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Situational, Interpersonal, and Intrapersonal Characteristic Associations With Adolescent Conflict Forgiveness

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ABSTRACT. Given the voluntary nature of adolescent friendships, forgiveness of interpersonal transgressions has been identified as a critical aspect of maintaining these relationships. However, transgression forgiveness is related to a range of situational (e.g., transgression severity), interpersonal (e.g., friendship commitment), and intrapersonal (e.g., victim’s empathy) factors. Data from 161 adolescents were used to examine the nature of the relationships between these factors and forgiveness and to examine the differential association patterns for adolescent boys and girls. Results for the overall adolescent sample indicated both situational and interpersonal factor associations with forgiveness ($R^2 = .52$, $p < .001$). Examination of separate female and male forgiveness reports indicated similar interpersonal factor associations and differential situational factor associations with female ($R^2 = .46, p < .001$), and male ($R^2 = .60, p < .001$) forgiveness. Findings suggest the likelihood of forgiving may be contextually dependent, and that researchers should consider transgression, relationship, and intrapersonal characteristics when examining forgiveness. Further, the present study suggests the contextual factors associated with forgiveness may be further differentiated by gender.

Keywords: adolescence, conflict, forgiveness, friendships

Conflict contributes to the reorganization and development of adolescent friendships by providing opportunities to redefine the relationship boundaries and
expectations, and restoring friendship equity and intimacy after a conflict is often viewed as an important friendship goal (Hartup, 1992; Laursen, 1993; Laursen, Hartup, & Koplas, 1996). The assumption that conflict is influential in reorganizing and assisting in the development of adolescent friendships is dependent on successfully resolving the interpersonal difference, which resulted in conflict (Enright, Santos, & Al-Mabuk, 1989; Laursen, 1993). Adolescents develop numerous goals and strategies for resolving conflicts, and research suggests close friends use negotiation more than other strategies (e.g., submission, disengagement, coercion) to repair the relationship (Hartup, 1992; Laursen, 1993; Rose & Asher, 1999). Further, conflict’s impact on adolescent friendships is dependent on the resistance of the transgressed individual to work toward conflict resolution and to forgive the transgression (Enright, Gassin, & Wu, 1992; Enright et al., 1989). Although forgiveness has not been extensively investigated in the adolescent conflict research, the role of forgiveness is an important factor related to the maintenance of the relationship. Enright et al. (1992) pointed out that forgiveness is not the same as conflict resolution in that forgiveness neither minimizes the transgression’s impact on the relationship nor excuses the transgression. One way to begin conflict resolution and repair the relationship after a violation is for the individual who has been hurt to forgive the violating friend (Baumeister, Exline, & Sommer, 1998), and the communication and trust restored through forgiveness is a first step toward conflict resolution (Enright et al., 1992; North, 1987).

Forgiveness has been identified as a critical aspect of maintaining close relationships, and forgiveness in friendships is especially important given the voluntary nature of these relationships. Forgiveness occurring between two individuals in a relationship is generally referred to as interpersonal forgiveness and involves one member as the transgressor and the other as a victim (Finkel, Rusbult, Kumashiro, & Hannon, 2002). Specifically, forgiveness is often warranted only after an individual has been emotionally, physically, or psychologically hurt by another person (Koutsos, Wertheim, & Kornblum, 2008), and this hurt often occurs in friendships as a result of interpersonal conflict. The process of forgiveness is often described as a relationship maintenance behavior characterized by attempts to maintain a positive interaction through the avoidance of revenge or getting even with the transgressor (Worthington, 1998). However, Enright et al. (1992) and North (1987) stated that interpersonal forgiveness is not the same as forgetting the transgression or pardoning the individual as the forgiver neither erases the betrayal from memory nor reconciles with the transgressor. Rather, forgiveness requires the individual display positive behavior, cognition, and affect in place of negative responses commonly associated with transgressions (Al-Mabuk, Enright, & Cardis, 1995; Enright, Freedman, & Rique, 1998; Enright et al., 1992; Subkoviak et al., 1995).

Situational Factor Associations With Forgiveness

The likelihood of an individual forgiving a transgression is associated with transgression-specific characteristics (e.g., transgression severity) as well as
interpersonal (e.g., relationship quality) and intrapersonal factors (e.g., victim’s gender), and examining these factors is an important part of understanding the process of conflict forgiveness (Finkel et al., 2002; Koutsos et al., 2008; Subkoviak et al., 1995). A primary situational factor association with forgiveness concerns the perception of an interpersonal offense (McCullough, Worthington, & Rachal, 1997). Transgressions perceived as severe and personally hurtful are associated with avoidance of the transgressor, a perceived need for retaliation, and fewer occurrences of forgiveness (Boon & Sulsky, 1997; Brown & Phillips, 2005; McCullough et al., 1997). Transgression severity is associated with the victim perceiving damage to the relationship, and this perceived relationship damage is associated with feelings of betrayal and a decreased likelihood of forgiveness (Leary, Springer, Negel, Ansell, & Evans, 1998). Increasing perception of transgression severity is further related to an increase in blame and a decrease in willingness to forgive (Boon & Sulsky, 1997), and the decreased willingness to forgive may occur despite a well-adjusted and close interpersonal relationship (McCullough et al., 1997).

In addition to perceived transgression severity, the resulting anger associated with the perceived transgression is also predictive of an individual’s propensity to forgive the transgression (Gottman, 1993). Anger is often a result of feeling physically, psychologically, or socially injured and is negatively associated with forgiveness (Coyle & Enright, 1998). Anger acts as a barrier to forgiveness (Berry, Parrott, O’Connor, & Wade, 2001), and individuals who respond to transgressions with anger have long-term thoughts of revenge and a low consideration for forgiveness (Barber, Maltby, & Macaskill, 2005). As a result, anger resulting from a perceived transgression inhibits the likelihood of forgiving the transgression as the strength of the anger increases.

A final situational factor associated with forgiveness concerns whether the transgressor issues an apology following the transgression. An apology is an initial indicator that the transgressor is remorseful about committing the transgression and recognizes that a harmful act has occurred (Darby & Schlenker, 1982), and individuals are more likely to forgive a transgression when they perceive an apology has been given (McCullough et al., 1997). Findings by Bachman and Guerrero (2006) support this association in that they found perceptions of receiving an apology were associated with increased forgiveness, and forgiveness for a specific transgression may increase when an apology is offered by the transgressor in this situation (Koutsos et al., 2008).

