Exploring the Relationship Between Reputational Credit, Severity of a

Transgression, Deservingness of Forgiveness and Forgiveness

Alexia Kalyvas

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Abstract

The act of forgiving is found to be driven by perceptions and motivations. That is, when

an individual chooses to forgive, their choice is driven by a pro-social, benevolent

response to a transgression (McCullough, Rachal, Sandage, Worthington, Brown &

Hight, 1998). While the theoretical explanations for the process of forgiveness are

fruitful in recent literature, empirical evidence on the underlying decision of why people

deserve forgiveness and how victims come to the decision to forgive is still sparse in

research. As such, the current study hypothesises that reputational credit is a predicting

factor of deservingness of forgiveness, and that severity of a transgression moderates

the relationship. Participants (N = 111) were asked to consider a close relationship with

a person of whom they were still in contact with and evaluate this relationship using

measures of reputational credit. Participants were then asked to reflect on a time where

the person had hurt or upset them, and outcomes relating to perceived deservingness

and executed forgiveness were measured. Results found a significant positive

relationship between reputational credit and deservingness of forgiveness and the

interaction effect of severity was approaching significance in a negative direction.

Additional analyses were run to assess the interaction between reputational credit and

transgression severity when forgiveness was the outcome variable, and a similar pattern

of results were found for high levels of reputational credit. However, when reputational

credit was low, incongruencies were identified between how transgression severity

impacted deservingness of forgiveness and forgiveness.

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Declaration

This thesis contains no material which has been accepted for the award of any other

degree of diploma in any University, and, to the best of my knowledge, this thesis

contains no material previously published except where due reference is made. I give

permission for the digital version of this thesis to be made available on the web, via the

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period of time.

Alexia Kalyvas,

2021

Contribution Statement

In writing this thesis, my supervisor and I collaborated to generate research questions of interest and design an appropriate methodology. I conducted a review of the literature, completed the ethics application and selected/developed all survey questions (utilising relevant established measures). My supervisor and I collaborated in running the data analyses and I interpreted the results and output. I wrote up all aspects of the thesis and all ideas explored in the discussion were generated independently.

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CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

1.1 Background

Close interpersonal relationships are a basic human necessity that fuel our sense of

connection with one another and stimulate harmonious feelings such as love and

affection. However, given the imperfect nature of humanity, the occurrence of

transgressions within close interpersonal relationships are inevitable. Thus, forgiveness

is a potential solution that enables the restoration of close connections and personal

well-being following a transgression (McCullough & Witvliet, 2002).

When a victim of an interpersonal transgression decides to forgive, there is an

element of risk that is involved. The victim is expected to make themselves vulnerable

again to a person who has previously hurt them, which may elicit negative emotions for

the victim such as weakness or uncertainty (Strelan, McKee & Feather, 2016). Why and

how, then, do victims decide if it is worth the risk to forgive the person who has

transgressed against them?

The current study proposes that these judgements are made on the basis of whether

the victim perceives the offender as deserving of their forgiveness, and that (a)

reputational credit is a predicting factor of deservingness and (b) severity of a

transgression moderates this relationship between reputational credit and deservingness.

1.2 Forgiveness: A Pro-Social Response to Interpersonal Transgressions

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The existing literature on forgiveness has made many attempts to operationalise and define it, and while no single psychological definition has been established, the most prominent idea explains forgiveness as a positive response to a transgression that is driven by pro-social motivations. 'Avoidance' and 'Revenge' are two motivational factors often associated with responding to a transgression in an unforgiving and negative way. Respectively, they have been defined as feelings of hurt that result in reduced contact with an offender and feelings of indignation that correspond with a drive to seek vengeance or harm against the offender (McCullough, Rachal, Sandage, Worthington, Brown & Hight, 1998). 'Benevolence' is the third motivation associated with responding to a transgression and refers to feelings of kindness and forbearance towards an offender (McCullough, Fincham & Tsang, 2003). In reference to these motivations, McCullough's theory on forgiveness indicates that when an individual chooses to forgive, their perceptions of the transgression and the offender are no longer driven by relationship-destructive motivations (i.e., avoidance and revenge) but instead, are derived from the more pro-social and relationship-restorative motivation, benevolence.

Forgiveness has also been operationalised in some research as a combination of three properties: a response, a personality disposition, and a characteristic of social units (McCullough & van Oyen Witvliet, 2002). As a response, forgiveness is understood as

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a pro-social change in a victim's behaviour, thoughts or emotions towards an offender that allows the victim to move past their hurt and to various degrees, restore positive feelings and behaviours towards the offender. Furthermore, the response of forgiveness is not necessarily signified by the restoration of a relationship but is instead determined by the riddance of negativity that the victim holds towards an offender. As a personality disposition, forgiveness is explained as a person's natural instincts to forgive, particularly in close interpersonal relationship. Forgiving tendencies can be scaled along a forgiving-unforgiving continuum, where most people are categorised as 'somewhere in between' (McCullough & van Oyen Witvliet, 2002). As a characteristic of social units, forgiveness is likened to attributes such as trust or intimacy, that govern the nature of interpersonal-relationships and social institutions. Some social structures are characterised by high levels of forgiveness, for the purpose of maintaining harmonious relationships (i.e., some marriages, families, or communities where participants are readily forgiven for transgressions). Other social structures, that are less relationship-orientated, are characterised by lower rates of forgiveness and a higher focus on the restoration of 'justice' (i.e., social institutions that ostracize or punish members who commit transgressions) (McCullough & van Oyen Witvliet, 2002).

Furthermore, forgiveness have been strongly associated with a victim's well-being post-transgression. Substantial evidence offers support for the reduction of

physiological stress responses and negative health habits such as alcohol and tobacco

consumption post-forgiveness, as well as lowered levels of mental health concerns such

as depression and anxiety relating to the transgression. Additionally, forgiveness has

been found to positively influence factors of well-being such as self-esteem and hope

(Pearce, 2014). However, theorists have also proposed that there are limits to the

benefits of forgiveness, and that in some instances, choosing not to forgive may have

impartial effects or potentially be less detrimental to a victim's well-being (Strelan et al,

2016). This idea introduces the relevance of deservingness of forgiveness, where it has

been suggested that all things equal, if we want to explore when and how forgiveness is

beneficial to victims, we should focus on the extent to which forgiveness is deserved. If

forgiveness is undeserved, personal consequences should be no worse by choosing not

to forgive (Strelan et al, 2016).

Thus, the process of forgiveness is thought of as a complex construct. It has been

suggested that forgiveness operates not only at an interpersonal level through the

execution of positive, relationship-restorative behaviours, but at an intrapersonal level.

At the intrapersonal level, forgiveness is associated with the cognitive changes in a

victim's thoughts, feelings, and motivations towards the offender that are transformed

from negative to positive (Strelan et al, 2016; Hook et al, 2012).

