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Barriers to forgiveness

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Abstract

Society generally encourages individuals to forgive their transgressors because forgiveness can yield many psychological, physiological, and social benefits (Exline & Baumeister, 2000). Nevertheless, victims face barriers to forgiving others, and other people face obstacles that prevent them from encouraging victims to forgive. We aim to provide insight into the various barriers that deter forgiveness by examining the role of the various parties involved—victims, transgressors, and uninvolved third parties—in creating barriers to forgiveness. We contend that beliefs held by these various parties significantly reduce the likelihood that victims will forgive their transgressors. By identifying how these beliefs impede forgiveness, we can begin to understand more fully why convincing victims to forgive is often a challenge. In our discussion, we also suggest ways by which victims, transgressors, and third parties can overcome these barriers to forgiveness.

KEYWORDS

barriers, forgiveness, persuasion, third parties, transgressors, victims

1 | INTRODUCTION

Imagine that while working on a team project, one of your teammates claims credit for an idea you developed. Should you forgive this person? Would granting forgiveness mean sacrificing your right to justice? Would granting forgiveness essentially condone the other person's behavior? And if forgiveness signals condoning, might forgiveness increase the likelihood that he or she would transgress against you again? Moreover, would forgiving signal that you are weak and powerless relative to the other person because you chose not to stand up to them? These concerns about the potential negative consequences of forgiveness may serve as important barriers to forgiveness.

Transgressors and third parties may also face barriers to forgiveness. For example, the teammate responsible for unduly claiming credit may shy away from seeking forgiveness because doing so might make her appear to be self-serving. She may also not view herself as culpable for the wrongdoing and therefore may not believe she needs forgiveness. Similarly, third parties asked by victims for their perspectives may hesitate to encourage victims to forgive because they fear that they lack the psychological standing or right to encourage the victim to forgive. Furthermore, they may fear that the victim might view them as "siding" with the transgressor.

In this paper, we examine how victims, transgressors, and third parties can create potential barriers to forgiveness. We focus on each party's beliefs about forgiveness and what promoting forgiveness might signal. In line with other scholars (Kearns & Fincham, 2004; Zechmeister & Romero, 2002), we believe that a better understanding of these lay conceptions will provide useful insight on when forgiveness is likely to occur. We focus on beliefs that are related to victims', transgressors', and third parties' desires to maintain positive self-concepts and healthy relationships with the other involved parties. We also offer suggestions for overcoming these barriers.

We first provide a discussion of what it means to forgive, as well as the many psychological, physiological, and social benefits of forgiveness (Section 2). Next, we provide a discussion of why victims might find it difficult to convince themselves to forgive following a transgression (Section 3). We then review the reasons why transgressors might be hesitant to seek forgiveness (Section 4) and discuss why third parties might be disinclined to encourage victims to forgive (Section 5). Throughout these sections, we suggest techniques that people may employ to overcome these obstacles to forgiveness. Finally, we suggest that the study of the barriers to persuading victims to forgive, particularly the barriers created by transgressors and third parties, provides an interesting opportunity for future research and has the potential to yield both theoretical and practical insights (Section 6).

2 | WHAT IT MEANS TO FORGIVE

The barriers people face when deciding to forgive depend critically upon the meaning of forgiveness. Forgiveness is defined as "a transformation of motives, from the hostile emotions and desires for revenge and retribution that immediately follow one's victimization, toward a more prosocial orientation" (Wenzel & Okimoto, 2010; p. 402). This change in the victim's motivation can impact subsequent behavior toward one's transgressor (e.g., Karremans, Van Lange, & Holland, 2005).