Interpersonal Characteristic Associations With Forgiveness

Research on forgiveness has indicated relationship commitment (e.g., a long-term orientation and partner attachment associated with relationship maintenance; Finkel et al., 2002) provides a source of positive motivation for forgiving another’s transgression (McCullough, Fincham, & Tsang, 2003). Park and Enright (1997) suggested that forgiveness is related to relationship quality. The intrinsic feature
of relationship commitment, desiring to remain in a relationship when faced with a transgression, minimizes conflict’s negative impact on the relationship and leads to the re-establishment of relationship harmony (McCullough et al., 2003). For example, Rusbult, Verette, Whitney, Slovik, and Lipkus (1991) reported individuals committed to their relationship inhibited destructive behavior (e.g., separating from or treating poorly the transgressor) and displayed constructive behaviors (e.g., discussion with the transgressor) when faced with conflict. Further, Finkel et al. (2002) and Karremans and Van Lange (2004) reported individuals who were strongly committed to their relationship were more likely to report forgiving a partner’s transgression than individuals who expressed low levels of relationship commitment.

**Intrapersonal Characteristic Associations With Forgiveness**

Empathy is viewed as a vicarious emotional reaction to perceived emotional experiences of others and is a primary emotional response related to forgiveness as forgiveness is often related to an individual’s ability to understand the transgressor (McCullough et al., 1997; Mehrabian & Epstein, 1972). When discussed in context of conflict responses, empathy allows a victim not only to frame the transgression in light of their previous behavior but also to take into consideration the transgressor’s emotions and motivations (Exline, Baumeister, Zell, Kraft, & Witvliet, 2008; McCullough et al., 1997). Given the victim’s understanding of his or her own behavior and of the transgressor’s emotions, empathy may reduce the victim’s motivation for revenge and may strengthen the motivation to reconcile (Davis & Gold, 2011; McCullough et al., 1998). According to Davis and Gold (2011), empathy increases the likelihood the transgressor will desire continuation of the relationship and will forgive the transgression. As a result, the salience of empathy overrides the transgression and leads to a greater likelihood of forgiveness for the transgression (McCullough et al., 1998; McCullough et al., 1997).

**Gender Differences in Situational, Interpersonal, and Intrapersonal Forgiveness Associations**

Gender differences are consistently reported in the conflict literature with adolescent girls favoring relationship-maintenance conflict goals and using more compromise as a resolution strategy when compared to adolescent boys (Laursen & Collins, 1994; Rose & Asher, 2004). Further, Chaux (2003) reported girls are more likely than boys to use conflict management strategies during a relationship transgression aimed at minimizing conflict and its potential impact on the relationship status (e.g., engaging in interpersonal discussion of the transgression with the transgressor). Despite these conflict goal and strategy differences, no consistent gender differences associated with the use of forgiveness have been reported in the literature. For example, Enright et al. (1989) and Park and Enright (1997)
found adolescent girls and boys to be equally forgiving regardless of transgression severity.

Although specific gender differences associated with forgiveness are not indicated in the literature, the factors predicting the use of forgiveness may differ according to gender. As previously stated, research has indicated situational, interpersonal, and intrapersonal factor associations with forgiveness. Because girls and boys approach relationships (and, as a result, relationship transgressions) differently, the salience and relevance of the factors related to forgiveness likely differs for girls and boys. Adolescent development is characterized by the formation of relationships outside the family, and maintenance of these relationships when faced with a transgression (e.g., conflict) is a necessary and integral aspect of these relationships (Collins, Laursen, Mortensen, Luebker, & Ferreira, 1997; Hartup, 1992). When examining the means adolescents use to assuring a conflict does not damage or end a relationship, research indicates adolescent girls and boys approach relationship maintenance differently when they perceive a transgression has occurred (Laursen, 1995; Rose & Asher, 1999). For example, the differential use of relationship conflict strategies employed by adolescent girls has been associated with their focus on maintaining relationship intimacy and commitment (Foot, Chapman, & Smith, 1977; Johnson, 2005; Laursen, 1995). Boys, however, respond to transgressions according to their perceived loss of relationship authority and generally employ more assertive conflict strategies that assist in maintaining their personal and relationship status (Clark & Bittle, 1992; Johnson, 2005; Laursen, 1995; Laursen & Collins, 1994; Maccoby, 1990). Specifically, girls may consider relationship characteristics (e.g., relationship commitment) and the transgressor’s attempt to maintain the relationship (e.g., offering an apology) when responding to conflict. Boys’ responses to conflict, however, may be associated more with the transgression-specific characteristics (e.g., transgression severity) and resulting anger. As a result, adolescent girls’ and boys’ focus on the specific situational, interpersonal, and intrapersonal characteristics associated with forgiveness may predict differential use of forgiveness.

**Present Study**

Use of forgiveness in response to a transgression is associated with situational, interpersonal, and intrapersonal characteristics. Although there are consistent research findings regarding the links between these factors and forgiveness, little research has supported differential associations for girls and boys. Prior to examining the factors associated with girls’ and boys’ forgiveness reports, we examined the relation between transgression characteristics (i.e., severity, anger, and apologizing), empathy for the transgressor, relationship commitment, and adolescent forgiveness for the total sample in order to establish the proposed forgiveness relations indicated in the previous research. Examination of situational transgression characteristics indicates the use of forgiveness is related to the perceived severity
of the transgression, experienced anger, and whether the transgressor apologizes for the transgression. Research examining empathy and relationship commitment indicates associations with forgiveness. Therefore, we hypothesized the following:

Hypothesis 1a ($H_{1a}$): Participants’ reports of forgiveness would be positively associated with the transgressor apologizing, the participants’ reported empathy, and the participants’ reported relationships commitment.

$H_{1b}$: Participants’ reports of forgiveness would be negatively associated with their perceived transgression severity and anger in response to the transgression.

