

# Gender Differences in the Relationship Between Empathy and Forgiveness

LOREN TOUSSAINT  
*Department of Psychology*  
*Luther College*  
*Decorah, IA*

JON R. WEBB  
*Department of Psychology*  
*East Tennessee State University, Johnson City*

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**ABSTRACT.** Much research has shown that women are more empathic than men. Yet, women and men are equally forgiving. However, it is not clear whether empathy is more important to forgiveness for men or for women. The purpose of the present study was to examine gender differences in levels of empathy and forgiveness and the extent to which the association of empathy and forgiveness differed by gender. Participants were 127 community residents who completed self-report measures of empathy and forgiveness. The present results showed that women were more empathic than men, but no gender difference for forgiveness was apparent. However, the association between empathy and forgiveness did differ by gender. Empathy was associated with forgiveness in men—but not in women.

**Key words:** coping strategies, gender differences, interpersonal understanding, perspective taking, prosocial behavior

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**FORGIVENESS** is central to healthy human development and may be one of the most important processes in the restoration of interpersonal relationships after conflict (Hill, 2001). The common imperfection in the ability of human beings to relate to one another gives rise to frequent offenses and consequent negative affective, behavioral, and cognitive responses in interpersonal relationships. Unaddressed, these negative responses can lead to impaired social functioning. Forgiveness

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*Address correspondence to Loren Toussaint, Department of Psychology, Luther College, Decorah, IA 52101-1045; touslo01@luther.edu (e-mail).*

involves the reduction of negative responses to offense (Gassin & Enright, 1995; Hargrave, 1994). It does not involve seeking retribution or restitution (Rosenak & Harnden, 1992; Wahking, 1992) and does not require further vulnerability. Rather it allows accountability (Coleman, 1998; Enright, Freedman, & Rique, 1998).

Researchers have focused much attention on the characteristics associated with forgiveness and on describing its process. Enright et al. (1998) summarized 20 steps or units of forgiveness that were described in the literature and divided them into four broad phases: *uncovering*, *decision*, *work* including empathy, and *deepening*. They carefully pointed out that the overall process of forgiveness is not likely to be linear. McCullough (2000) provided an overview of the current status of the study of forgiveness and the determinants of the ability to forgive, including empathy and perspective taking. Further, he stated that our understanding of forgiveness in the process of healing continued to be limited and in need of investigation. Thus, empirical data regarding forgiveness—although growing—is lacking, and there is a gap between the encouragement of forgiveness by clinicians and sufficient scientific knowledge of its underlying mechanisms (Fincham, Paleari, & Regalia, 2002). More work is needed to determine who will benefit from forgiveness and what factors will lead to its constructive use (Walrond-Skinner, 1998).

### *Empathy and Forgiveness*

The broad definition of *empathy* includes affective and cognitive components (Zahn-Waxler & Radke-Yarrow, 1990). It has been defined “as accurately perceiving the internal frame of reference of another” (Gold & Rogers, 1995, p. 79) and includes nonverbal communication (Katz, 1963). Moore (1990) asserted that empathy is “an organizer and regulator of a variety of behaviors” (p. 75), and Zahn-Waxler and Radke-Yarrow said empathy is central to what it means to be fully human. As such, it is critical to moral development and justice, thereby acting as a catalyst for societal cohesion and unity (Hoffman, 1990), because constructive interpersonal relations are contingent upon a willingness to take another’s perspective (Johnson, Cheek, & Smither, 1983).

It is likely that an ability to understand others, to relate to others, and to treat others as one would like to be treated would enable a person to forgive others. The empathic person tends to focus on others’ experiences in a fairly objective or unselfish manner rather than focusing on one’s own experiences in a selfish manner. As we mentioned above, Enright et al. (1998) discussed empathy as a factor in the work phase of the process of forgiveness, and McCullough (2000) and Worthington (1998) have discussed empathy as a determinant of the ability to forgive. Other researchers have confirmed this relationship. Zechmeister and Romero (2002) found a link between forgiveness and both situational and dispositional empathy. Fincham et al. (2002) showed a link between forgiveness and emotional empathy in a hypothetical marital offense. Konstam, Chernoff, and Deveney (2001) showed relationships between forgiveness and both cognitive and emo-

tional empathy. Macaskill, Maltby, and Day (2002) reported a relationship between empathy and forgiveness of others but not oneself. Farrow et al. (2001) even showed common neurophysiological correlates of empathy and forgiveness. In sum, multiple forms of evidence point to a link between empathy and forgiveness. Based on this evidence, the present study's first hypothesis follows:

*Hypothesis 1:* Dispositional, emotional empathy will be positively associated with forgiveness.