Forgiveness can be experienced as an intrapersonal, within-victim phenomenon or can be expressed as an interpersonal, victim–perpetrator phenomenon (Baumeister, Exline, & Sommer, 1998; Finkel, Rusbult, Kumashiro, & Hannon, 2002); experienced forgiveness is intrapsychic and evident through one's actions and behavior toward the transgressor, expressed forgiveness, in contrast, is explicitly granted to the transgressor. In this work, we focus our discussion on experienced forgiveness, which has been the focus of much of the extant literature (see Adams, Zou, Inesi, & Pillutla, 2015 and Finkel et al., 2002 for notable exceptions). We note that this form of forgiveness might make it harder for the transgressor to ascertain that he or she has been forgiven given that the victim has not expressed his or her forgiveness. Victims, however, may nonetheless be concerned about the implications of conveying forgiveness through nonverbal behavior.

Work on the consequences of forgiveness overwhelmingly suggests that forgiveness yields a number of psychological, physiological, and benefits for both victims and transgressors. This existing work suggests that forgiveness *should* largely be encouraged following a transgression because a host of benefits follow from the decision to forgive.

2.1 | Psychological and physiological benefits of forgiveness

Forgiveness is linked with both psychological and physiological benefits. Forgiveness is believed to be part of the psychological healing process following a transgression (Hope, 1987), and is often a coping strategy that victims use to overcome the negative emotional state that Worthington and Scherer (2004) describe as unforgiveness. Indeed, it can play an important role in reducing psychological stress (Karremans, Van Lange, Ouwerkerk, & Kluwer, 2003), anxiety, anger, and grief that transgressions can cause (Coyle & Enright, 1997). Forgiveness also results in enhanced levels of psychological well-being (greater life satisfaction, positive affect, and state self-esteem), especially in high-commitment relationships (Karremans et al., 2003).

Forgiveness also yields important physiological benefits for the victim of a transgression. Victims' adverse reactions to interpersonal transgressions may lead to poor health outcomes because they can add stress to the victim's sympathetic nervous and immune systems (e.g., Kiecolt-Glaser, 1999; Kiecolt-Glaser, McGuire, Robles, & Glaser, 2002). Whereas unforgiveness can lead to increased skin conductance, heart rate, and blood pressure, forgiveness is associated with lowered physiological stress responses and superior health outcomes (van Oyen Witvliet, Ludwig, & Vander Laan, 2001).

2.2 | Social benefits of forgiveness

Victims and transgressors can also accrue social benefits from forgiveness. Forgiveness often repairs the interpersonal relationship between the victim and transgressor (McCullough, Worthington, & Rachal, 1997) and induces prosocial feelings in the victim toward the transgressor (McCullough, 2000; McCullough et al., 1997; Worthington, 2006), as well as others more generally (Karremans et al., 2005). Forgiveness also prompts prosocial feelings in the transgressor (Kelln & Ellard, 1999; Mooney, Strelan, & McKee, 2015). In these ways, forgiveness increases the likelihood that the interpersonal relationship between the victim and transgressor will persist beyond the transgression.

Given the many benefits associated with forgiveness, one might imagine that it would be relatively easy to convince victims to forgive their transgressors. In reality, however, a number of barriers deter victims from granting forgiveness, as well as transgressors and third parties from promoting forgiveness. We now turn our discussion to the various barriers that limit people's willingness to forgive or persuade others to forgive.

3 | BARRIERS THAT PREVENT VICTIMS FROM GRANTING FORGIVENESS

Following a transgression, victims often undergo a process of sensemaking (Weick, 1995) during which they try to understand the transgressor's underlying motivations as well as their own feelings toward the transgressor (Fehr & Gelfand, 2012). These feelings play an important role in the forgiveness process by informing victims of their reaction to the transgression (e.g., Clore, Schwarz, & Conway, 1994). Victims may then start engaging in a strategic analyses about how to respond to the transgression. The more negative victims' feelings toward the transgressor, the less likely victims are to want to grant forgiveness (Skarlicki, Folger, & Tesluk, 1999). This is especially likely to be the case when the transgression is severe and when the transgressor is seen as responsible (McCullough, Fincham, & Tsang, 2003). Victims' emotional reactions to the transgression may therefore play an important role in determining whether they are willing to forgive (e.g., McCullough, Bono, & Root, 2007).