Next, we examined the differential association between the situational, interpersonal, and intrapersonal transgression characteristics and girls’ and boys’ use of forgiveness. Although previous research does not indicate gender differences in forgiveness, adolescent girls and boys differ in their approach to relationship maintenance when faced with conflict in their relationships (i.e., a transgression), and this differential focus likely leads to different situational, interpersonal, and intrapersonal characteristic associations with girls’ and boys’ use of forgiveness. Based on previous conflict research, we hypothesized the following:

$H_{2a}$: Girls’ reports of forgiveness would be positively associated with the transgressor apologizing, their reported empathy, and their commitment to the relationships.

$H_{2b}$: Boys’ reports of forgiveness were hypothesized to be negatively associated with their perceptions of the transgression severity and their anger in response to the transgression.

Transgression severity and anger were not expected to be related to girls’ reports of forgiveness, and relationship commitment, empathy, and the transgressor issuing an apology was not expected to be related to boys’ reports of forgiveness.

**Method**

**Participants**

The sample was selected from Grades 7, 8, and 11 in midwestern city and consisted of 161 adolescents (95 boys and 66 girls). The sample comprised 55 Grade 7 adolescents (31 girls: $M_{age} = 12.81$ years, $SD = 0.40$ years; 24 boys: $M_{age} = 12.67$, $SD = 0.48$ years), 43 Grade 9 adolescents (20 girls: $M_{age} = 14.60$ years, $SD = 0.50$ years; 23 boys, $M_{age} = 14.73$ years, $SD = 0.52$ years), and 63 Grade 11 adolescents (44 girls: $M_{age} = 16.39$ years, $SD = 0.49$ years; 19 boys: $M_{age} = 16.56$ years, $SD = 0.62$ years). The sample was reflective of the school districts’ population in that the sample was predominately White (1% of the sample were
from minority backgrounds) and came from lower middle- and middle-class families. Participant recruitment was conducted using convenience sampling. We asked school administrators to select classrooms, and the researchers contacted each parent or legal guardian of the selected students by mail. The correspondence contained a written description of the study, an informed consent form for the parent or legal guardian to sign, and an informed assent form for the participant to sign (participants were also provided the opportunity to complete the informed assent form in class). Participants were required to return the signed consent and assent forms to their teacher in order to participate. Participants who agreed to participate were entered into a drawing for movie tickets.

**Demographic Measures**

Participants were asked to provide their age, grade, gender, and the first initial of a same-sex friend. They were instructed to write the first initial of their friend to ensure that they would be thinking of this person while completing all of the measures.

**Transgression Situational Characteristics and Forgiveness Measures**

Transgression severity, participant anger, transgressor apologizing, and adolescent forgiveness were assessed using six randomly ordered hypothetical vignettes. This measurement technique enables sampling from a variety of situations and controlling for the context in which the situation occurs, while also introducing manipulation of the variables of interest, thus mimicking an experimental approach. Further, Wernli (2006) found no significant differences in forgiveness responses to hypothetical and actual transgressions using the same measurement items with the same sample, and hypothetical vignettes have been shown to be a valid measure in assessing conflict (Rose & Asher, 1999). The vignettes used in the present study described personal transgressions concerning (a) violation of trust, (b) backstabbing, (c) deceit, (d) missed appointment, (e) irresponsibility, and (f) broken promise (see Appendix for vignette examples) and were similar to common issues causing conflicts as reported by adolescents in junior and senior high school (Laursen, 1995; Youniss & Smollar, 1985).

In order to determine the likelihood the hypothetical vignettes described a realistic situation, the participants were asked to rate their response to a question (“How realistic is this situation?”) on a 5-point Likert-type scale ranging from 1 (not at all realistic) to 5 (extremely realistic). Realism responses ranged from an average low of 3.00 (deceit) to an average high of 3.54 (backstabbing). A 2 Gender × 3 Grade × 6 Vignette repeated measures analysis of variance on vignette realism indicated a significant grade by vignette interaction difference in realism reports, Wilks’s $\lambda = .88$, $F(8, 300) = 2.05$, $p < .05$. Examination of the interaction indicated Grade 7 participants reported lower realism levels for the deceit and...
missed appointment (average realism = 2.82, \(SD = .18\) and 2.77, \(SD = 1.7\), respectively) vignettes than the violation of trust, backstabbing, irresponsibility, or broken promises vignettes (average realisms = 3.29–3.66, \(SDs = .16\) to .18). No significant differences were indicated for Grade 9 and Grade 11 vignette realism scores. Although other studies using vignettes to examine adolescent conflict do not report participant validation of the hypothetical situations (i.e., Rose & Asher 1999), realism scores in the present study show that girls and boys across grades rated each vignette as depicting a moderately realistic and possible conflict situation that could occur (i.e., mean realism scores of 3.00 or higher).

Transgression severity. In order to assess participants’ perception of the transgression’s severity, each participant was asked to rate the severity of the transgression on a 5-point Likert-type scale by answering, “How would you rate the severity (how serious it is) of this transgression?” Participant responses ranged from 1 (not at all severe) to 5 (extremely severe). Severity scores were summed across vignettes.

Participant anger. Anger to the hypothetical transgression was measured by asking each participant to answer, “How angry would you be if your friend did this to you?” on a 5-point Likert-type scale. Participant responses ranged from 1 (not at all angry) to 5 (extremely angry). Anger scores were summed across vignettes.

Transgressor apology. Transgressor apologizing associations were examined through the manipulation of the vignettes. A random subsample of participants at each grade received vignettes that ended with the friend apologizing for the transgression. The last sentence in the apology vignettes was, “Your friend comes to you and freely offers an apology for hurting you. Your friend says ‘I am so sorry for hurting you. I feel terrible about it. I should not have done that to you.” Fifty percent of each grade level received vignette packages including transgressor apologies. To ensure equal distribution of the apology and no apology vignettes, a series of Grade \(\times\) Gender \(\times\) Vignette Type chi-square analyses were conducted. Results failed to indicate significant differences in the number of participants who received the apology or the no apology vignette, all \(\chi^2(1) < 1, ps = .44–.53\).

