forgiveness (in this case, its averseness or the appropriateness of forgiveness without transgressor-initiated repair)

are not significantly influenced by thinking about the context of workplace transgressions versus transgressions in personal relationships.

Discussion

Our second study again provides no evidence suggestive of a distinction in forgiveness-related judgements in the workplace versus the home. However, thus far, our two studies have focused on the perspective of the forgiving party (their forgivingness, their forgiveness for transgressions, their attitudes about forgiveness, their perceived risks in forgiving). It may be that while people approach forgiveness in consistent ways in the workplace and in their personal lives, they respond differently to observed forgiveness in the workplace versus home contexts.

In particular, given evidence that (at least in romantic relationships) forgiveness influences third parties' judgments of victims' warmth and competence (DiDonato, McIlwee, & Carlucci, 2014), we focus on how the social context (workplace versus personal life) might shape how forgiving victims are seen by others. This possibility is explored in Study 3.

Study 3

In our third study, we turn from the perspective of the victim to the perspective of third-party observers. A growing body of research has focused on the importance of observers and witnesses to interpersonal transgressions, both in the workplace (Mitchell, Vogel, & Folger, 2015; O'Reilly & Aquino, 2011; Reich & Hershcovis, 2015) and in close relationships (DiDonato et al., 2014; Eaton & Sanders, 2012; Green, Burnette, & Davis, 2008). While, thus far, we have found remarkable consistency in forgiveness and forgiveness-related attitudes

across contexts, there may be differences in how forgiveness is received by observers in the workplace versus personal contexts.

In particular, we focus on judgments of warmth and competence, because these account for the majority of variance in global impressions of others (Wojciszke, Bazinska, & Jaworski, 1998), and because the choice to forgive may be consequential for signaling both warmth (e.g., caring, empathy) and competence (e.g., self-protection, prudence), as DiDonato and colleagues show in a study of transgressions in friendships (DiDonato et al., 2014).

Participants

Participants were 631 ‘level 2’ members of Crowdfunder. We sought to recruit 600 participants, but completed above our expected quota. Where Studies 1 and 2 used only American participants, this study was open to participants in six English-speaking countries: Australia (1%), Canada (29%), Ireland (1%), the United Kingdom (23%), the United States (44%), and New Zealand (1%). An additional 1% of participants were recruited from those countries but their country was not recorded. Participants ranged in age from 18 to 73 ($M=38.1$, $SD=11.97$). We retained the data from all participants except those ($n=12$) whose open-ended answers were left blank or were nonsensical (e.g., ‘keyboard leaning, such as “*fgf ug ugyu ugku fty uity*”’). In total, data from 619 participants were retained for analysis.

Design and Manipulations

We used a 2x2x2 experimental design in the context of an imagined transgressor in which the participant was an observer (witness). We manipulated context (asking participants to imagine the transgression occurring to someone they know from work or at home), closeness

(asking participants to choose someone from that context they are either close to or not close to), and the victim's forgiveness (forgiving versus unforgiving victim). We tested the main and interactive effects of these manipulations on participants' perceptions of the victim's warmth and competence.

Context and closeness. We manipulated context and closeness in the instructions provided to participants. We began by asking them to imagine "something happening to someone from your [*personal life* | *workplace*] who you [*know very well* | *do not know very well*]." We gave an example for the assigned target (e.g., "a friend or close family member", "an acquaintance or distant family member", "a coworker you know well or someone you work with very regularly", "a coworker you don't know well, or someone you rarely work with"). Participants entered the initials of their chosen target; those initials were included in the vignette to ensure they were thinking of the right person and situation.

Forgiveness. We manipulated forgiveness in a transgression vignette, in which we asked people to imagine the person they had chosen as the victim, and repeated details of the contextual manipulation to ensure participants were imagining this occurring (depending on condition) in the home or workplace context. The vignette read:

"Imagine that [initials] shared some sensitive information with a [*friend* | *coworker*]. To [initials]'s surprise, the [*friend* | *coworker*] ended up gossiping about what [initials] told them to others. This ended up badly hurting and embarrassing [initials]. [Initials] felt badly betrayed by their [*friend* | *coworker*]. Weeks later, when you ask [initials] about the situation, they tell you that they [*forgave/didn't forgive*] their [*friend* | *coworker*] for what

happened. ‘[I’m still angry about it. It was a betrayal. I just can’t get over it or forgive them. | I’ve stopped being angry about it. I know it was a betrayal, but I got over it and forgave them.]’”