3.1 | Beliefs that forgiveness sacrifices justice

Transgressions can create inequity in the victim–transgressor relationship because the victim is hurt more than the transgressor (Baumeister, Stillwell, & Heatherton, 1994). Victims often experience strong negative feelings and desires to restore justice following transgressions (Carlsmith, Darley, & Robinson, 2002). Victims may choose to seek punishment or revenge for the wrongdoing (Vidmar, 2000)—returning harm with harm. Alternatively, victims may choose to grant forgiveness to their transgressors. Forgiveness restores the imbalance created in the relationship by the transgression because the victim lets go of his or her negative feelings toward the transgressor for the harm caused (e.g., McCullough, 2000; McCullough & Witvliet, 2002). Furthermore, by forgiving, the victim relinquishes his or her right to seek retribution following the transgression. Victims may fear that by doing so they are sacrificing their right to justice by granting the transgressor forgiveness (Exline & Baumeister, 2000; Reed & Aquino, 2003). Indeed, some victims may believe that justice and forgiveness are mutually exclusive given that forgiveness appears to be inconsistent with the notion of "just deserts" (Wenzel & Okimoto, 2010). Victims may therefore be disinclined to listen to others' attempts to persuade them to forgive because they may wish to avoid sacrificing their right to justice.

Extant research on forgiveness may shed insight on whether justice and forgiveness are mutually exclusive. Contrary to victims' expectations, forgiveness may restore the victim's sense of justice. Forgiveness provides victims with the opportunity to decide how to resolve the transgression (Raj & Wiltermuth, 2016). It consequently can fulfill victims' symbolic needs for status and power following interpersonal transgressions (Shnabel & Nadler, 2008). Forgiveness also creates a sense of value consensus between the victim and transgressor because it signals the victim's faith and optimism that both parties' expectations of future interactions are aligned (Wenzel & Okimoto, 2010). Forgiveness may therefore increase, not decrease, victims' sense of justice following the transgression.

3.2 | Beliefs that forgiveness condones the transgressor's behavior

Victims may also be hesitant to forgive because of what forgiveness might signal to the transgressor about the severity of the transgression. Indeed, victims may fear that forgiveness signals that they were relatively unharmed by the transgression and are willing to condone the transgressor's behavior (e.g., Baumeister et al., 1998). Victims may fear that this makes them susceptible to future aggression by the transgressor if the transgressor believes that the transgression was relatively harmless and therefore forgivable (McNulty, 2011; Wallace, Exline, & Baumeister, 2008). Unforgiveness, in contrast, may communicate that the victim is unwilling to tolerate future wrongdoing. Victims may therefore believe that by forgiving and not standing up to their transgressor, they may be signaling their willingness to accept the transgressor's dominance over them.

While victims may be concerned that forgiveness condones the transgressor's behavior and may lead to future aggressive behavior from the transgressor, research suggests otherwise. Forgiveness, if expressed, may actually reduce the likelihood of repeat transgressions by one's transgressor because forgiveness induces a repentance motivation in the transgressor (Wallace et al., 2008). Other related work (e.g., Kelln & Ellard, 1999) suggests that transgressors are more likely to experience a prosocial orientation toward forgiving victims than unforgiving victims. This suggests that forgiveness may result in *less* aggressive future behavior by the transgressor.

3.3 | Beliefs that forgiveness makes the victim appear weak

Victims may also fear that forgiveness will make them weak and powerless in their relationship with the transgressor. Following a transgression, victims often feel inferior about their relative power compared to the transgressor. This is because the transgressor, by engaging in wrongdoing, demonstrates his or her ability to impact the victim's outcomes negatively (Heider, 1958). Victims may experience a heightened need to restore the power that was threatened by the transgression (Foster & Rusbult, 1999; Shnabel & Nadler, 2008) and may therefore wish to see their transgressor symbolically restore their power (Raj & Wiltermuth, 2016; Wenzel & Okimoto, 2010) by expressing responsibility and guilt (Baumeister et al., 1994). Victims, however, may fear that granting forgiveness, which entails letting go of the transgression and the transgressor's obligation to experience guilt, might make them appear weak and powerless in the eyes of the transgressor. Victims may also view themselves as weak for granting forgiveness—especially when the transgressor has failed to make proper amends for the wrongdoing (Luchies, Finkel, McNulty, & Kumashiro, 2010).