Forgiveness. Participant forgiveness responses were measured by having participants answer the following questions: (a) How likely would you be to hold a grudge against your friend? (b) How likely would you be to forgive your friend in this situation? and (c) I would still want to be a friend with this person. Responses were recorded using a 5-point Likert-type scale ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree). Responses to the three questions for each vignette were summed to yield a forgiveness score for each vignette with higher scores indicating higher levels of participant forgiveness. The forgiveness scores from the six vignettes were summed for each participant to yield a forgiveness score for each participant. A Pearson correlation analysis of the three forgiveness questions
showed consistency in responses ($rs = .49–.65, ps < .05$). Internal reliability (Chronbach’s $\alpha$) for each vignette forgiveness response was .77 (trust), .88 (back-stabbing), .80 (deceit), .71 (missed appointment), .77 (broken promise), and .82 (irresponsibility).

**Relationship Commitment Measure**

Participants’ commitment level in their friendships was measured using Rusbult’s (1980) five-item commitment scale. This 5-point Likert-type scale asks participants to indicate features as the strength of commitment, stability, and the likely duration of a specified relationship on a scale ranging from 1 (*not very; quite short*) to 5 (*completely committed; very long duration*). In the present study, the statement, “For what length of time do you think this friendship will last?” was changed to “How long do you think this relationship will last compared to the average relationship?” Participants were told to report on relationship commitment as it related to the friend identified on the demographic information questionnaire. Scores from the five items were summed to yield a commitment score and ranged from 5 (low commitment) to 25 (high commitment). Rusbult reported an internal reliability ($\alpha$) of .80, and the internal reliability for the present sample was .74.

**Empathy Measure**

Empathy was assessed with Bryant’s (1982) empathy scale. The measure contains 22 items that ask participants to report their emotional response in relation to the emotional experiences of others (i.e., “I really like to watch people open presents, even when I don’t get a present myself.”). Responses were measured using a 9-point Likert-type scale with choices ranging from −4 (*very strong disagreement*) to +4 (*very strong agreement*). All items were summed to yield an empathy score with a range of −88 (low empathy) to 88 (high empathy). Bryant reported an internal consistency ($\alpha$) for adolescents of .79 with test–retest reliability of .83. The internal reliability ($\alpha$) for the present study was .77.

**Procedure**

Data were collected in large groups, with collection sessions lasting approximately 45 min. The participants were told that the study was concerned with adolescent friendships, transgressions that occur in those friendships, and forgiveness. The participants were assured of the anonymity and confidentiality of their answers. They were then given a packet containing all the measures, and instructions about completing each measure. The demographic questionnaire was the first page of the each packet, followed by the hypothetical vignettes in a random order, and the empathy index and the commitment scale in random order. After
data collection, the participants were thanked and debriefed. Participants entered into a drawing for movie tickets.

Results

Preliminary Analyses

Given scale score differences across the forgiveness predictors and forgiveness measure, scores for transgression severity, anger, relationship commitment, empathy, and forgiveness were standardized. Prior to testing our proposed prediction of forgiveness, a 3 Grade × 2 Gender multivariate analysis of variance was used to examine differences in participant reports of transgression severity, anger, relationship commitment, empathy, and forgiveness. Results indicated a significant main effect of gender, Wilk’s $\lambda = .89$, $F(8, 300) = 2.20$, $p < .05$. Examination of the gender differences supported $H_{1a}$. Girls reported higher relationship commitment ($p < .05$) and empathy ($p < .001$) scores than did boys. Girls reported higher levels of transgression severity ($p < .05$) and anger ($p < .01$) than did boys (see Table 1). Results did not indicate significant gender differences for forgiveness.

Correlation Analysis of Forgiveness Predictor and Forgiveness Responses

Pearson product and Spearman correlation analyses were conducted to examine the (a) associations between forgiveness predictors and (b) associations between forgiveness predictors and forgiveness for the total sample and for girls and boys.

Total sample. Correlation analysis of sample-wide forgiveness revealed significant associations between forgiveness and forgiveness predictors examined in the present study. As shown in Table 2, results indicated positive correlations between

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>TABLE 1. Gender Differences in Forgiveness Predictor and Forgiveness Reports</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Girls (SE)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Transgression severity$^*$</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Anger$^{**}$</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Relationship commitment$^*$</td>
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<tr>
<td>Empathy$^{***}$</td>
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<tr>
<td>Forgiveness</td>
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</table>

Note. Standardized scores are presented with standard errors in parentheses. Female and male standardized means significantly different at $^*p < .05$, $^{**}p < .01$, and $^{***}p < .001$
forgiveness and relationship commitment and between forgiveness and vignette apology ($p < .001$). Significant negative correlations were indicated between forgiveness and anger and between forgiveness and transgression severity ($p < .001$). Examination of correlations between predictors indicated positive associations between empathy and relationship commitment ($p < .01$) and between anger and transgression severity ($p < .001$). Because the role of being offered an apology when considering forgiving a transgression was evaluated using a situation manipulation, we wanted to ensure participant reports of forgiveness predictors were not related to the hypothetical situation characteristics. Correlations failed to indicate any significant association between the situation apology manipulation and participant reports on the predictor variables which indicated the offering of an apology in the vignette was not associated with variable responses other than forgiveness.

**Girls.** Correlation analysis of female forgiveness revealed significant associations between forgiveness and forgiveness predictors examined in the present study. As shown in Table 3, results indicated positive correlations between forgiveness and vignette apology ($p < .01$). Significant negative correlations were indicated between forgiveness and anger and between forgiveness and transgression severity ($p < .001$). Examination of correlations between predictors indicated positive associations between age and empathy ($p < .05$) and between anger and transgression severity ($p < .001$). As with the examination of the total sample forgiveness responses, we examined forgiveness predictor and vignette apology correlations. Correlations failed to indicate any significant association between the situation

| TABLE 2. Situational, Interpersonal, and Intrapersonal Characteristics Associations With Forgiveness |
|---------------------------------------------------|-----|-----|-----|-----|-----|-----|-----|
| 1. Age                                             |     | -0.08 | -0.03 | -0.01 |  0.09 |  0.10 |  0.07 |
| 2. Transgression severity                          |     | -0.77*** |       |  0.02 |  0.03 |  0.12 | -0.56*** |
| 3. Anger                                           |     |       | -0.04 | -0.01 |  0.05 |  0.14 | -0.61*** |
| 4. Apology offered                                 |     |       |       | -0.05 | -0.05 |  0.17* |
| 5. Relationship commitment                        |     |       |       |       |  0.22** |  0.28** |
| 6. Empathy                                        |     |       |       |       |       |  0.11 |
| 7. Forgiveness                                    |     |       |       |       |       |       |

*Note. Spearman nonparametric correlation coefficient is reported for apology offered, which was coded as -1 (no apology offered vignette) or 1 (apology offered vignette).