Empathy is a variable that is important in promoting forgiveness. As indicated above, theoretical and empirical works support this notion. However, two important research questions remain unanswered regarding gender, empathy, and forgiveness. First, do gender differences in empathy generalize to similar constructs such as forgiveness? Second, does gender moderate the relationship between empathy and forgiveness, and, as such, is empathy a more important predictor of forgiveness for women or men?

### *Gender, Empathy, and Forgiveness*

Commonly held stereotypes and popular culture suggest that women have a greater capacity for understanding others' thoughts and feelings than do men (Klein & Hodges, 2001). Also, empirical researchers have found that gender differences in empathy commonly indicate that women have higher levels than do men (Batson et al., 1996; Gault & Sabini, 2000; Lennon & Eisenberg, 1987; Macaskill et al., 2002; Schieman & Van Gundy, 2000). Further, research indicates the possibility that these differences may be the result of motivation rather than ability (Klein & Hodges). Regardless of the cause, women appear to be more empathic than men. Consistent with these findings, our second hypothesis is the following:

*Hypothesis 2:* Women will show higher levels of empathy than will men.

Gender differences, which exist for empathy, do not similarly exist for forgiveness. There appear to be no straightforward gender differences in levels of forgiveness. In reviewing the literature on forgiveness in group interventions, Worthington, Sandage, and Berry (2000) estimated a gender effect by correlating effect size and percentage of males by using a regression analysis and showed that women are no more likely to forgive than men. Yet Worthington et al. stated that fewer men than women participate in group interventions involving forgiveness and that there may be some reason to suspect that men are more prone to unforgiveness than women. However, empirical studies provide no support for that assertion. Berry, Worthington, Parrott, O'Connor, and Wade (2001) documented no significant gender differences in dispositional forgiveness. Macaskill et al. (2002) also did not find any significant gender differences in the participant's forgiveness of oneself or others. Even when gender differences in forgive-

ness have emerged in the literature, they have been contextualized by other variables. For instance, Kalbfleisch (1997) found no gender difference in overall forgiveness in a study of conflict resolution between mentors and protégés. However, when examining forgiveness in a particularly emotional context (when protégés cried), Kalbfleisch found that higher levels of forgiveness were present in female mentors than in male mentors. For another example, Kadiangandu, Mullet, and Vinsonneau (2001) showed that while gender differences appeared in a French sample, such differences did not occur in a Congolese sample. Because of the findings in the current literature, our third hypothesis is the following:

*Hypothesis 3:* There will be no gender differences in forgiveness.

Extant literature indicates gender differences in levels of empathy but not in levels of forgiveness. However, beyond the question of whether gender differences exist in levels of these variables is another important research question: whether gender acts as a moderator of the relationship between empathy and forgiveness. In other words, it may be the case that the relationship between empathy and forgiveness is qualitatively or quantitatively different for women than it is for men.