Research, however, suggests that victims may find forgiveness empowering. Although the transgression might make the victim feel powerless (Shnabel & Nadler, 2008), forgiveness is associated with a heightened sense of power over one's transgressor (Raj & Wiltermuth, 2016; Wenzel & Okimoto, 2010). By forgiving one's transgressor, the victim trivializes the transgression (Simon, Greenberg, & Brehm, 1995) and reappropriates control over the transgression and its resolution. In this way, forgiveness may actually increase, not decrease victim's sense of power—suggesting that victims' fears that they may appear weak or powerless as a consequence of forgiving may be unfounded.

3.4 | Belief that forgiveness makes the victim appear morally superior

People often view those who forgive as moral because those who forgive demonstrate a sense of humanity toward the transgressor (Exline, Worthington, Hill, & McCullough, 2003). However, transgressors may also view forgivers

as morally superior or morally self-righteous. This is because transgressors engage in moral comparison with victims and this comparison may threaten transgressors' moral self-concepts (Adams et al., 2015). Forgiveness may also lead to a social penalty from third parties and other victims who do not forgive the transgressor and feel threatened by the forgiver's moral behavior (Raj, Wiltermuth, & Adams, 2016).

Victims' concerns about appearing morally self-righteous as a consequence of forgiving have received some empirical support. Recent research (Adams et al., 2015) suggests that in the absence of agreement between the victim and the transgressor that a transgression occurred, expressions of forgiveness can backfire such that the ostensible transgressor views the forgiver as morally self-righteous. Victim–transgressor consensus about the transgression, however, may moderate the perception of forgivers as morally self-righteous. When there is a clear transgression, for example, transgressors may respond more favorably to expressions of forgiveness (Wallace et al., 2008).

In order to avoid this barrier to forgiveness, victims should assess whether the transgressor is aware of his or her role in the transgression. If so, then expressing forgiveness may not lead to perceptions of moral superiority. If, however, there is some ambiguity surrounding the transgression, it may be wise for the victim to experience but not explicitly express forgiveness. We note that while determining others' perceptions of the wrongdoing can be difficult (Kuran, 1997), perspective-taking might help victims assess the transgressor's point of view (Exline, Baumeister, Zell, Kraft, & Witvliet, 2008).

3.5 | The moderating role of an apology

In our discussion of barriers that prevent victims from granting forgiveness, we note that a transgressor apology might moderate these effects. An apology can play an important role in inducing forgiveness by eliciting empathy in the victim (McCullough et al., 1998). By confessing one's role in causing the victim harm (Weiner, Graham, Peter, & Zmuidinas, 1991) and by apologizing for the wrongdoing (Darby & Schlenker, 1982; Ohbuchi, Kameda, & Agarie, 1989), a transgressor can increase the likelihood that he or she is granted forgiveness by the victim. This is because an apology acknowledges that the transgressor violated social norms (Darby & Schlenker, 1982) and that he or she feels badly about doing so (Lazare, 2006). Additionally, a common element of apologies is forbearance—that is, the transgressor's promise to avoid such transgressions in the future (Scher & Darley, 1997). In these ways, an apology may assuage victims' concerns about the injustice gap created by the transgression, condoning the transgressor's behavior, and fears of appearing weak relative to one's transgressor.

4 | BARRIERS THAT PREVENT TRANSGRESSORS FROM SEEKING FORGIVENESS

Transgressors often experience guilt for the wrongdoing that occurred (Baumeister, Stillwell, & Heatherton, 1995). Guilt plays an important role following a transgression because it may encourage transgressors to repent for the wrongdoing and may motivate transgressors to make attempts to repair the relationship and seek forgiveness (Riek, 2010). Transgressors not only experience guilt, but may also experience a threat to their identity as moral individuals following the wrongdoing (Nadler & Shnabel, 2008; Shnabel & Nadler, 2008). Although forgiveness might allow transgressors to alleviate some of these negative feelings, transgressors may be hesitant to actively seek forgiveness.