1.3 The Role of Deservingness Judgements in Facilitating Forgiveness

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Deservingness refers to a person's judgement of whether their own or someone else's outcomes are earned or achieved as a product of their actions and qualities (Feather, 1999). When the perception of actions, qualities and outcomes are in a congruent relation, the outcome is deserved. In the context of the current study, this suggests that when a victim perceives their offender as having high reputational credit, it is likely that the victim will also perceive the offender as deserving of their forgiveness. When the relationship between actions, qualities and outcomes is incongruent, an individual may be perceived as undeserving of the outcomes - such as, when reputational credit is low, victims are more likely to perceive their offenders as undeserving of forgiveness. Furthermore, judgements of deservingness can be either positively or negatively attributed and are applicable across a wide range of personal and third-party outcomes, such as those relating to success and achievement or wrongdoing and punishment (Feather, 1999; Strelan et al, 2016).

The concept of deservingness has also been linked to one's perception of another person's responsibility for an outcome (Fincham, 2000; Feather, 1999; Darby & Schlenker, 1982). A large scope of literature has attempted to conceptualise responsibility and has yielded various findings (e.g., Heider, 1958; Schlenker, Britt, Pennington, Murphy & Doherty, 1994; Feinberg, 1970; Fincham & Jaspers, 1980; Hamilton, 1978). In the context of deservingness, the definition by Weiner (1995) is

determined most relevant, expressing that the assignment of responsibility for an event

requires that it can be attributed to an internal or controllable cause. Thus, judgements

of deservingness can be directly associated with a person's level of responsibility

towards an outcome (Feather, 1999) and in the context of deservingness of forgiveness,

it is up to the victim to determine how much responsibility they perceive the offender

had over the transgression. Additionally, deservingness of forgiveness could also be

evaluated by a victim based (a) their perception of how much responsibility the offender

accepted over the transgression and (b) the offender's efforts to express that acceptance

of responsibility (e.g., the offender admitted that they were in the wrong and sought to

make amends). Therefore, if an offender was perceived to be highly responsible for a

transgression, but accepted responsibility and attempted to make amends, they could

still potentially be perceived as deserving of forgiveness.

Similar to judgements of responsibility, perceived moral character is another factor

suggested to be associated with judgements of deservingness. Feather (1999) theorised

that perceptions of moral character are formed by allocating moral value (positive or

negative) to personality attributes. For example, an attribute such as 'kindness' would

presumably be positively valued and thus, a kind person would be perceived as having

high moral character. In relation to deservingness, Feather concludes that high moral

character is associated with high levels of deservingness when an event pertains a

positive outcome, and low levels of deservingness for negative outcomes. The opposite

is applied for low moral character.

In the context of forgiveness, it is proposed that deservingness theory can be used to

describe the process of forgiving by applying the theory across three factors: (a) the

offender's actions in the lead up to/following the transgression and the effect those

actions have on the outcomes (b) the perceived responsibility a victim believes an

offender holds for a transgression, and (c) the judgement of moral character and

qualities that the victim aligns with the offender.

1.4 Conceptualising 'Reputational Credit'

Due to forgiveness being understood as a pro-social, relationship-orientated set of

motivational changes that follow an interpersonal offense, the level of intimacy or

closeness between a victim and their offender should be positively related to the

decision of whether or not the victim chooses to forgive (McCullough et al, 1998).

Thus, the concept of reputational credit can be derived from the theoretical foundations

of research on interpersonal relationships and the common themes that arise when

investigating the maintenance of healthy relationships. These themes are inclusive of

factors such as 'trust' and 'closeness', which have been considered central components

of interpersonal connections and required to maintain a healthy relationship (Miller &

Rempel, 2004).

Trust, in particular, is a well-developed construct in the research on interpersonal

relationships, with influential developmental theorists such as Erikson (1963) and

Bowlby (1973) hypothesising that the foundational basis of trust in adult relationships is

established in infanthood through the encounters that people have with their caregivers

(Miller & Rempel, 2004). Furthermore, trust is also thought of as a fluid concept that

develops beyond a person's childhood experiences and changes in response to the

unique properties of the relationships people develop with others over time.

Additionally, trust is conceptualised as a person's willingness to be vulnerable based on

the perceived motivations of a relationship partner, which are derived from consistent

positive behaviours and attitudes exhibited by that partner towards the relationship

(Strelan, Karremans, & Krieg, 2017). Therefore, positive behaviours and attitudes

generate a sense of trust between people and formulate a strong sense of reputational

credit within relationships (Miller & Rempel, 2004).

Likewise, based on interdependence theory, the investment model of interpersonal

relationships operationalises 'closeness' as a measure of four constructs including

commitment level and three sub-categories of dependence - satisfaction level, quality of

alternatives and investment size (Rusbult, Martz & Agnew, 1998). The investment

model further proposes 'that while there are distinctions between these four constructs,

they are all positively correlated. For example, dependence often increases as a result of

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relationships operating with high levels of satisfaction, trust, and a sense of investment in the relationship (Rusbult & Buunk, 1993). In the context of forgiveness, the distinction between relationship satisfaction and dependence is an important one to note, as relationship dependence can be assigned both positive and negative connotations based on the nature of one's relationship. Therefore, despite the correlation between dependence and relationship satisfaction, forgiving motivations can be drawn from one factor separately of the other (i.e., in domestic violent relationships, forgiveness would be motivated by a sense of dependence more so than by high levels of relationship satisfaction) (Bornstein, 2006). However, for the purpose of the present study, an overall measure of closeness will be used as these distinctions between relationship satisfaction and dependence are not deemed specifically detrimental to what the study is aiming to test.

When defining the concept of reputational credit, high levels of reputational credit would be exhibited by positive past behaviours that demonstrate a sense of trust and closeness within the relationship. In relation to this, a large field of research has investigated the relevance of past behaviours in predicting future behaviours and has established that when people have behaved a certain way at one point in time, they are likely to do so again (Albarracín & Wyer, 2000; Ouellette & Wood, 1998). Thus, in the context of forgiveness, it is proposed that victims may forgive offenders who have

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treated them well in the past as they have the historical evidence of a harmonious relationship and therefore, hope that they will be able to move forward. Positive past behaviours may encourage a victim to restore trust in their offender following a transgression and promote the idea that restoring the relationship will rectify the transgression, as opposed to leading to further betrayals of trust (Albarracín & Wyer, 2000; Molden & Finkel, 2010).

Furthermore, several existing studies have suggested that forgiveness is more likely to occur when relationships are characterised by high levels of satisfaction, closeness, and commitment (Roloff & Janiszewski, 1989; Woodman, 1991). This empirical evidence supports the current studies rationale for hypothesising a relationship between reputational credit and deservingness of forgiveness.

1.5 The Moderating Effect of Transgression Severity

Transgression severity is conceptualised as the intensity of negative affect a victim experiences from an interpersonal transgression (Vallade & Myers, 2014). In broader literature of forgiveness, transgression severity is closely linked to forgiveness, with more severe transgressions associated with less forgiveness (Fincham, Jackson, & Beach, 2005; Karremans, Van Lange, & Holland, 2005). The association between transgression severity and forgiveness can be understood from a cognitive perspective, where severity of an offense facilitates the victim's impressions of the offender (i.e.,

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impressions of moral character, which influences judgements on deservingness of forgiveness). In the case of high severity transgressions, the victim tends to associate the offender with the negative event that occurred and therefore, the offender is often judged as undeserving of forgiveness (McCullough et al., 2003). In relation to the current study, a similar pattern is expected to occur, even when taking an offender's reputational credit into consideration.