There are currently two studies in the literature that evaluate gender differences in the relationship between empathy and forgiveness. In one study, Macaskill et al. (2002) examined empathy and forgiveness of oneself and others in 324 British undergraduates. In that study, Macaskill et al. showed that women were higher than men in levels of empathy but not in either type of forgiveness. Empathy was positively associated with forgiveness of others but not with forgiveness of oneself for both men and women. It appeared that this association was smaller for men than for women; however, Macaskill et al. reported no statistical test for the difference between these correlations. In the other study, as part of a larger model's studies, Fincham et al. (2002) examined empathy and forgiveness in the context of marriage with 171 Italian husbands and wives. In that study, Fincham et al. did not examine simple gender differences in empathy or forgiveness but did examine the relationship separately in husbands and in wives. The results indicated a difference in the relationship between empathy and forgiveness across gender. The relationship between emotional empathy and forgiveness of a hypothetical offense was positive for both men and women but stronger for men. However, again there was no formal statistical test to evaluate whether the difference between these correlations was statistically significant. Researchers can conclude two things from these studies. First, there appear to be gender differences in the relationship between empathy and forgiveness. Second, the nature and magnitude of these differences are not clear. In fact, the results from the two studies reviewed above are contradictory. In both studies, the association between empathy and forgiveness is positive, but in one study the relationship is stronger for men, and in the other study the pattern is reversed. In neither study is it clear that the magnitude of the difference is sufficient to be considered statistically significant.

Based on these findings, our goal was to examine the relationship between empathy and forgiveness separately in men and in women and to evaluate whether any differences in the two relationships are statistically significant. Our fourth hypothesis is the following:

*Hypothesis 4:* There will be a difference between men and women in the size of the relationship between emotional empathy and forgiveness; however, the direction of this difference cannot be predicted. That is, on the basis of the current literature, researchers cannot predict whether men or women will show a stronger relationship between empathy and forgiveness.

## Method

### *Participants and Procedures*

Participants were 127 people whom we recruited from public beaches and community parks in Los Angeles, Orange, and San Diego Counties in California. The participants formed a convenience sample for this cross-sectional study. In terms of gender, 45 (35% percent) were men, and 82 (65%) were women. In terms of marital status, 23% were married, 45% were single, 30% were separated or divorced, and 2% were widowed. In terms of ethnicity, 66% were White, 11% were Hispanic, 8% were Black, 8% were Pacific Islander, and 7% were other.<sup>1</sup> In terms of religion, 55% were Christian, 25% were spiritual but not religious, 13% were areligious, 7% were other (i.e., religious but non-Christian). To be included in the study, participants were required to meet three inclusionary criteria. Participants had to be between the ages of 25 years and 45 years, their annual income had to be between \$25,000 and \$65,000, and their education had to be between having some high school and having a college degree.

We approached potential participants and, after a brief introduction, obtained informed consent from those who agreed to participate. Participants then completed the questionnaires.

### *Measures*

*Forgiveness.* We used the Enright Forgiveness Inventory (EFI; Enright, 2005) to assess multidimensional aspects of forgiveness across affective, behavioral, and cognitive domains. It is a self-report measure of the degree to which one person forgives another who has hurt him or her deeply and unfairly. The EFI has 60 items that compose three subscales of 20 items each that assess the aforementioned domains or components of one's forgiveness toward the offending person. Table 1 provides example items from the EFI subscales. Participants respond to all items on a 6-point Likert-type scale from 1 (*disagree*) to 6 (*agree*). Higher scores represent higher levels of forgiveness. Subkoviak et al. showed acceptable

levels of internal consistency and test–retest reliability over a 1-month interval for the affect, behavior, and cognition subscales of the EFI, all Cronbach’s alphas = .97, test–retest  $r_s \geq .79$ . For the present study, internal consistency of the affective, behavioral, and cognitive subscales were excellent ( $\alpha_s = .97, .96, \text{ and } .97$ , respectively).

*Empathy.* The Balanced Emotional Empathy Scale (BEES; Mehrabian, 1996, 1997), is a unidimensional measure of affective or emotional empathy. It is a self-report measure of one’s ability to vicariously experience another individual’s emotions or to feel what someone else feels. The BEES consists of 30 items. The following are example items from the BEES:

1. Unhappy movie endings haunt me for hours afterward.
2. I cannot feel much sorrow for those who are responsible for their own misery.<sup>2</sup>

Participants respond to all items on a scale ranging from  $-4$  (*very strong disagreement*) to  $+4$  (*very strong agreement*). Higher scores represent higher levels of emotional empathy. Mehrabian (1996, 1997) has shown that the BEES has good internal consistency and test–retest reliability,  $\alpha = .87, r = .77$ . In the present study, internal consistency was good,  $\alpha = .83$ .