*p < .05. **p < .01. ***p < .001.*
TABLE 3. Situational, Interpersonal, and Intrapersonal Characteristics Associations With Forgiveness for Girls and Boys

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>1</th>
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<th>5</th>
<th>6</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Age</td>
<td></td>
<td>.05</td>
<td>.06</td>
<td>.02</td>
<td>-.24*</td>
<td>.08</td>
<td>-.01</td>
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<td>2. Transgression severity</td>
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<td>-.70***</td>
<td>-.08</td>
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<td>.02</td>
<td>-.03</td>
<td>.03</td>
<td>-.57***</td>
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<td>-.06</td>
<td>.15</td>
<td>.08</td>
<td></td>
<td>.02</td>
<td>-.04</td>
<td>.29**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. Relationship commitment</td>
<td>.07</td>
<td>-.07</td>
<td>-.09</td>
<td>.07</td>
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<td>.12</td>
<td>.20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6. Empathy</td>
<td>.03</td>
<td>-.14</td>
<td>-.06</td>
<td>-.08</td>
<td>.19</td>
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<td>.21</td>
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<tr>
<td>7. Forgiveness</td>
<td>.18</td>
<td>-.68***</td>
<td>-.68***</td>
<td>.02</td>
<td>.38**</td>
<td>.21</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note. Correlations for girls and boys are presented above and below the diagonal, respectively. Spearman nonparametric correlation coefficient is reported for apology offered, which was coded as −1 (no apology offered vignette) or 1 (apology offered vignette). *p < .05. **p < .01. ***p < .001.

apology manipulation and participant reports which indicates offering of an apology in the vignette did not potentially influence female forgiveness predictor responses.

Boys. Correlation analysis of male forgiveness also revealed significant associations between forgiveness and forgiveness predictors examined in the present study. As shown in Table 3, results indicated positive correlations between forgiveness and relationship commitment (p < .01). Significant negative correlations were indicated between forgiveness and anger and between forgiveness and transgression severity (ps < .001). Correlations between predictors indicated positive associations between age and transgression severity (p < .05) and between anger and transgression severity (p < .001). Correlations failed to indicate any significant association between the situation apology manipulation and boys’ forgiveness predictor reports which indicates offering of an apology in the vignette did not potentially influence male forgiveness predictor responses.

Correlation gender differences. Gender differences in the correlations between predictor variables and forgiveness were analyzed due to the differential hypothesized prediction of forgiveness for girls and boys. As shown in Table 4, two-tailed Fisher r to z transformations indicated a significant gender difference for the anger–forgiveness (p < .01) and apology–forgiveness (p < .05) correlations, which suggests stronger variable associations for girls than for boys. Contrary to our proposed prediction hypotheses, girls’ anger score was more strongly associated with forgiveness than for boys. Consistent with our proposed prediction hypotheses, however, the offering of an apology in the vignette was more strongly...
TABLE 4. Gender Differences in Situational, Interpersonal, and Intrapersonal Correlations With Forgiveness

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Girls ($n = 95$)</th>
<th>Boys ($n = 66$)</th>
<th>Fisher $z$</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Severity—forgiveness</td>
<td>-.46</td>
<td>-.28</td>
<td>-1.28</td>
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<tr>
<td>Anger—forgiveness</td>
<td>-.57</td>
<td>-.20</td>
<td>-2.72**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Apology—forgiveness</td>
<td>.29</td>
<td>-.06</td>
<td>2.19*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Commitment—forgiveness</td>
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<td>.07</td>
<td>0.81</td>
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<tr>
<td>Empathy—forgiveness</td>
<td>.21</td>
<td>.03</td>
<td>1.12</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Note.* $^{*}p < .05$; $^{**}p < .01$; $^{***}p < .001$.

associated with girls’ forgiveness than for boys. No significant gender differences were indicated for the remaining predictor-forgiveness correlations.

**Prediction of Adolescent Forgiveness Responses**

Prediction analysis of forgiveness responses was conducted using hierarchical regression analysis. Analyses were conducted using a two-step hierarchical regression procedure in which age was entered in Step 1 and forgiveness predictors were entered in Step 2. As previously stated, we standardized each variable following the recommendation made by Aiken and West (1991). Regression analysis was first run for the total study sample and was then conducted separately for adolescent girls and boys.

**Total sample.** Regression variable entry at Step 1 indicated age was not a significant forgiveness predictor and did not account for a significant percentage of forgiveness variance (see Table 5). Variable entry for the situational, interpersonal, and intrapersonal predictors indicated transgression severity, participant anger, apology offered, relationship commitment, and participant empathy were significant forgiveness predictors ($ps < .05–.001$). As shown in Table 5, the Step 2 entry of severity, anger, apology, commitment, and empathy accounted for a significant change in forgiveness variance. Results supported $H_{1a}$ and $H_{1b}$. An apology being offered, relationship commitment, and participant empathy were positively associated with forgiveness, and transgression severity and participant anger were negatively associated with forgiveness.

**Girls.** Examination of the regression analysis in Table 5 shows variable entry at Step 1 indicated age was not a significant forgiveness predictor and did not account for a significant percentage of forgiveness variance. Variable entry at Step 2 indicated anger, an apology offered, and relationship commitment were significant
TABLE 5. Regression Coefficients for Prediction of the Transgression Forgiveness Reports for the Total Sample, Girls, and Boys

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Predictor step</th>
<th>Total sample</th>
<th>Girls</th>
<th>Boys</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>$\Delta R^2$</td>
<td>$b$</td>
<td>$\Delta R^2$</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Step 1</td>
<td>.01</td>
<td>.00</td>
<td>.03</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Age</td>
<td></td>
<td>.03</td>
<td>.03</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Step 2</td>
<td>.52***</td>
<td>.46***</td>
<td>.60***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Transgression severity</td>
<td>- .26**</td>
<td>- .12</td>
<td>- .44**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Anger</td>
<td>- .46***</td>
<td>- .55***</td>
<td>- .35*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Apology offered</td>
<td>.17***</td>
<td>.24***</td>
<td>.08</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Relationship commitment</td>
<td>.22***</td>
<td>.16*</td>
<td>.29***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Empathy</td>
<td>.13**</td>
<td>.10</td>
<td>.10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total $R^2$</td>
<td>.53***</td>
<td>.46***</td>
<td>.63***</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note. Apology offered was coded as –1 (no apology offered vignette) or 1 (apology offered vignette).