Thus, a moderation effect is proposed, where an offender with high reputational credit is perceived as more deserving of forgiveness than an offender with low reputational credit, but the interaction of severity on reputational credit has a negative impact on deservingness of forgiveness. For example, an offender who has high reputational credit but commits a transgression of high severity would be less deserving of forgiveness than if they had done something only a mildly hurtful. However, regardless of the severity of the transgression, an offender with high reputational credit would always be more deserving of forgiveness than an offender with low reputational credit.

Furthermore, in forgiveness literature, transgression severity is mostly rated by the research participants through measures of self-report – thus indicating that severity is a concept mostly analysed from a subjective perspective. While some research has considered the implications of transgression severity from the objective perspective of

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the researcher (Fincham, Jackson & Beach, 2005), it is acknowledged that measuring

transgression severity from a subjective perspective is important as a victim's

experience is perceptive to their individual situation, their own cognitive appraisal of

the transgression and the level of reputational credit they consider an offender to obtain.

1.6 The Impact of Post-Transgression Efforts

The concept of post-transgression efforts refers to an offender's response following

a transgression. This response encapsulates actions such as attempts to make amends,

apologies and displays of remorse (Strelan et al, 2016) and is positively associated with

forgiveness and restoring damaged relationships (Struthers, Eaton, Santelli, Uchiyama

& Shirvani, 2008). The most prominent explanation for the effectiveness of post-

transgression efforts is expressed through theory of deservingness, where post-

transgression efforts improve/restore the impression the victim has of the offender by

affirming their involvement, responsibility and remorse towards their actions (Struthers

et al, 2008).

Thus, post-transgression efforts have been considered in previous literature in

relation to deservingness of forgiveness and has been identified as a factor that

encourages a victim to perceive their offender as deserving of forgiveness (Strelan et al,

2016). Therefore, post-transgression efforts are considered a relevant background

variable in the present study and will be measured to enable correlations between this

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factor and measures of reputational credit, transgression severity, deservingness of forgiveness and forgiveness.

1.7 Current Study Rationale

While the existing literature on forgiveness has briefly explored the topics of deservingness, transgression severity and reputational credit respectively, it is of my understanding that a relationship between these factors has not yet been tested. The extant literature proposes positive associations between reputational credit and forgiveness (Roloff & Janiszewski, 1989; Woodman, 1991) and negative associations between transgression severity and deservingness of forgiveness (McCullough et al, 2003), yet no study has examined a relationship between all factors. Thus, the research aims of the current study is to investigate if a significant relationship exists between reputational credit and deservingness of forgiveness, and to determine if this relationship is moderated by the severity of a transgression (see Figure 1). As deservingness of forgiveness is presumably correlated to forgiveness, additional analyses will be run to test this assumption, as well as explore if a relationship exists between reputational credit and forgiveness and if the moderation effect of severity is also applicable in relation to forgiveness. Post-transgression efforts will be measured as a background variable in the study and is hypothesised to be highly correlated with both reputational credit and deservingness of forgiveness.

Furthermore, the hypothesised main effects are as followed:

H_1 = There will be a positive relation between reputational credit and deservingness

of forgiveness, as well as reputational credit and forgiveness. Participants who report

high reputational credit will also report high levels of deservingness of forgiveness and

forgiveness.

H_2 = There will be a negative moderating effect of severity on the relationship

between reputational credit and deservingness of forgiveness, as well as on the

relationship between reputational credit and forgiveness. Participants who report high

severity will report lower levels of deservingness and forgiveness than participants who

report low severity transgressions. However, participants who report high reputational

credit will still report higher levels of deservingness and forgiveness than participants

who report that their offender has low reputational credit.

Figure 1. The proposed moderation model.
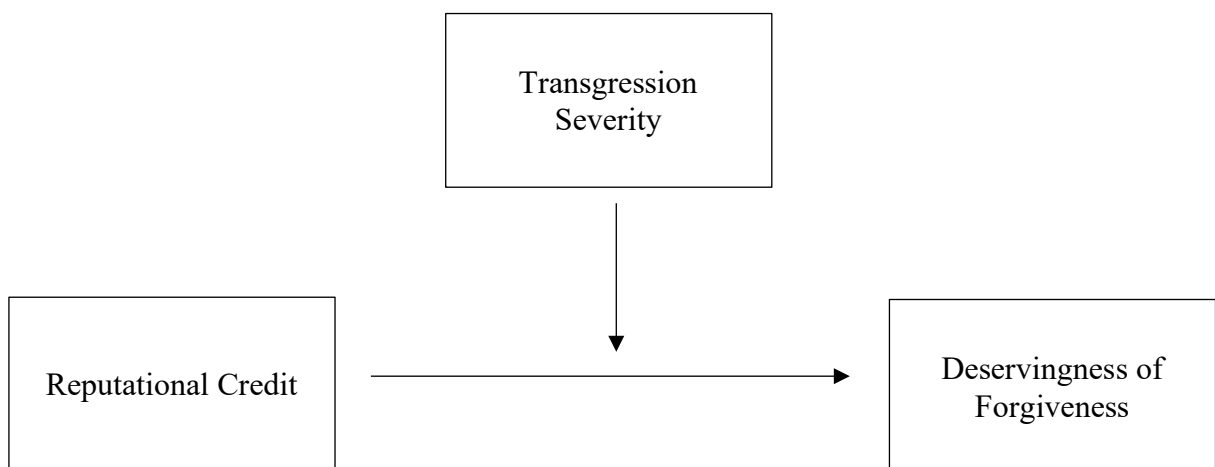
CHAPTER 2: METHOD

2.1 Participants

An a priori power analysis was conducted (Faul, Erdfelder, Buchner, & Lang, 2009) to determine a sufficient sample size for the study. For a multiple regression analysis with up to 6 predictors; including covariates, (medium effect size, $\alpha = .05$, power = .85), a sample size of $N = 109$ was suggested.

The study's sample was comprised of first-year psychology students from the University of Adelaide ($N = 83$), who participated in the study for course credit towards their undergraduate degree via the university's Research Participation System (RPS). The data collection deadline for first-year psychology students was the end of semester one 2021. The decision was then made to extend the sample so that it included members of the general public ($N = 76$), who were recruited via a social media post and snowball sampling/word of mouth, in order to reach the minimum aim of $N = 109$ participants and ensure that the study was sufficiently powered.

A total of 159 responses were collected (83 first-year students; 76 members of the general public). However, 6 of the first-year student's responses were removed from the dataset due to frivolous responding and 42 responses from the general public were deleted due to being incomplete or invalid responses (invalid response criteria included: frivolous responding and no reported transgression – e.g., "x has not hurt me in the past"). The final sample size included 111 participants. Within this, 76 were first-year

psychology students from the University of Adelaide and 35 were members of the

general public (73 female; 34 male; 2 undisclosed). Participant's age ranged from 18-67

years (M_{age} = 23.22, SD = 10.23).