*Gender.* Participants self-reported gender, and we coded it as 0 (*male*) or 1 (*female*).

**TABLE 1. Example Items From the Enright Forgiveness Inventory**

Subscale	Item
Forgiving affect	I feel warm toward the offender.
	I feel caring toward the offender.
	I feel repulsed by the offender. <sup>a</sup>
Forgiving behavior	I would show friendship toward the offender.
	I would help the offender.
	I would avoid the offender. <sup>a</sup>
Forgiving cognition	I think s/he is worthy of respect.
	I think s/he is corrupt. <sup>a</sup>
	I think s/he is an annoyance. <sup>a</sup>

*Note.* From the “Enright Forgiveness Inventory and Manual,” by R. Enright, 2005, Mind Garden (Redwood City, CA). Adapted with permission of the author. Dr. Enright has requested that these items not be used independently as indices of forgiveness.

<sup>a</sup>Item was reverse scored.

### Statistical Analyses

We evaluated Hypothesis 1 using bivariate correlations to examine the relationship between empathy and forgiveness. We evaluated Hypothesis 2 and Hypothesis 3 using one-way analyses of variance (ANOVAs) to examine gender differences in levels of empathy and forgiveness. We evaluated Hypothesis 4 using bivariate correlations and multiple regressions to examine gender differences in the relationships between empathy and forgiveness. Prior to each analysis, we screened data for outlying or influential data points and examined the data for adherence to the assumptions of ANOVAs and correlations or regressions. No outlying or influential data points were identified, and assumptions of statistical tests were met. We conducted all statistical tests at the  $p < .05$  level.

### Results

To examine Hypothesis 1, that there would be a positive association between empathy and forgiveness, we conducted bivariate correlations. As we expected, empathy was significantly correlated with forgiving behavior in the full sample,  $r = .18, p < .05$ . Contrary to our hypothesis, bivariate correlations between empathy and forgiving affect,  $r = .04, ns$ , and forgiving cognitions,  $r = .10, ns$ , were nonsignificant.

To examine Hypothesis 2 and Hypothesis 3, that women would show higher levels of empathy but not forgiveness as compared to men, we analyzed data using one-way ANOVAs. The results of these analyses showed that, as predicted in Hypothesis 2, women had higher levels of empathy than did men. Also, as predicted in Hypothesis 3, no gender differences were observed on affective, behavioral, or cognitive forgiveness, all  $F_s < 1$ ; see Table 2.

To examine Hypothesis 4, that the relationship between empathy and forgiveness would differ in magnitude for men and women, we conducted bivariate correlations separately by gender. For each gender, we computed bivariate correlations between empathy and forgiving affect, behavior, and cognition. The results showed that relationships between empathy and forgiving affect, behavior, and cognition were present for men only. Relationships between empathy and forgiving affect, behavior, and cognition were not present for women; see Table 3.

To determine whether the gender differences in the bivariate relationships between empathy and forgiveness were statistically significant, as predicted in Hypothesis 4 and as shown in Table 3, we used regression analyses following the guidelines put forth by Baron and Kenny (1986) for establishing moderation. To determine whether the participant's gender moderated the empathy–forgiveness relationship, we conducted three separate regression models predicting (a) forgiving affect, (b) forgiving behavior, and (c) forgiving cognition. In each of the analyses, we entered gender and empathy in Step 1 and then the product term  $\text{Gender} \times \text{Empathy}$  as the interaction variable in Step 2. One can infer that gender

**TABLE 2. Gender Differences in Levels of Empathy and Forgiveness**

Dependent variable	Men ( <i>n</i> = 45)		Women ( <i>n</i> = 82)		<i>F</i> (1, 125)	<i>p</i>
	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>		
Empathy	42.08	23.53	62.55	24.06	21.36	< .001
Forgiving affect	75.63	25.67	74.47	26.75	< 1	<i>ns</i>
Forgiving behavior	85.10	23.17	86.35	23.01	< 1	<i>ns</i>
Forgiving cognition	89.90	25.78	91.60	23.61	< 1	<i>ns</i>

**TABLE 3. Association Between Empathy and Forgiving Affect, Behavior, and Cognition by Gender**

Variable	Empathy	
	Men ( <i>n</i> = 45)	Women ( <i>n</i> = 82)
Forgiving affective	0.28*	-0.06
Forgiving behavior	0.30*	0.12
Forgiving cognition	0.32*	-0.05

*Note.* We adjusted coefficients for severity of offense.