* $p < .05$. ** $p < .01$. *** $p < .001$.

Forgiveness predictors ($ps < .05–.001$). As shown in Table 5, the predictors entered in Step 2 accounted for a significant change in accounted for variance. Consistent with $H_{2a}$ regarding variable associations with girls’ reports of forgiveness, an apology being offered and relationship commitment were positively associated with forgiveness. Although not specifically hypothesized anger was negatively associated with female forgiveness reports. Finally, results failed to support our hypothesized between forgiveness and empathy reports.

Boys. As shown in Table 5, variable entry at Step 1 indicated age was not a significant forgiveness predictor and did not account for a significant percentage of forgiveness variance. Analyses of variable entry at Step 2 indicated transgression severity, anger, and relationship commitment were significant predictors of forgiveness ($ps < .05–.001$). Results indicated the Step 2 predictors accounted for a significant change in accounted for variance (see Table 5). Consistent with $H_{2b}$, transgression severity and anger were negatively associated with boys’ forgiveness reports. Further, friendship commitment was positively associated with forgiveness although this association was not hypothesized for boys.

**Discussion**

Forgiveness is a first step toward conflict resolution (Enright et. al., 1992). The likelihood of an individual forgiving a conflict, however, is related to a wide range
of situational (e.g., perception of transgression severity) and global (e.g., victims’ commitment to the relationship in which the transgression occurred) factors. Previous forgiveness research has indicated the conflict characteristics, relationship quality, and the victim’s interpersonal orientation are related to the likelihood a transgression is forgiven (Chaux, 2003; Enright et al. 1989; McCullough et al., 1998). Findings from the present study extend the present research by (a) indicating the unique contribution of the examined forgiveness predictors and (b) revealing the differential prediction of forgiveness for adolescent girls and boys. First, analysis of predictor associations suggests a unique contribution of each focal variable to adolescent forgiveness reports. In addition to replicating previously reported associations between inter- and intrapersonal factors and forgiveness, the lack of significant associations between predictors allows for the examination of each predictor’s unique contribution to forgiveness reports. Second, findings from the present study support previous research by revealing situational, relationship, and individual characteristic associations with forgiveness use. However, findings also revealed the link between forgiveness and these predictive characteristics differs for adolescent girls and boys. Although the overall results are supported by previous forgiveness research (e.g., Bachman & Guerrero, 2006; Enright et al. 1989; Leary et al., 1997; McCullough et al., 1997), the gender differences reported in the present study indicate a more complex association between the situational, relationship, and individual characteristics and forgiveness use that what has been previously reported. These findings are important to the conflict and forgiveness research because they (a) suggest independence among forgiveness predictors, (b) support the relation between individual and situational factors and adolescent forgiveness, and (c) indicate these factors potentially differentiate adolescent girls’ and boys’ use of forgiveness in response to perceived transgressions.

**Associations Between Forgiveness Predictors**

Although we did not propose specific hypothesized associations between forgiveness predictors, we ran correlations between predictors prior to examining the hypothesized forgiveness prediction. In most of the examined variable associations, results failed to indicate significant correlations across the analyses for the overall sample and for adolescent girls and boys (the significant positive correlation between transgression severity and anger being the one exception as it was found across the three analyses). The lack of significant correlations among forgiveness predictors is important given the interrelatedness of conflict situation characteristics. Although conflict is viewed as a time-distributed event (i.e., the initial conflict event and resulting conflict behaviors occur across time; Shantz, 1987), the factors associated with conflict are believed to form a distinct but interrelated pattern of events (Laursen & Collins, 1994). Therefore, the initial conflict event (e.g., perception of the transgression severity) should predict subsequent conflict events (e.g., anger), and subsequent conflict events would then predict
further steps in the conflict situation. Further, the conflict literature suggests interpersonal and intrapersonal variables are also related to initial conflict responses. For example, anger resulting from a relationship transgression is less intense when there is a high level of commitment to the relationship (Karremans & Van Lange, 2004). In turn, significant correlations between participants’ forgiveness predictor responses would be expected given the interrelationship among conflict situation responses leading up to the decision to forgive. As previously stated, the link between predictors was evident for transgression severity and anger and suggests participant anger likely resulted from their interpretation of the transgression severity, but results failed to indicate consistent significant associations among the other predictors. As a result, this pattern of findings suggests a possible independence among the examined forgiveness predictors and supports the subsequent prediction of forgiveness as each predictor’s unique contribution to forgiveness reports is not significantly related to the other predictor responses.

**Situational, Interpersonal, and Intrapersonal Prediction of Forgiveness**

*Transgression severity.* Results indicted transgression severity was significantly associated with adolescent reports of transgression forgiveness. Findings indicated adolescent participants’ likelihood of forgiving their friend decreased as their perceived severity of the transgression increased. Data showed that these adolescents were more willing to terminate negative cognitions about their friend (e.g., hold a grudge) and exhibit positive thoughts (e.g., wanting to continue the relationship) when the transgression was viewed as less severe. This forgiveness prediction has been supported by previous research that indicates offense-severity was weighted more heavily than whether the offense was avoidable (Boon & Sulsky, 1997). According to Laursen (1995, 1996), adolescents are engaged in slightly more than one conflict per day with close friends, and the voluntary nature of these relationships increases their awareness of the relational cost of conflicts. Because friendships are voluntary, relationship members recognized the need to use conflict resolution strategies that sustain, rather than further damage, the relationship. Laursen (1993) found that adolescents prefer to use strategies similar to forgiveness (i.e., talking things out) to resolve conflicts with friends. Further, Bukowski and Sippola (1996) contended that friends impose specific expectations on each other friend to act toward the other in a fair way when a transgression occurs and propose there is an ought quality in friendships (e.g., friends ought to act toward each other in a certain manner). As a result, forgiveness is expected in response to low severity transgressions. However, because fairness is expected of both friendship members, higher severity transgressions may impede forgiveness due to the potential violation of the relationship expectations.