2.2 Procedures

The study was advertised to participants through the University of Adelaide

Research Participation System, Facebook, and via word of mouth. Participants

completed the study online via the website 'Qualtrics' and were only able to complete

one question at a time. They were asked to first identify a person with whom they have

(or have had) a close relationship, and it was specified that this person must be someone

that they are still in contact with. To personalise the survey and optimise the emotional

authenticity of responses, participants were asked to write the first name of the person

they had selected in a textbox which enabled this person's name to be used in the

context of each question that followed. Participants were asked to think about their

relationship with the person and answer a series of questions that measured the

reputational credit this person had accumulated based on factors of trust, closeness, and

past behaviours. In order to gain an accurate and untainted measure of reputational

credit, participants were only asked to think of a relating transgression after they had

completed the reputational credit measure. They were asked to describe an experience

where the person whose relationship they had just evaluated had hurt or upset them and

could recount it in as much or as little detail as they felt comfortable sharing.

Participants were also asked how much time had elapsed since the transgression so that

a mean reference point of time passed could be established. Following this, participants

responded to questions on severity of the transgression, deservingness of forgiveness,

forgiveness and post-transgression efforts (which henceforth, will be interchangeably

referred to as 'apology'). At the end of the survey, participants were asked to provide

general demographic information, as well as categorise the type of relationship they

have/had with the person referred to in the survey (e.g., family, intimate partner, etc).

The estimated duration time for survey completion was 10-15 minutes.

2.3 Materials

All responses to items in the present study were rated by participants across a 5-

point Likert scale, where 1= "Strongly disagree", 3 = "Neither agree nor disagree" and

5= "Strongly agree".

2.3.1   Predictor variables.

Reputational credit was operationalised in the current study as a combination of

three factors: Trust, Closeness, and Past Behaviours. These factors were averaged and

then combined together as one definitive variable to represent reputational credit. The

factor Trust was measured using items from Rempel, Holmes, and Zanna's Trust in

Close Relationships Scale (1985). The Trust in Close Relationships Scale is a self-

report measure designed to gauge levels of trust in one's relationship. It is divided up

into three subscales: predictability (e.g., "[X] is very unpredictable. I never know how

he/she is going to act from one day to the next"), dependability (e.g., "I can rely on

[X]to keep the promises he/she makes to me") and faith (e.g., "When I am with [X], I

feel secure in facing unknown new situations") (Rempel et al, 1985). Furthermore, from

the 17-item scale, only 15 items were used in the study, and exclusion criteria was based

on an item's generalisability to be contextualised across different types of relationships

(e.g., items that were only applicable to romantic relationships and not family

relationships were excluded). Additionally, the internal reliability of the Trust in Close

Relationships Scale was high (α = .81), with subscale reliabilities of .80, .72 and .70 for

the faith, dependability, and predictability subscales, respectively (Rempel et al, 1985).

Closeness was measured using the Investment Model Scale (Rusbult et al,

1998), a self-report measure that explores the prevalence of two factors in relationships

that the current study considers appropriate measures of closeness: commitment and

dependence. Items were selectively chosen from the Investment Model Scale to include

measures of: Satisfaction Level (e.g., "I feel satisfied with our relationship"),

Investment Size (e.g., "I have put a great deal into our relationship that I would lose if

the relationship were to end") and Commitment Level (e.g., "I want our relationship to

last forever"). A total of 9 items from the Investment Model Scale were used to measure

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closeness and item exclusion criteria involved the generalisability of items across

different types of relationships. The internal reliability for this scale across all subscales

was high (α = .90).

Past Behaviours were measured with a five-item scale, that was developed for

the purpose of this study and had high internal reliability (α = .90). The items in this

scale included: "[X] has mostly treated me well in the past"; "On occasions where [X]

has upset me, I have felt comfortable communicating with them about my feelings";

"On occasions where [X] has upset me in the past, I have felt that he/she was apologetic

or made an effort to resolve their actions"; "Because of the way [X] generally treats me,

he/she has built up a good history with me"; "I consider my history with [X] to be

positive".

The internal reliability across all three measures of reputational credit combined

was high (α = .95). This confirmed that these three measures all tested similar and

relevant concepts and therefore supported the current study's decision to operationalise

reputational credit as a combination of trust, closeness and past behaviours.

2.3.2   Moderator variable.

Severity of the Transgression was measured using three items acquired from

relevant research (Strelan et al, 2016) and had moderate internal reliability (α = .63).

These items were: "This experience still pains me"; "What this person did was hurtful";

"Compared to other hurtful experiences I have had, this was the most hurtful".

2.3.3   Outcome variables.

While deservingness of forgiveness was the main outcome variable of interest in

the current, the act of forgiveness was also measured as an outcome variable in order to

test whether participants' judgement of deservingness was congruent with their actions

of forgiveness.

Deservingness of Forgiveness was measured using five items from relevant

research (Strelan et al, 2016), which were: "[X] deserved to be forgiven"; "[X] earned

forgiveness"; "[X] merited being forgiven"; "It is fair to forgive [X]"; "It is justifiable

to forgive [X]". This scale had high internal reliability ($\alpha = .90$).

Forgiveness was measured using the 18-item Transgression Related

Interpersonal Motivations Inventory (TRIM; McCullough et al., 1998). The TRIM

measure is a self-report inventory that measures thoughts and feelings of a victim

towards their offender through three subscales: revenge (e.g., "I wish something bad

would happen to him/her"), avoidance (e.g., "I am avoiding him/her") and benevolence

(e.g., "I want us to bury the hatchet and move forward with our relationship").

Furthermore, on the Likert scale continuum of "strongly disagree" to "strongly agree",

revenge and avoidance were reverse scored. Thus, lower scores meant that a victim

possessed higher forgiving attitudes towards their offender. The TRIM measure has

been used considerably often in research on forgiveness, and thus, has a strong,

consistent evidence-base in favour of its construct validity (Worthington et al., 2015)

and internal reliability ($\alpha = .94$).

2.3.4   Background variables.

Apology was measured with the following three items, adopted from relevant

research (Strelan et al, 2016). These included: "[X] was remorseful for what they did";

"[X] made amends for what they did"; "[X] apologised for what they did". The items

had high internal reliability ($\alpha = .88$).

Time elapsed since the transgression was reported as an approximation of the

days/months/years that have passed since the transgression occurred.

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CHAPTER 3: RESULTS

3.1 Descriptive Statistics of Transgressions Recalled

Participants recalled transgressions committed by friends (47.7%), intimate partners (30.6%), family members (18%), work colleagues (2.7%) and "other" (0.9%). The transgressions that were described included infidelity, dishonesty, emotional neglect, ostracism, bullying and gossiping. On average, transgressions were approximated to have occurred between 2.35 years (SD = 3.51) and 8.4 days (SD = 11.49) prior to the study and compared to other painful events that participants have experienced, the transgressions recalled were mild to moderately painful events (M = 2.4, SD = 1.39). A large portion of participants reported that their offenders apologised or attempted to make amends for the transgression (M = 8.3, SD = 2.57).