\* $p \leq .10$ . \*\* $p \leq .05$ .

moderated the relationships between empathy and forgiveness if the regression coefficients for the product terms in these analyses were significant (Baron and Kenny). Interaction models showed that the relations between empathy and some dimensions of forgiveness were moderated by gender. There was a significant Gender  $\times$  Empathy interaction in predicting forgiving cognitions,  $B = -.40$ ,  $p \leq .05$ , and the Gender  $\times$  Empathy interaction on forgiving affect approached significance,  $B = -.38$ ,  $p \leq .10$ . The Gender  $\times$  Empathy interaction on forgiving behavior was nonsignificant,  $B = -.23$ , *ns*.

## Discussion

Support for Hypothesis 1 was mixed. Contrary to our expectations, bivariate analyses showed no statistically significant relationships between empathy and forgiving affect or forgiving cognition in the full sample. There was, however, a bivariate relationship between empathy and forgiving behavior, confirming prior work (Enright et al., 1998; Fincham et al., 2002; McCullough, 2000; Zechmeister & Romero, 2002). The present results supported Hypothesis 2 and Hypothesis 3. As expected, ANOVA analyses revealed that women had higher levels of



empathy than men but that forgiveness did not differ by gender. This finding confirms findings of previous researchers that showed gender differences in empathy (Batson et al., 1996; Gault & Sabini, 2000; Lennon & Eisenberg, 1987; Macaskill et al., 2002; Schieman & Van Gundy, 2000) but not in forgiveness (Berry et al., 2001; Kalbfleisch, 1997; Macaskill et al., 2002; Worthington et al., 2000). The present results supported Hypothesis 4. Analyses indicated that the relationship between forgiveness and empathy was moderated by gender. The relationships between empathy and forgiving affect, behavior, and cognition were positive and moderate in size for men but not women. Not a single significant bivariate relationship between empathy and forgiveness was observed for women.

The present findings pertaining to Hypothesis 4 contradict those of Macaskill et al. (2002), who showed significant relationships between empathy and forgiveness for both men and women. Further, the present findings contradict those of Macaskill et al. because their results showed a weaker relationship between empathy and forgiveness in men and a stronger relationship in women. In the present findings, the pattern was reversed. There are at least two possible explanations for this contradiction. First, Macaskill et al. collected data from British participants, and the participants in the present study were U.S. citizens. An underlying cultural difference in gender dynamics, empathy, or forgiveness could account for the conflicting results. Given that others (Kadiangandu et al., 2001) have documented inconsistencies in gender differences across cultures, this may be an important consideration in comparing these two studies. Second, Macaskill et al. used Mauger et al.'s (1992) scales of forgiveness of oneself and others. These scales actually measure "unforgiveness" instead of forgiveness. Some authors (e.g., Worthington & Wade, 1999) argued that these two constructs are distinct and should not be considered as opposite ends of the same continuum but rather as two independent dimensions. Recent work lends initial empirical support to this notion, showing that unforgiveness and forgiveness have different correlates (Konstam, Holmes, & Levine, 2003). Mauger et al.'s scales have been used to assess guilt (Mauger, 2003) and vengeance (McCullough, Bellah, Kilpatrick, & Johnson, 2001), two components of unforgiveness—but not forgiveness. Hence, differences between the current findings and those of Macaskill et al. may reflect differences in the correlates of forgiveness versus unforgiveness and the role of gender in these processes.

The present findings are consistent with those of Fincham et al. (2002), who found a similar relationship between gender, emotional empathy, and forgiveness in their study of hypothetical marital offense. In both studies, the effect of empathy was stronger for men, suggesting a greater impact on forgiveness for men. An important distinction between Fincham et al. and the present work is that empathy and forgiveness were assessed in the context of an actual, self-reported offense in the present study whereas Fincham et al. examined these variables under the pretense of a hypothetical offense. Another important distinction is that Fincham et al. examined marital offenses only, whereas the present study includes self-reported offenses of many different types.