4.1 | Beliefs that seeking forgiveness appears self-serving

In response to transgressions, victims can choose to seek revenge or punishment, which returns harm with harm and restores equity in the relationship (e.g., Gromet & Darley, 2006, 2009). Forgiveness, in contrast to seeking punishment or revenge, increases the symbolic debt created by the transgression because granting forgiveness means that victim returns harm with a good (Droll, 1984; Kelln & Ellard, 1999). Inequity in relationships often causes anxiety—and a

heightened concern about the need to restore and maintain equity in the relationship (Adams, 1965). The additional inequity created by the victim's decision to act prosocially by granting forgiveness is likely to increase the transgressor's equity anxiety. This equity anxiety is most likely to arise in nonclose relationships where individuals may be more concerned about maintaining equity. In close relationships, in contrast, equity concerns may not be as salient (e.g., Hatfield & Rapson, 2011).

To the extent that transgressors care about victims' and third parties' perceptions of them, transgressors may fear that seeking forgiveness may appear self-serving given that the victim receives nothing in return. Additionally, transgressors' pleas for forgiveness may provoke negative judgments from victims and third parties if they feel that the transgressor has not demonstrated sufficient remorse for his or her actions. This concern is likely to be exacerbated by the fact forgiveness is often portrayed as the morally-virtuous response to a transgression (North, 1987), which in contrast to the wrongdoing may make the transgressor appear to be morally inferior to the victim (Adams et al., 2015) and perhaps, self-serving.

While concerns about appearing self-serving may prevent transgressors from seeking forgiveness, research suggests that there are ways for transgressors overcome these barriers to forgiveness. Transgressors, for example, should be encouraged to reframe their view that seeking forgiveness is self-serving. Research demonstrates that forgiven transgressors experience heightened prosocial feelings toward victims (Mooney et al., 2015) and a greater willingness to comply with favor requests made by the victim (Kelln & Ellard, 1999). If transgressors were aware of these consequences of forgiveness, they may be more inclined to view forgiveness as less self-serving and more other-serving. Framed this way, forgiveness yields upsides for both the transgressor (whose conscience is cleared) and the victim (who can benefit from the transgressor's resulting prosocial intentions). Additionally, transgressors could reframe their desire to seek forgiveness as their opportunity to demonstrate remorse (Sandage, Worthingon, Hight, & Berry, 2000) and humility (Powers, Nam, Rowatt, & Hill, 2007) to the victim.

4.2 | Beliefs that one is not culpable

Transgressors may also find it difficult to admit their own culpability following the transgression (Stillwell & Baumeister, 1997), which we argue is another reason why it may be hard for transgressors to persuade victims to forgive. As Adams (this issue) highlights, transgressors and victims often have asymmetric perceptions of the transgression and may consequently come to disagree about which type of response (either an apology or forgiveness) is appropriate or warranted following a transgression. Indeed, victims and transgressors may have asymmetric perceptions regarding the intentionality of the transgression as well as the severity of the transgressor's actions (e.g., Kearns & Fincham, 2005; Zechmeister & Romero, 2002). Transgressors may be less likely than victims to view their actions as intentional (Adams & Inesi, 2016), as well as harmful and severe (Baumeister, Stillwell, & Wotman, 1990). Indeed, transgressors tend to minimize or exclude information that emphasizes their responsibility for the harm caused when they recall their own transgressions (Stillwell & Baumeister, 1997). Because of these asymmetries between victims and transgressors following the wrongdoing, transgressors may mispredict victims' anger (Baumeister et al., 1990) and may therefore misjudge when seeking forgiveness may be most effective.