*Anger.* A conflict victim’s likelihood of forgiving a transgression is also associated with their anger in response to the conflict event (Barber et al., 2005; Thompson
et al., 2005). Results from the present study indicated adolescent reports of forgiveness were negatively related to their anger resulting from their friend’s transgression, and this pattern of findings supports previous research indicating a negative link between negative emotions (e.g., anger) and conflict forgiveness. For example, Gottman (1993) stated that anger is a possible emotional response to negative relational events (e.g., transgressions), and is further associated with contempt toward the relationship partner as well as associated with an increased desire for retaliation. Individuals are more likely to avoid the transgressor and less likely to seek out behaviors that minimize their own self-interests in the conflict (e.g., seeking revenge) both of which further decrease the likelihood of forgiveness being granted to the transgressor (McCullough et al., 1998; Rusbult et al., 1991; Van Lange et al., 1997). Therefore, adolescents who are angered in response to relationship transgressions are less motivated to forgive their partner than are individuals who display low levels of anger and/or higher levels of more general positive emotions (McCullough et al., 1998; Worthington et al., 2000).

**Apology offered.** According to Rusbult et al. (1991), an apology following a perceived transgression is an important step toward forgiveness. Individuals are more likely to forgive an interpersonal transgression when it is perceived the transgressor has offered an apology (Bachman & Guerrero, 2006; McCullough et al., 1997), and this association was supported in the present study. Findings revealed that being offered an apology following a transgression was positively associated with forgiveness. Although the apology manipulation involved presenting an apology at the end of the vignette to only a half of the sample, adolescents who received the apology-offered vignettes reported higher rates of forgiveness than did adolescents who received the vignettes where an apology was not offered. This finding supports those reported by Bachman and Guerrero, who stated that offering an apology in hypothetical conflict situations was positively related to willingness to forgive the transgressor. Offering an apology increases the likelihood of forgiveness because the transgressor is displaying remorse by admitting fault and accepting responsibility (Bachman & Guerrero 2005; McCullough et al., 1997). Because the apology is an initial step in rectifying the conflict, the apology likely brings individuals closer together because it promotes the use of more constructive (e.g., discussion) rather than destructive conflict management styles (e.g., verbal aggression).

**Relationship commitment.** Research examining the relation between commitment and forgiveness indicates a positive association between relationship and conflict outcomes (Bono, McCullough, & Root, 2007; Karremans & Van Lange, 2004; Karremans, Van Lange, Ouwerkerk, & Kluwer, 2003,). Individuals who perceive their relationship as close and committed prior to the transgression are more likely to forgive their partner than are those whose relationship is more distant and
transient (Tsang, McCullough, & Fincham, 2006). This pattern of findings is supportive of the results indicated in the present study. Adolescents who reported high levels of relationship commitment reported higher levels of reported forgiveness than did adolescents who were less committed to their friendship. Karremans and Van Lange (2004) and Tsang et al. (2006) reported stronger relationship commitments are associated with increased use of forgiveness in response to conflict, and relationship commitment decreases the likelihood of relationship dissolution in response to conflict (Drigotas & Rusbult, 1992; Gordon, Burton, & Porter, 2004; Rusbult et al., 1991). According to Rusbult and Buunk (1993), commitment in a relationship enhances continuity and promotes positive behaviors (e.g., accommodation) that are helpful in maintaining the relationship. This long-term orientation associated with commitment increases the desire to maintain the relationship and encourages pro-relationship behaviors (Rusbult & Buunk, 1993; Tsang et al., 2006). As a result, previous research and the present findings suggest adolescents are likely to minimize the relationship dissolution through the use of forgiveness when they feel committed to their partner.

Empathy. Empathy is related to an individual’s ability to experience the emotional experiences of others (Mehrabian & Epstein, 1972), and this ability to experience the emotions of their relationship partner may be further related to an individual’s understanding his or her partner feels distressed or guilty after violating a relationship expectation (McCullough et al., 1997). Adolescent forgiveness reports in the present study followed a similar pattern. Adolescent participants who reported higher levels of empathy also reported more frequent forgiveness in response to relationship transgressions than did adolescents with lower empathy levels. Although data in the present study did not indicate a strong empathy and forgiveness relation (as indicated by the percentage of accounted for variance), the link between empathy and forgiveness is supported by McCullough et al.’s (1997) data that indicated empathy was positively associated with an increased motivation to repair the relationship. McCullough et al. (1998) suggested that empathy is the largest determinant of forgiveness as forgiveness is often related to an individual’s ability to understand the transgressor’s point of view and the transgressor’s emotional state. Experiencing vicarious emotions similar to those of the transgressor likely reduces the victim’s motivation to retaliate against their partner which may be further associated with a strengthened motivation to reconcile (McCullough et al., 1998). As a result, empathy for the transgressor assists in overriding the perceived negative impact of the transgression and likely leads to an increased probably of forgiving their relationship partner.

Gender Differences in Forgiveness Prediction

A final goal of the present study was to examine gender differences in the situational, interpersonal, and intrapersonal factors associated with adolescent
forgiveness. First, in comparing girls’ and boys’ predictor correlations to those for the total sample, empathy was not significantly associated with either girl or boy transgression reports. Despite the previous research indicating a strong relation between empathy and forgiveness (e.g., McCullough et al., 1998), the association did not hold in our present study when examining gender differences in the variables associated with adolescent forgiveness reports. One possible explanation for the difference in results when comparing the total sample associations to those for female and male participants concerns the low level of accounted for variance in the total sample analysis. As a result, the strength of the empathy and forgiveness relationship likely decreases as the effect is split between separate analyses. Because much of the previous forgiveness research has utilized older samples and/or may not have examined specific gender differences in transgression prediction, the empathy associations differences between these findings and previous research suggests a need for further examination of empathy’s role in forgiving.