Although men show lower levels of empathy than do women, one could argue, on the basis of the present findings, that empathy is more important for men in terms of promoting forgiveness. Further, even though women show higher levels of empathy than do men, this circumstance does not translate into higher levels of forgiveness because there is no association between empathy and forgiveness in women. To the extent that empathy is an important step in the process of forgiveness (Gassin & Enright, 1995; Jones-Haldeman, 1992), men may be encumbered in their attempts to forgive because of lower levels of empathy. If it is true that empathy promotes forgiveness, then the present findings are puzzling from the perspective of women. Women have higher levels of empathy, but this does not seem to help them forgive. Hence, psychotherapists for men aiming at the patient's forgiving an offense may do well to emphasize increasing empathy. For women, it seems that although they already possess higher levels of empathy, empathy-based forgiveness interventions may be less effective.

Perhaps the observed gender difference in the relationship between empathy and forgiveness is related to motivation rather than ability (Klein & Hodges, 2001). Women generally may be more motivated to be empathic and thus may show higher levels of empathy (Klein & Hodges). In the case of forgiveness, it may be that, as compared to men, women are less motivated by empathy than by some other factor. This possibility is consistent with Weitzman (2001), who found that young women, on the basis of or motivated by overriding power and behavioral norms, tended to rely on low-level interpersonal negotiation strategies, or less consideration of others' perspectives and needs, when resolving relational conflicts. Therefore, psychotherapists for women aiming at forgiving an offense may do well to focus on motivational factors related to empathy, forgiveness, and equality, thereby possibly tapping into the women's apparent ability for empathy, rather than on pragmatic negotiation issues related to power differentials and behavioral norms.

The present study adds to a small number of investigations of gender, empathy, and forgiveness. However, to our knowledge, the present study is the first to simultaneously examine gender differences in these variables and gender differences in the associations between these variables. As such, there are limitations in the present study. First, the present results represent cross-sectional data and, although we conceptualized empathy as preceding forgiveness, as much theory suggests, we cannot be certain that this is the case entirely and that the reverse is not also true. Forgiving states may precede empathic states, or these may simply be co-occurring phenomenon with neither having any causal precedence. Future researchers should address changes in empathy and forgiveness using longitudinal designs. Second, it is quite possible that individuals high in dispositional aspects of forgiveness might be more inclined to respond more empathically to a transgression and that this trait-like forgiving tendency might account for the relationship between empathy and forgiveness. Future researchers should investigate the extent to which the association between forgiveness and empathy is mediated by forgiv-

ing dispositions. Third, although our participants were selected from the community, the present sample was a convenience sample, and hence its representativeness is questionable. Fourth, our results only pertain to the relationship between emotional or affective empathy (as measured by the BEES) and forgiveness. It likely would be beneficial for future researchers in this area to incorporate cognitive components of empathy, such as perspective taking, into the analyses.

As evidence builds in favor of empathy's having salutary effects in relationships for men, it becomes incumbent upon social psychologists to work to dispel the popular notion that men are unable to relate to others' feelings. While the present findings confirm gender differences in empathy, such as that women have higher levels than do men, our findings also indicate that empathy may have a greater impact for men in facilitating the process of forgiveness. In sum, the important role of empathy in forgiveness is qualified by gender, and future researchers should attempt to replicate this finding using larger, more representative samples.

### NOTES

1. All participants spoke fluent English.

2. The BEES items are from the "Manual for the Balanced Emotional Empathy Scale (BEES)," by A. Mehrabian, 1996, Albert Mehrabian (1130 Alta Mesa Road, Monterey, CA 93940). The two items are reproduced with permission of the author. The BEES is a copy-righted personality scale. The author will permit the reproduction of only two items. To find out more about the scale, see Mehrabian (1996, 1997) and the author's Web page <http://www.kaaj.com/psych/scales/emp.html>.

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