Although transgressors may also have difficulty admitting their own culpability, research may shed light on how transgressors can overcome this important barrier to forgiveness. For example, transgressors should be encouraged to elicit the opinions of uninvolved third parties, who may be able to provide the transgressor with a fresh perspective on the transgression and the transgressor's culpability. These third parties could also encourage transgressors to try to understand the transgression from the victim's point-of-view. Consistent with findings from the perspective-taking literature that suggest that perspective-taking is beneficial following interpersonal conflict because it induces empathy (Exline et al., 2008), transgressors should be asked to identify the many reasons why victims may perceive their actions as transgressions. Transgressors who do so may be better able to identify their role in the conflict and consequently seek forgiveness for their actions.

5 | THIRD PARTIES AS BARRIERS TO FORGIVENESS

Victims and their transgressors are rarely the only individuals impacted by the relationship strain caused by a transgression. The transgression can also have a meaningful impact on individuals outside the victim–transgressor relationship. For example, individuals who are third parties to the transgression (in the sense that they are neither the transgressor nor the victim) may be consulted by victims about whether to grant forgiveness. This provides third parties with the opportunity either to encourage or discourage victims from forgiving. Indeed, third parties can play a critical role in reducing unforgiving motivations following a transgression (Eaton, Struthers, & Santelli, 2006). Nevertheless, third parties may be reticent to encourage victims to forgive.

5.1 | Beliefs that they lack psychological standing

Third parties might be reticent to persuade victims to forgive because they lack psychological standing. The personal and material cost resulting from the transgression plays an important role because it influences how victims choose to respond to the wrongdoing (Green & Cowden, 1992). Third parties may believe that they do not have the right to experience anger following the injustice especially given that they were less materially and emotionally affected by the wrongdoing (Miller, Effron, & Zak, 2009). Third parties may therefore believe that they do not have the right to encourage the victim to forgive his or her transgressor.

Third parties may also be concerned about providing victims with incorrect advice regarding whether to grant or deny the transgressor forgiveness. Victims may perceive third-party advisors as hypocritical (e.g., Effron & Miller, 2015), especially if the third-party advisors have not experienced similar transgressions. Third parties may therefore fear that attempts to persuade the victim to forgive may be viewed by the victim as presumptuous. As such, third parties may err on the side of silence rather than encouraging victims to forgive.

Existing work on moralization might shed some insight on how third parties can increase their sense of psychological standing, and consequently, their willingness to promote forgiveness. In the case of transgressions that violate sacred values—moral imperatives that individuals are unwilling to compromise (Tetlock, 2003)—third parties may be willing to intercede even when unaffected by the transgression (e.g., Skitka, 2002). This willingness to intercede is especially likely if an issue has been moralized (Effron & Miller, 2012). Third parties may therefore be more willing to promote forgiveness if the act of doing so is moralized. We note, however, that moralization might also serve as a barrier to forgiveness if the transgression, rather than the act of forgiveness, is moralized. That is, if the transgression is viewed as violating the basic norms of justice from the perspective of third parties (Effron & Miller, 2012), third parties may be less likely to promote forgiveness.

5.2 | Beliefs that the victim may view them as taking the transgressor's side

Additionally, third parties may find it difficult to encourage victims to forgive because they may believe that victims would view them as siding with the transgressor by encouraging them to "wipe the slate clean" following the transgression. Consistent with extant research that suggests that victims react negatively to those who minimize transgressions (Eaton, 2013), victims may view third parties who encourage them to forgive as lacking in empathy. Indeed, this might affect the extent to which the victim trusts the third party and may cause strain between the victim and third-party individual. To the extent that the third party is close to the victim and wishes to remain that way, he or she may be hesitant to convince the victim to forgive given this potential downside of doing so.

While third parties may be hesitant to encourage the victim to forgive for fear that the victim may view the third-party individual as siding with the transgressor, there may be ways for third parties to avoid this possibility victims. Third parties should be encouraged to help the victim identify the psychological, physiological, and social benefits can accrue as a result of forgiving the transgressor. By doing so, victims may be able to view third parties' attempts to promote forgiveness as serving their interests rather than the interests of the transgressor.