Measures

Social judgments. We first asked participants to respond to an open-ended question asking them what they would think of the victim based on their response (this open-ended question was used to ensure participants were genuine and attentive, as described earlier). We then measured participants’ social judgments of the victim, using a 9-item scale from Fiske, Cuddy, Glick and Xu (2002) Five items ($\alpha=.78$) measured competence, and four items ($\alpha=.88$) measured warmth.

Results

Since (consistent with previous research; DiDonato et al., 2014) judgments of warmth and competence were significantly correlated in our data ($r=.62$), we conducted a MANOVA analysis on the two judgments. Our predictors were our three experimental manipulations: Forgiveness (versus unforgiveness), context (workplace versus home), and closeness (close versus distant victim). This allowed us to test both whether workplace context influenced responses to forgiveness, and whether any such effect was conditioned on relational closeness.

We found that forgiveness had a multivariate effect on warmth and competence judgments, Wilks’ $\lambda = .62$; $F(2,307)=94.88$, $p<.001$. Consistent with prior work (DiDonato et al., 2014) a victim’s forgiveness significantly increased observers’ perceptions of their warmth ($M_{\text{forgiving}}=3.94$, $SD=.85$; $M_{\text{unforgiving}}=2.71$, $SD=.84$); $F(1,308)=164.01$, $p<.001$. We also found

that in our study, observers saw forgiving victims as higher in competence ($M_{\text{forgiving}}=3.36$, $SD=.77$; $M_{\text{unforgiving}}=3.01$, $SD=.75$) $F(1,308)=164.01$, $p<.001$. In short, we found that forgiveness does lead to favourable responses among observers, both in terms of warmth and competence. But our research question is not how people respond to forgiveness, but rather whether their responses to forgiveness are different when it is offered for workplace versus personal transgressions.

To test this question, we examined the interaction term between our forgiveness and workplace-context manipulations. As with our previous studies, we found that responses to forgiveness were not influenced by work-versus-home context; the interaction between forgiveness and context was non-significant; Wilks' $\lambda=1.00$; $F(2,307)=.67$, $p=.52$.

We further examined whether there might be a difference between contexts that was suppressed by closeness. However, the three-way interaction term between our forgiveness, context, and closeness manipulations was also non-significant; Wilks' $\lambda=.99$; $F(2,307)=1.15$, $p=.32$, suggesting that for both close and distant victims, observers do not perceive forgiveness differently when it occurs in a workplace versus a personal setting.

Discussion

In this study, we measured observers' reactions to imagined episodes of forgiveness involving people they knew (closely or distantly). We found that victims who offer forgiveness are seen as both warmer and more competent. But, consistent with our previous studies, we found no evidence to suggest that context influences this response to forgiveness. There were no significant differences in participants' responses to forgiveness when imagining it being offered by coworkers, versus when imagining it being offered by friends or family.

General Discussion

Research and theory about forgiveness in organizations draws liberally on insights from studies of close relationships. As one illustration, Fehr and Gelfand (2012) build a conceptual argument in which organizational forgiveness climates around workplace transgressions will bolster commitment (e.g., in leader-follower relationships). This argument is built drawing heavily on evidence from close relationships, including studies of married couples (Fincham & Beach, 2007), dating couples (Ysseldyk & Wohl, 2012), and college roommates (Terzino & Cross, 2009). In general, research in management fields (e.g. OB, leadership, business ethics, etc.) draws liberally from research in close relationships when developing theory about forgiveness in the workplace.

This may be laudable, of course—an instance of research insights being developed at the intersection of disciplines and subdisciplines. But, it may also represent a risk: Underlying our citations to work in close relationships is a tacit belief that these relationships are reasonable surrogates for the workplace relationships that are the focus of our field.

Given work suggesting that people can hold multiple value systems (Seligman & Katz, 1996), and that the hierarchy of our values can be dynamically reorganized according to context (Chusmir & Parker, 1991), we argue that it is important to directly investigate whether forgiveness is valued differently, expressed to different degrees, responded to differently, or offered with differing levels of reluctance in the workplace and in personal settings. This question speaks to the transferability of insights between related fields in business and psychology. If we were to find substantial differences between contexts in forgiveness,

forgivingness, forgiveness aversion, or other related attitudes, it might give us pause about the degree to which we can generalize from close relationships to organizations. But our null results provide no such evidence suggestive of meaningful contextual effects on forgiveness-related variables (see Table 1 for a summary of these null effects). While null results cannot definitively rule out the possibility of contextual differences in forgiveness attitudes, these provide no evidence to support the perspective of forgiveness as a situational value.