Previous forgiveness research has revealed girls and boys equally employ the use of forgiveness in response to conflict situations (Enright et al., 1989; Park & Enright, 1997). We proposed that the use of forgiveness may not differ for girls and boys (which was somewhat supported by the lack of significant gender differences in forgiveness reports). Rather, the factors predicting the use of forgiveness may differ for adolescent girls and boys. Examination of girl and boy analyses indicated anger in response to the transgression and relationship commitment predicted both girls’ and boys’ forgiveness reports. Given the differential relationship orientation often endorsed by adolescent girls and boys (Foot et al., 1997; Johnson, 2005; Laursen, 1995), we hypothesized anger and commitment would differentially predict girls’ and boys’ forgiveness (e.g., relationship commitment would predict girl and anger would predict boys’ forgiveness reports). However, findings suggest adolescent negative emotional response to conflict and their commitment to their relationship are important factors in predicting forgiveness for both girls and boys.

Results did indicate differential association with girls’ and boys’ reports of forgiveness. Consistent with our proposed hypotheses, apologizing by the transgressor was predictive of female forgiveness reports and perceived transgression severity was predictive of male forgiveness reports. Given the interpersonal nature of offering an apology and the situational nature of transgression severity, these associations support our proposal that relationship orientation differences (i.e., girls’ intimacy and boys’ personal status approaches) may assist in specifying the factors associated with girls’ and males’ forgiveness use. First, girls are generally more focused on maintaining relationship intimacy and commitment than are boys (Foot et al., 1997; Johnson, 2005). The offering of an apology assists both relationship members with maintaining the relationship because an apology is recognition of fault for the transgression. Relationship maintenance is an important expectation of adolescent same-sex friendships, and female adolescents develop more flexible conflict styles (e.g., forgiving of the transgression) in attempt to maintain physical and psychological relationship closeness (Gavin & Furman, 1989;
Jarvinen & Nicholls, 1996). As a result, an apology is generally a first step in resolving a conflict, and the offering of an apology is related to the use conflict management strategies consistent with adolescent girls’ relationship orientation aimed at minimizing conflict and its potential impact on their relationship.

For adolescent boys, transgression severity differentially predicted use of forgiveness. According to Maccoby (1990), developing interpersonal friendship connections is important to girls. However, boys are more focused on developing individual status in the context of friendships than are girls, and stress status issues (e.g., individuality and self-governing) as an important factor in their friendships more than girls (Clark & Bittle, 1992; Maccoby, 1990). Adolescent boys may view more severe transgressions as being a threat to their relationship status and forgiving a severe transgression does not allow for the immediate re-establishment of their relationship status. In turn, adolescent boys are likely to use less accommodating conflict behaviors (i.e., forgiveness) when faced with these transgressions in order to minimize damage to their perceived level of power in the relationship (Laursen, 1995; Laursen & Collins, 1994).

Limitations

Results support the hypotheses presented in the present study as well as those presented in the existing forgiveness research. However, the findings are limited in several respects. The sample in the present study was predominantly White and from a midwestern urban setting. Therefore, it is difficult to determine if the results will generalize to minority adolescents, adolescents from other regions or countries, and adolescents from rural settings. Further, the correlational nature of our analyses does not allow for causes and effect determination between the situational, interpersonal, intrapersonal variables and forgiveness analyzed in the present study. In addition, the variables used to predict forgiveness are likely only a few of those related to adolescent use of forgiveness, and, as a result, may only provide a partial description of the factors related to this conflict behavior. Finally, Laursen, Finkelstein, and Betts (2001) showed more cooperative conflict tactics (e.g., negotiation and compromise) are reported when compared to hypothetical situations than are actually used during conflict interactions. Because participants are not experiencing the conflict in a real-life context, responses collected in the present study may not reflect those that would occur in an actual conflict situation with their target friend.

Conclusions

In the present study we examined situational, interpersonal, and intrapersonal factors associated with adolescents’ use of forgiveness in response to transgressions from a friend. Much of the adolescent conflict literature has examined conflict goals and resolution strategies, but this line of research has not directly examined the role of forgiveness in the conflict process. Forgiveness is not a conflict resolution, but rather a necessary behavioral and communicative step
in minimizing the transgressions impact on the relationship (Enright et. al., 1992; North, 1987). As a result, examining the predictive factors related to forgiveness prove useful in determining which transgressions may have a subtle and negligible impact or a lasting and possibly damaging impact on adolescent relationships. Examination of these variable relations may increase the ability to better understand the social and personal components associated with conflict outcomes. Findings are significant in that they not only support previous forgiveness research indicating transgression perceptions, relationship quality, interpersonal orientation, and forgiveness associations. Findings from the present study also add additional information to this line of inquiry in that (a) forgiveness variable associations can be extended to adolescent relationships and (b) the forgiveness variable associations differently predict forgiveness for adolescent girls’ and boys’ forgiveness reports.

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AUTHOR NOTES

H. Durell Johnson is an associate professor of human development and family studies at Pennsylvania State University. His current research examines adolescent friendship and romantic relationship characteristics, identity, and well-being. Molly A. Wernli is an associate professor of psychology at the College of Saint Mary in Omaha, Nebraska and was at the University of Nebraska Omaha while conducting research for the current study. Her current research interests examine individual and situational factors associated with conflict strategies in adolescent same- and opposite-sex relationships. Joseph C. LaVoie is Professor Emeritus of Psychology at University of Nebraska Omaha. His research examines close peer relationships in childhood and adolescence and adolescent and young adult identity formation processes.

REFERENCES


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## APPENDIX

### Sample Hypothetical Conflict Vignettes

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Vignette theme</th>
<th>Vignette</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><em>Violation of Trust</em></td>
<td>Last week you told your friend, (insert first initial) _____, a personal secret about yourself that would be very damaging if others found out. You specifically asked your friend not to tell anyone this secret and your friend agreed. You find out that your friend told some of your classmates this secret.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>Missed Appointment</em></td>
<td>Your friend, (insert first initial) _____, made plans with you to work on homework for a class you both have. On the day you are supposed to get together your friend does not show up to work on the homework.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>