5.3 | Beliefs that forgiveness is not warranted

Third parties may also believe that forgiveness is not warranted following the transgression—and may therefore overtly advocate or imply that the victim should not grant forgiveness to his or her transgressor. Following a transgression in which a close other has been victimized, a "heroic motive"—that is, a desire to protect the victim—may emerge in third parties (Meindl & Lerner, 1983). Third parties may therefore make more negative attributions about the transgressor's behavior than even victims might and may ironically be less likely to forgive the transgressor than the actual victim. Furthermore, if third parties believe that forgiveness and justice are mutually exclusive (e.g., Armour & Umbreit, 2005), they are less likely to encourage the victim to forgive. We may therefore anticipate third parties to sometimes serve as barriers to forgiveness because they may actually advise victims against doing so.

Although third parties may believe that forgiveness is not warranted following a transgression, existing research can shed some insight into how third parties can overcome this barrier. To do so, third parties should be encouraged to imagine the likelihood that they could or would commit a similar transgression. Research demonstrates that such simulations might increase the likelihood of forgiveness (Wallace et al., 2008) and, consequently, the likelihood that third parties promote forgiveness.

6 | CONCLUSION

Identifying the potential barriers to convincing one's self to forgive, as well as convincing others (i.e., the victimized individual) to forgive, is critical for understanding when and why victims will respond to conflict by granting or denying forgiveness. While the extant literature on forgiveness has grown substantially in the past two decades (Kearns & Fincham, 2004), there is still much that remains unclear about individuals' responses to transgressions.

6.1 | The role of other actors on forgiveness

Much of the work on forgiveness focuses on victims' responses to transgressions. Such a focus overlooks the role of other relevant actors in the forgiveness process. In this review, we have argued that transgressors and third parties play an important role in influencing a victim's willingness to forgive. Yet, there is surprisingly little work that examines the way in which these various actors might influence victims' willingness to grant forgiveness. Both from a theoretical and practical standpoint, the literature would benefit from work that seeks to understand when and why victims may be more amenable to forgiving their transgressors—and which actors may create important barriers to forgiveness. We suggest that contextual factors, such as whether other victims are involved and whether these other victims are inclined to forgive, will play a critical role in determining which barriers are most salient following the transgression.

6.2 | Different types of transgressions

Our discussion of the potential barriers of forgiveness highlights the role that victims, transgressors, and third parties play in preventing forgiveness. We note that we examine these barriers in the context of relatively minor transgressions that might occur on a day-to-day basis, in which the transgression is unambiguous. The type of transgression, however, might play an important role in which barriers might prevent forgiveness. For example, the severity of the transgression might moderate the effects we describe in this review. That is, following severe transgressions such as rape or murder, victims' concerns about appearing weak by granting forgiveness are likely to be stronger. Indeed, transgressors and third parties might also find it more difficult to encourage the victim to forgive given the seriousness of the transgression. The ambiguity of the transgression (i.e., whether there was even a transgression) might also play an important role in moderating some of the barriers described in this review. Future work could identify the potential moderating roles of transgression severity and ambiguity on the barriers to forgiveness discussed in this review.

6.3 | Overcoming the barriers to persuading victims to forgive

In addition to identifying the barriers to forgiveness, we suggest that future work should also examine how the various parties involved in the transgression and its resolution can overcome the barriers created by each party's beliefs. We suggest that it would be important to determine whether the concerns that prevent the various parties from persuading victims to forgive are real or imagined concerns. While there is some research that might speak to victims', transgressors', and third-parties' concerns, future work is needed. We suggest that future work along these lines could yield insights on how best to encourage victims to forgive and could therefore play an important role in mending relationships threatened by transgressions. Furthermore, it is essential that these findings be disseminated from academic journals to popular press outlets, so that individuals are aware of the consequences of persuading others to forgive and whether these concerns are warranted.

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