3.2 Bivariate Correlations Between Variables

The bivariate correlations between predictor, moderator, outcome and background variables are summarised in Table 1. First, deservingness of forgiveness was positively associated with reputational credit, forgiveness and apology, and was negatively associated with transgression severity. Second, transgression severity was also negatively associated with reputational credit, forgiveness and apology. Third, reputational credit was positively associated with forgiveness and apology. Table 1 also

includes bivariate correlations between the background variable 'apology' and the

outcome variable 'forgiveness', where they were found to be positively associated.

Table 1. Correlations between Reputational Credit, Deservingness of Forgiveness, Transgression Severity and Forgiveness

	1	2	3	4	5
1. Rep Cred	1				
2. Deservingness	.762**	1			
3. Severity	-.318**	-.378**	1		
4. Forgiveness	.724**	.647**	-.214*	1	
5. Apology	.439**	.546**	-.179	.276**	1

Note. N = 111; ** Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level; * Correlation is significant at the 0.05

level

3.3 Reputational Credit and Transgression Severity predicting Deservingness of Forgiveness

Hayes' (2021) PROCESS macro (version 4.0; model 1; 5000 iterations; bias

corrected; interaction terms mean-centred) was used to test for an interaction effect of

reputational credit transgression severity on deservingness of forgiveness.

Reputational credit was significantly positively associated with deservingness of

forgiveness (B = .132, p = .000, $CI_{95\%}$ = [16.894, 17.873]) and transgression severity

was significantly negatively associated with deservingness of forgiveness (B = -.274, p

= .0166, $CI_{95\%}$ = [-.4954, -.0531]).

3.4 The Reputational Credit Transgression Severity interaction on Deservingness

of Forgiveness

The interaction effect of severity moderating the relationship between reputational

credit and deservingness of forgiveness was approaching significance (B = .011, p =

.081, $CI_{95\%}$ = [-.0014, .0239]). Breaking down this interaction, the effect of reputational

credit was significant over both high (B = .156, p = .000, $CI_{95\%}$ = [.1260, .1853]) and

low (B = .111, p = .000, $CI_{95\%}$ = [.0675, .1535]) levels of severity. These relations are

graphed in Figure 2.
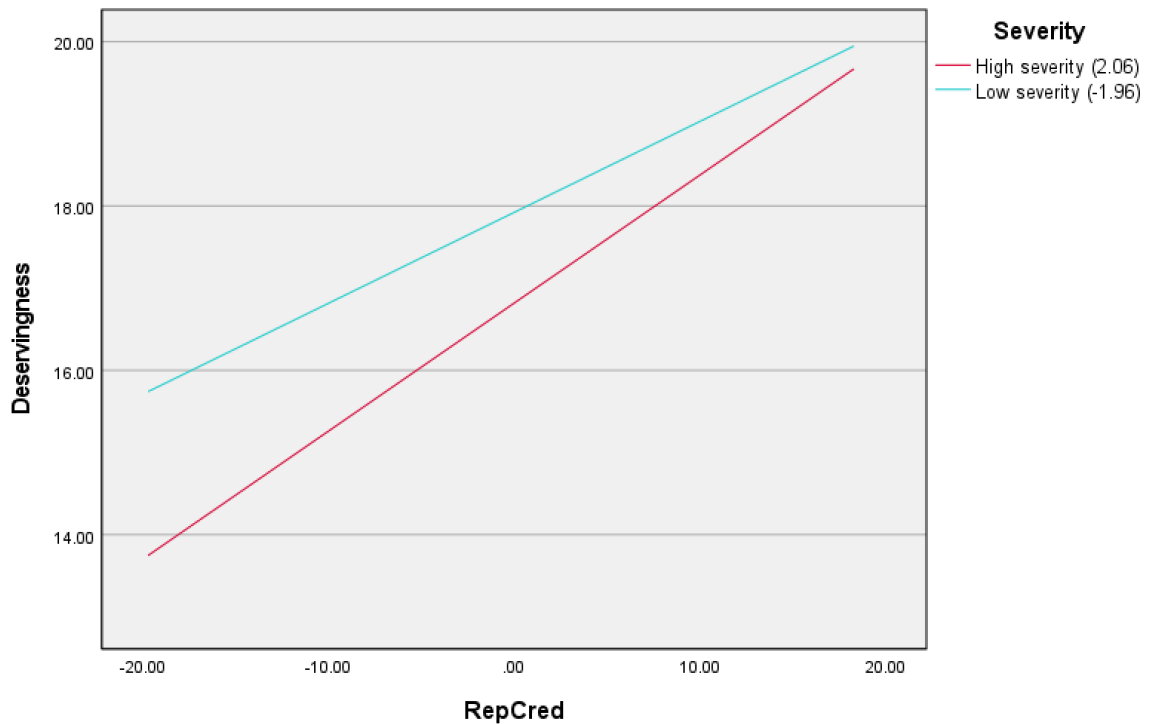
Figure 2. Interaction of Reputational Credit x Transgression Severity on Deservingness of Forgiveness

The analysis was repeated with reputational credit as the moderator variable and

severity as the predictor variable to examine the simple slopes from the other angle. It

was found that severity of a transgression had a significant negative effect on

deservingness of forgiveness when reputational credit was low (B = -.495, p = .005,

$CI_{95\%}$ = [-.8370, -.1537]), but when reputational credit was high, severity had no effect

(B = -.069, p = .662, $CI_{95\%}$ = [-.3810, .2431]).

3.5 Additional Analyses

An additional analysis was run that tested how reputational credit and severity

interacted with forgiveness. A similar effect was found, where reputational credit was

positively significantly associated with forgiveness (B = .897, p = .000, $CI_{95\%}$ =

[.4908,1.3027]), and both transgression severity (B = 5.563, p = .054, $CI_{95\%}$ = [-

.0850,11.2109]) and the interaction effect (B = -.048 p = .056, $CI_{95\%}$ = [-.0962,.0011])

were approaching significance.

Breaking down the interaction, the effect of reputational credit on forgiveness was

significant across both high (B = .452, p = .000, $CI_{95\%}$ = [.3378, .5659]) and low (B =

.643, p = .000, $CI_{95\%}$ = [.4777, .8088]) levels of transgression severity. The effect was

slightly stronger at the lower level of severity, which is consistent with the interaction