Insert Table 1 about here

If our null results are, in fact, reflective of broad similarities between attitudes toward and expressions of forgiveness between work and nonwork contexts, this does not mean that organizational research on forgiveness is unnecessary. Rather, we see this result as freeing researchers to investigate distinctively *organizational* dimensions of forgiveness—that is, the elements not addressed in studies of close relationships. Bies and colleagues describe these as ‘systems-level’ questions: How, for instance, transgressor and victim roles are shaped by organizational politics, or how changing organizational structures influence the viability of forgiveness (Bies, Barclay, Tripp, & Aquino, 2016). In short, while this is a null result, we believe it is one that contributes to cumulative knowledge in the study of business and psychology, i.e., an instance where “nothing is something” (Landis et al., 2014).

Our three studies have a number of desirable attributes: We replicate our null effect using a wide range of validated scales. We examined forgiveness, the forgivingness of self and others, attitudes toward forgiveness, the perceived riskiness of forgiveness, the willingness to forgive unconditionally, sources of forgiveness aversion, and reactions to others’ forgiveness. We used

an adequately-powered experimental design that allowed for the comparison of attitudes in context without the threats from contrast or consistency biases found in previous work.

Our study, however, has a number of important limitations. While our third study included participants from three countries, our samples are all of online crowd workers, among whom many occupations are likely underrepresented. Crowdsourcing workers also tend toward higher negative affect and lower social engagement (McCredie & Morey, 2018), characteristics that may shape forgiveness-related attributes. Replicating these findings with a more representative sample (and with participants from non-Western countries) could add further confidence in the context-independence of forgiveness-related attitudes.

Our results showing an overall absence of context-specificity to forgiveness does not necessarily mean that *some* individuals do not adjust their forgivingness or attitudes toward forgiveness at work. Future research could investigate variance in the degree to which an individual's forgiveness beliefs correspond in the workplace and at home, studying both how these attitudes come to align (e.g. through P-O fit processes), and how and when they diverge (e.g., through work-home segmentation).

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Table 1: Comparison of Work and Nonwork Responses, Studies 1-3

Variable	Study	Work Context M (SD)	Home Context M (SD)	Difference
Forgiveness for most recent transgression (TRIM-18)	1	3.16 (.75)	3.24 (.77)	$t(120)=-.54$, $p=.59$
Dispositional forgivingness (TFS)	1	4.31 (.92)	4.51(1.05)	$t(120)=-1.09$, $p=.28$
Pro-forgiveness attitudes (ATF-PF)	1	5.10 (1.36)	5.06 (1.40)	$t(119)=.16$, $p=.87$
Anti-revenge attitudes (ATF-AR)	1	4.25 (1.53)	4.53 (1.32)	$t(120)=-1.09$, $p=.29$
Forgivingness of peers (FSI of 8 peers)	1	3.54 (1.07)	3.45 (1.27)	$t(118)=.42$, $p=.68$
Balance of costs and rewards of forgiving	1	3.14 (1.37)	3.41 (1.24)	$t(120)=-1.14$, $p=.26$
Forgiveness aversion (Williamson et al., 2014)	2	2.81 (.56)	2.94 (.63)	$t(201)=-1.45$, $p=.15$
Conditional forgiveness	2	2.63 (.73)	2.60 (.75)	$t(200)=.36$, $p=.72$
Perceived warmth of victim (Fiske et al., 2002)	3	<i>Forgiving:</i> 3.83 (.98) <i>Unforgiving:</i> 2.68 (.83)	<i>Forgiving:</i> 4.07 (.65) <i>Unforgiving:</i> 2.73 (.85)	$F(1,312)=1.07$, $p=.30$
Perceived competence of victim (Fiske et al., 2002)	3	<i>Forgiving:</i> 3.32 (.85) <i>Unforgiving:</i> 2.96 (.78)	<i>Forgiving:</i> 3.42 (.65) <i>Unforgiving:</i> 3.06 (.72)	$F(1,312)=.00$, $p=.98$