between reputational credit and severity on deservingness. These relations are graphed
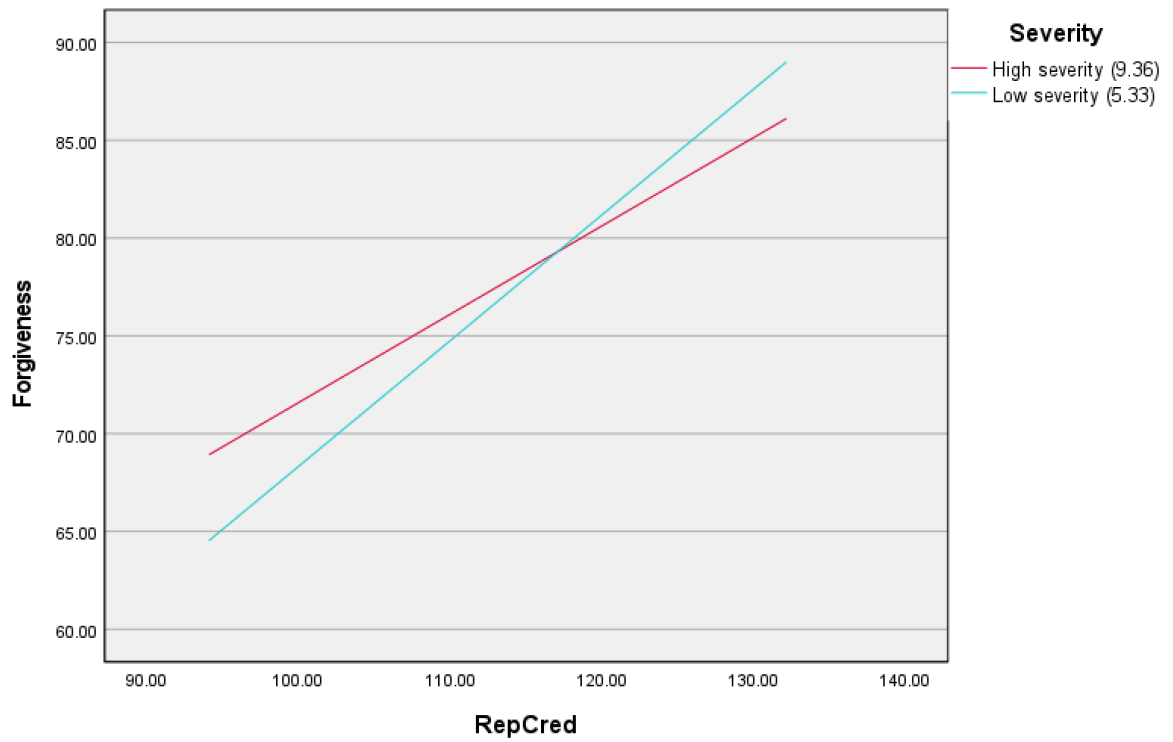
in Figure 3.

Figure 3. Interaction of Reputational Credit x Transgression Severity on Forgiveness

CHAPTER 4: DISCUSSION

4.1 Summary and Interpretation of Findings

The purpose of the current study was to examine the relationship between

reputational credit and deservingness of forgiveness. The first hypothesis proposed a

positive association between reputational credit and deservingness of forgiveness, and

this hypothesis was supported as the findings expressed a significant positive

association between the two factors. More specifically, the results indicated that high

reputational credit equated to higher perceived deservingness of forgiveness.

The study further aimed to explore the moderating effect of transgression

severity on the relation between reputational credit and deservingness of forgiveness,

hypothesising a negative interaction effect. While the findings established a significant

negative association between transgression severity and deservingness of forgiveness,

the moderation interaction was only found to be approaching significance. Breaking

down the interaction, it was able to be determined that when reputational credit was

high, the interaction effect was not significant, and the severity of a transgression made

little difference in perception of deservingness. On the opposing end, when reputational

credit was low, a significant negative interaction effect was found. This significant

effect indicates that only when reputational credit is low would the severity of a

transgression moderate a victim's perception of their offender's deservingness of

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forgiveness. Therefore, hypothesis two was partially supported, where a significant moderation effect existed, but only at the lower level of reputational credit.

The bivariate correlations established a moderate correlation between deservingness of forgiveness and forgiveness, demonstrating how these factors may not always be congruent. The additional analyses re-tested the two hypotheses but with forgiveness as the outcome variable and findings supported that the relationship between reputational credit and forgiveness followed a similar pattern to the relationship between reputational credit and deservingness of forgiveness. Reputational credit was significantly positively associated with forgiveness, indicating that victims are likely to forgive offenders of whom they trust, share a close relationship with and have previously treated them well. The moderation interaction between reputational credit and transgression severity on forgiveness was approaching significance, although a break-down of this interaction revealed significance across both high and low levels of severity. Interestingly however, when the interaction effect was plotted out on a graph, it showed that while the high level of reputational credit reflected similar patterns as the previous analyses on deservingness of forgiveness, offenders with low reputational credit received more forgiveness for transgressions with high severity than those with low severity.

4.2 The Effects of Reputational Credit on Deservingness of Forgiveness

Theoretical models in extant literature have considered how forgiveness is more likely to occur when relationships are characterised by high levels of satisfaction, closeness and commitment (Roloff & Janiszewski, 1989; Woodman; 1991). However, the current study extends on previous research as it is the first to provide empirical evidence supporting a significant relationship between reputational credit and deservingness of forgiveness. The findings were consistent with previous research on deservingness theory, where perceptions of an offender (i.e., reputational credit) impacted the level of perceived deservingness. Furthermore, the implications of this significant finding suggest that a positive relationship exists between reputational credit and deservingness of forgiveness, meaning that offenders with high reputational credit are likely to be perceived as deserving of forgiveness.

4.3 The Impact of Severity as a Moderator

The research examining transgression severity has largely focused on the link between severity of a transgression and forgiveness and has determined a negative association where more severe transgressions are less likely to be forgiven. However, the current study proposed that transgression severity would also influence a victim's perception of an offender's deservingness of forgiveness by moderating the relationship between reputational credit and deservingness. It was also proposed that an interaction between transgression severity and an offender's reputational credit would facilitate

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forgiveness. The findings of the current study were partially consistent with the previous literature, where the moderation effect of transgression severity was negatively associated with the relationship between reputational credit and deservingness of forgiveness. However, the interaction effect between reputational credit and transgression severity was inconsistent with previous literature when predicting forgiveness from participants who reported low levels of reputational credit. Results found that for offenders who were perceived as having low reputational credit, high severity transgressions received more forgiveness from victims than low severity transgressions.

4.4 Exploring the Incongruencies between Deservingness of Forgiveness, Transgression Severity and Forgiveness for Offenders with Low Reputational Credit

Previous literature has established that deservingness judgements are formed by a combination of a victim's perceptions of their offender's moral character, as well as their responsibility for their actions (i.e., the transgression). Therefore, deservingness theory supports the logic that regardless of a person's reputational credit, less severe transgressions would leave a victim with a more favourable impression of their offender than transgressions of high severity. However, the findings in the current study are

inconsistent with the literature and suggest an incongruency between deservingness

judgements and forgiveness when reputational credit is low.

One explanation is that participants were asked to recall a transgression by

someone with whom they still maintain a close relationship with. Therefore, while

participants who recalled a high severity transgression from an offender with low

reputational credit may have felt that the person was undeserving of forgiveness, it is

possible that in attempt to rationalise why they still maintain a relationship with the

offender, participants expressed that they had forgiven the offender for their

transgression. Furthermore, this type of relationship-based rationalising has been

previously theorised in research on forgiveness, with a similar explanation explored in a

paper by Strelan et al (2016) referring to an incongruency between deservingness of

forgiveness and receiving amends from the offender. In the 2016 study, unforgiving

victims who did not receive amends were found to perceive their offenders as no less

deserving of forgiveness than those who did receive amends. It was considered that this

may be the effect of elevated judgements of deservingness in the no-amends/no-

forgiveness condition of the study due to the participants still having relations with the

offender (Strelan et al, 2016).

Additionally, the idea of relationship rationalising can be supported by literature

that explores motivational influence on memories. An abundant amount of evidence

suggests that post-event memories are recalled in relation to self-perception (Brunot &

Sanitioso, 2004), as well as the information that a person has access to following the

event (Sedlmeier & Jaeger, 2007). In order to attain a desired self-perception, people are

often motivated to view their actions and choices as positive, consistent and congruent

with their core values. This means that in relation to event recall, a person's motives

have the potential to influence the memories that become accessible to allow motive-

consistent self-characterisation (Brunot & Sanitioso, 2004). Furthermore, when a person

is asked to recall an event, it is argued that new information (that has become assessable

to the person in the time that has passed since the event) is assimilated with existing

knowledge and therefore constructs a mix of old and new memories (Sedlmeier &

Jaeger, 2007).

In the context of the present study, a combination of these two theories could be

used to explain the incongruent findings between deservingness of forgiveness,

transgression severity and forgiveness for offenders with low reputational credit. For

example, a victim may reflect on the transgression and decide that it was highly hurtful

and therefore the offender did not deserve forgiveness. Furthermore, they are aware that

the offender is a person that they do not completely trust, nor has the offender always

treated them well in the past. However, the information that has become accessible to

them post-transgression is that they decided to maintain a relationship with the offender

regardless. Thus, in order to resolve the moral discrepancy between being hurt by the

offender but continuing to maintain the relationship, the victim determines that they

must have forgiven the offender.

An alternative explanation for the incongruencies between deservingness,

transgression severity and forgiveness is that participants may have had external reasons

to forgive the offender, such as an attachment or social obligations to the relationship.

This theory is best explained through the analogy of a parent- child relationship, where

there may be instances in which this relationship becomes strained later in life due to

the parent's actions resulting in hurt or trauma and in part, a lowered perception of the

parent's reputational credit (Brann, Rittenour & Myers, 2007). However, due to factors

such as parental attachment developed through childhood or the perceived social

constructs of a parent-child relationship, children may feel an obligation to forgive their

parents for transgressions, even in situations where forgiveness may be perceived as

undeserved.

A final explanation for the incongruencies identified in the current study is that

victims may have chosen to forgive primarily for the sake of the self. That is, sometimes

a victim may feel that while a transgression was hurtful, the best chance they have of

coping is to forgive the offender so that they can emotionally move on from the pain

caused by the transgression (Strelan et al, 2016). Additionally, victims may utilise this

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type of forgiveness as a cost-benefit analysis and choose to forgive the offender in prevention of a worse alternative. For example, if a victim is highly dependent on their relationship with the offender and has a lot of investment in the relationship, they would potentially suffer more from the loss of that relationship as opposed to forgiving the offender for a hurtful transgression. In the context of the present study, measures of investment size were reported on under the subsection 'closeness', however, this subsection was combined with measures of trust and past behaviours and thus, it is proposed that while an offender's total reputational credit may have been low, the victim's investment in the relationship could have potentially still been high, but this may have been due to an alternative factor (e.g., dependency, comfort).

4.5 Strengths

The present study was the first to explore the relationship between reputational credit, transgression severity and deservingness of forgiveness and therefore sought to do so in a way that maximised ecological validity. Thus, a correlational design was implemented, which enabled the measures of reputational credit, transgression severity, deservingness of forgiveness and forgiveness to be explored in the context of the participants lives. Participants were asked to recall real transgressions that had happened to them in the past, which allowed for genuine, emotion-based responses to the survey questions that reflected a range of different experiences that would not have

been possible if an alternative study design was used (e.g., an experimental design with

hypothetical transgressions). Furthermore, the use of real-life transgressions

strengthened the findings applicability to real-word settings and enabled an analysis of

the proposed hypotheses across a variety of transgressions, with differing levels of

severity and across different types of relationships.

      A further strength of the current study design was the careful consideration

around how measures were tested. As reputational credit is a measure of positive affect,

it was important to ensure that the study design encouraged participants to respond with

an honest and an untainted perception of a person's reputational credit. Therefore, in

order to achieve this, reputational credit was the first factor measured in the study and

participants did not have access to the following questions until they had completed

their responses to this first section, nor were they able to go back to previous questions

once completed.

      As the present study used survey research for data collection, an additional

strength of the study was that the design enabled it to be a cost effective and time

efficient project. As the University of Adelaide offers the Research Participation System

as a form of participant recruitment and advertising for participants via social media

was free of charge, there were no recruitment-related costs to conduct this research,

which permitted for an unlimited sample size. Furthermore, as survey research can be

collected over a period of time and does not need to be conducted in person, the study

was able to extend the data collection phase for as long as necessary in order to reach

the minimum aim of N=109 participants and ensure that the research was sufficiently

powered.

4.6 Limitations

While this study design enabled more accurate reports of reputational credit, a

limitation of the design it that it could have potentially acted as a gatekeeper for

transgression severity. Participants were first asked: "please think of a person in your

life that you have a close relationship with (or have had in the past but are still in

contact with)", without the context that they would later be asked to consider a time that

this person had hurt or upset them. Therefore, it is acknowledged that this could have

limited participants from recalling transgressions of extremely high severity as they may

not have experienced such transgressions in their closest relationships, or, they may not

have selected a person who has hurt them badly, if at all, in the past. This limitation was

also reflected in the original dataset, where a number of participants responses were

invalid and removed due to claims that they have never been hurt by the person they

had selected.

Alternatively, the limited reports of high severity transgressions in the current

study could also be relevant to the participant demographic, where a large portion of

participants were first year psychology students and the average age of participants was

23 (SD = 10.23), suggesting a relatively young sample. Thus, the mere effect of limited

life experience may have resulted in transgressions with lower severity being recalled

and reported on.

Furthermore, as a result of only mild-moderate transgressions being reported in

the present study, a further limitation is the generalisability of results across high

severity transgressions. It is proposed that while the significant findings of the study

would be generalisable across mild-moderately severe transgression, additional research

would need to be conducted to test how reliable and generalisable the findings are in

relation to high severity transgressions (e.g., physical or emotional abuse).

An additional limitation of the present study is that participants responses could

have been influenced by social desirability bias. Research comparing forgiving and

unforgiving responses to a transgression has established that withholding forgiveness is

perceived as the less favourable, inharmonious option among society (Jones Ross, Boon

& Stackhouse, 2018). Thus, the perceived social norms of forgiving responses may have

encouraged participants to report elevated levels of deservingness of forgiveness and

forgiveness, in order to align with what they believe is the socially appropriate and ideal

response to a transgression. Hence, the use of self-report measures and the impact of

social desirability bias may have limited the validity of the data.

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A further, and final, limitation of the present study is that the findings are correlational. Thus, the study can only infer that the factors of reputational credit, transgression severity, deservingness of forgiveness and forgiveness are related, and claims of causation cannot be made. Therefore, the findings cannot establish if reputational credit and transgression severity are the reason victims perceive their offenders as more or less deserving of forgiveness and in part - forgive, but instead, can only suggest that these factors influence a victim's perceptions of deservingness and forgiveness.

4.7 Implications of the Current Study

The implications of the present study suggest that when a person is transgressed against, their judgements on whether or not their offender deserves forgiveness are significantly predicted by the closeness and trust shared in the relationship, as well as how the offender has treated them in the past. When there is little to no trust or closeness between the victim and the offender, or the offender has not always treated the victim well in the past, it is found that deservingness judgements can be influenced by the severity of a transgression. In a practical sense, these implications may support the work of psychologists, counsellors and related mental health practitioners in helping clients unpack the transgressions that have occurred in their close relationships and decide if the offender is deserving of their forgiveness.

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More specifically, the explanations of the incongruencies between deservingness judgements and forgiveness presented in the current study suggest that when victims forgive undeserving offenders, this may be the product of their relationship with the offender being categorised as an 'unhealthy relationship' (which can be inferred from low levels of reputational credit). Therefore, a recommendation made to practitioners based on the findings of the present study is to expand on these findings by exploring the relationship dynamics between the victim and offender in more depth, encouraging the victim to consider the reasons they are choosing to forgive the offender and maintain their relationship, and explore the impacts of the relationship in the broader scope of the victim's well-being.

Practitioners and related mental health workers who work with clients in unhealthy relationships could also utilise the findings of the present study and related literature to develop resources that may aid clients in evaluating an offender's deservingness of forgiveness, and in part, whether the risk of forgiving their offender is worth opening themselves up to being vulnerable with the potential of being hurt again. A potential resource example that could be derived from the findings of the present study is a 'deservingness flowchart' that prompts victims to systematically evaluate and consider their decision to forgive an offender or not by exploring factors of reputational credit and transgression severity. The flowchart could provide reliable measures of

reputational credit and transgression severity (such as those used in the survey of the

present study) to help practitioners guide victims through the process of unpacking their

relationship with the offender, what they did (i.e., the transgression) and whether or not

they are truly deserving of the victim's forgiveness.

Furthermore, while the findings of the present study are not directly associated

with cases of domestic violence, implications can be drawn from the findings and

applied to support the way practitioners approach clients who are victims of violent

relationships. Relevant literature on domestic violence has established that a victim's

intent to return to or maintain a relationship with an abusive partner is related to

forgiveness of the abuse. While few studies have identified predictors of forgiveness in

this population, the predominant findings in those that have suggest that commitment to

the relationship and downplaying the severity of the abuse are two factors that minimise

the dissonance of maintaining such unhealthy relationships and enable victims to

forgive their offenders (Gilbert & Gordon, 2016).

As such, the incongruencies between judgements of deservingness and

forgiveness that were identified in the present study (where offenders had low

reputational credit and committed high severity transgressions, but still received

forgiveness despite being classified as 'undeserving') are anticipated to be applicable to

cases of domestic violence, and if the study were to be replicated in the future using

victims of domestic violence as the population to draw a sample from, it is proposed

that similar results would arise. The findings of the present study imply that often,

victims are able to identify if an offender is undeserving of their forgiveness. However,

sometimes this perception of deservingness is not enough to deter the victim from

forgiving their offender and therefore, they end up forgiving regardless. Thus, the

implications of these findings for victims in relationships characterised by domestic

violence suggest that deservingness may not be a predictor of forgiveness in this

population. Therefore, a recommendation for practitioners who work with victims of

domestic violence is to be sensitive towards these incongruences. It is likely that victims

of domestic violence are aware that their partner is undeserving of forgiveness and

therefore practitioners should try exploring alternative factors, such as relationship

dependency (Gilbert & Gordon, 2016), that may be keeping the victim in the

relationship.

4.8 Future Research

   To address the incongruencies between perceived deservingness of forgiveness

and forgiveness that were identified in the present study, future research may wish to

focus on relationships categorised by lower levels of reputational credit, or more

specifically, the interaction between high severity transgressions committed by

offenders with low reputational credit. An interesting proposal, that could also

potentially address the limitations regarding the lack of high severity transgressions,

would be to explore the relationship between reputational credit, transgression severity,

deservingness of forgiveness and forgiveness through the scope of 'broken

relationships' (for example, sample a group of people receiving some form of

relationship counselling) and aim to explore if a similar pattern of results are found.

Additionally, exploring the relationship between these factors using a sample of people

who are victims of domestic violence would support the inferences made in the present

study and address a gap in literature where there a few studies that explore forgiveness

predictors in domestic violent relationships. Furthermore, it is proposed that similar

incongruencies will be found among samples of people in unhealthy relationships and

an explanation for this could potentially be that deservingness of forgiveness does not

necessarily predict when a victim perceives a relationship to be worth restoring. Thus,

future research could also dissect the measure of reputational credit to test whether a

more accurate representation of this measure would include the factors of trust and past

behaviours, but not the element of closeness, as it is inferred that based on the

incongruencies of the present study, measures of relationship commitment (i.e.,

closeness) could potentially be a separate factor all together. Therefore, future research

could explore if reputational credit and relationship commitment influence

deservingness of forgiveness and the act of forgiving differently.

Another recommendation for future research that specifically involves

reputational credit is to explore the fluidity of this factor following a series of

transgressions. The present study adopted a cross-sectional nature which enabled

participants to reflect upon one previous transgression, and while the subsection of

reputational credit: 'past behaviours' can infer if previous transgressions have occurred

in the relationship, there is no indicator of how reputational credit was impacted over

time. Thus, future research may wish to explore how reputational credit changes over

the course of a relationship, especially in relationships where the offender continues to

hurt the victim.

To address the concerns regarding the present study's sample demographic,

future research could potentially duplicate the current study with a more representative

sample of the general population. Furthermore, as the findings identified correlational

relationships between the measures of reputational credit, transgression severity,

deservingness of forgiveness and forgiveness, future research may wish to explore

causal hypotheses and conduct research using an experimental design in order to claim

causal inferences regarding the relationships between these variables. Additionally, a

multi-study design (similar to what was used in the research by Strelan et al, 2016) is

thought to potentially be the most ideal way to explore the relationship between these

variables in the future. This is because as it enables data collection across both a

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correlational study design, where real world applicability is enhanced, as well as

experimentally, where causal claims can be made.

4.9 Conclusions

The findings from the present study make important contributions to the

understanding of why and how victims decide to forgive a person who has transgressed

against them. While forgiving an offender has been acknowledged to involve an

element of risk, the conclusions that can be drawn from the present study is that

forgiveness is worth the risk when the victim is committed to their relationship with the

offender and has reason to believe (based on levels of trust, closeness and the offenders

past behaviours) that the relationship is worth restoring. In other words, the present

study suggests that high reputational credit may be a factor that trumps all.

Furthermore, the study found that the severity of a transgression moderated the

relationship between an offender's reputational credit and the victim's perception of

deservingness of forgiveness but was only significant when an offender had low

reputational credit. These findings have meaningful implications for the impact that

reputational credit has on deservingness of forgiveness and demonstrates how offenders

who are categorised by low levels of trust and closeness, and have hurt the victim in the

past, are therefore less likely to be perceived as deserving of the victim's forgiveness,

especially following a highly hurtful, severe transgression. Interestingly however,

perceptions of the deservingness of forgiveness for offenders with low reputational

credit were found to be incongruent with whether or not they were actually forgiven,

and therefore future research should attempt to address the extent to which

deservingness of forgiveness predicts a victim's perception of whether a relationship is

worth restoring.

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