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**Paths to Interpersonal Forgiveness: The Roles of Personality, Disposition to Forgive and Contextual Factors in Predicting Forgiveness Following a Specific Offence**

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Abstract

This study examined a multi-factorial model of forgiveness in which personality of the offended party, disposition to forgive, and context-specific factors were examined as predictors of forgiveness in a specific situation. A community sample of adults (N=128) was recruited from Australia and New Zealand. Regression analyses indicated that individuals scoring higher on agreeableness and spirituality, and lower on neuroticism, reported a greater disposition to forgive. Disposition to forgive mediated the relationship between individuals’ agreeableness and their reported forgiveness in a specific situation. Factors that predicted unique variance in forgiveness of a specific offence were the offended party’s disposition to forgive, the value they placed on the relationship with the transgressor, positive offender actions (e.g., listening, apologising, providing compensation), and expecting the transgressor to repeat the offence. The findings support the idea that interpersonal forgiveness involves the interplay of factors that are both intrinsic and extrinsic to individuals.

Keywords: forgive; agreeableness; neuroticism; spirituality; apology; relationship; offence; intent
Paths to Interpersonal Forgiveness: The Roles of Personality, Disposition to Forgive and Contextual Factors in Predicting Forgiveness Following a Specific Offence

In recent years, forgiveness has received increasing attention as its role in maintaining interpersonal relationships and contributing to well-being has been recognised (Exline & Baumeister, 2000; McCullough, Pargament & Thorensen, 2000). The context of forgiveness is an interpersonal hurt or transgression perpetrated by another. When a person forgives, their thoughts, feelings and behaviours toward the offender become less negative and more positive (McCullough et al.). Forgiveness can further be seen as a prosocial act, whereby motivations to avoid and/or seek revenge against the transgressor are replaced with a motivation to maintain a positive relationship (McCullough et al.).

In addition to forgiveness being a response to a specific interpersonal transgression, theorists have proposed that it may be conceptualised as a personality variable. A disposition to forgive can be characterised along a forgiving-unforgiving continuum (Berry, Worthington, Parrott, O’Connor & Wade, 2001; Brose, Rye, Lutz-Zois & Ross, 2005; McCullough & van Oyen Witvliet 2002).

Various personality traits have been conceptualised as influencing a person’s disposition to forgive, although two have most consistently contributed unique variance to forgiveness-related variables: agreeableness and neuroticism (e.g., Berry et al., 2001; Berry, Worthington, O’Connor, Parrott, & Wade, 2005; Brose et al., 2005; McCullough & van Oyen Witvliet, 2002; McCullough & Hoyt, 2002; McCullough, Bellah, Kilpatrick, & Johnson, 2001; Mullet, Neto, & Rivièrè, 2005). Agreeableness incorporates attributes such as empathy and generosity (McCullough, 2001). Individuals who are more agreeable may be more tolerant of others (McCullough & Hoyt) resulting in being more forgiving. Neuroticism has been proposed to
affect individuals’ disposition to forgive, as more neurotic persons may be less effective at letting go of negative motivations toward a transgressor and more anxious and distrustful (McCullough & Hoyt; Walker & Gorsuch, 2002).

Another personality dimension proposed to increase disposition to forgive is spirituality, which is defined as a personal search for meaning, unity, and connectedness to humanity and nature (Emmons, 1999; Piedmont, 1999). A central tenet in many religious and spiritual doctrines is the offering and receipt of forgiveness (McCullough & Worthington, 1999). Various studies have suggested that people who report being highly spiritual or religious value forgiving and view themselves as more forgiving (Brose et al., 2005; McCullough & Worthington; Leach & Lark, 2004; Mullet, et al., 2005).

While research has supported the idea that personality variables predict a general disposition to forgive, how well these variables predict a person’s response to forgiveness in a specific situation has received minimal attention, and when examined, results have been mixed (e.g., Eaton, Struthers, & Santelli, 2006; Hoyt, Fincham, McCullough, Maio & Davila, 2005; Brose et al., 2005; McCullough & Worthington, 1999). Researchers have suggested that this may be due to the influence of many situation-specific factors that may predict forgiving better than personality-level determinants (McCullough et al., 1998).

**Contextual Factors Related to Forgiving a Transgression**

Increasing evidence suggests that transgression-related contextual factors predict a person’s situational forgiveness, i.e., forgiveness following a specific transgression. These can be grouped as factors related to the characteristics of the transgression, the transgressor and the relationship.
Regarding transgression characteristics, a transgression viewed as severe and hurtful may be more difficult to forgive because severe transgressions have more enduring consequences (Boon & Sulsky, 1997). Research supports this view, with more severe transgressions reported as harder to forgive (e.g., Brown & Phillips, 2005). Transgressor-related factors include positive transgressor actions such as apologies, remorseful statements, and attempts to rectify damage caused (McCullough et al., 1998; Ristovski & Wertheim, 2005). Perception that the transgressor’s actions were not intentionally malicious has also been linked to more forgiveness (Boon & Sulsky). A further factor might be whether an injured party sees forgiving as risky due to an expectation that the transgressor will repeat the offence.

Finally, characteristics of the relationship with the offender include the level of pre-offence closeness and commitment and the value the offended party places on their relationship post-offence. Each is likely to predict forgiveness since greater investment in a relationship may increase motivation to retain it (McCullough et al., 1998). Studies have shown that willingness to forgive is increased in relationships in which individuals feel satisfied, close and committed (Rusbult, Hannon, Stocker & Finkel, 2005; McCullough et al., 1998).

Relationships among Key Determinants of Dispositional and Situational Forgiveness

While some studies have examined the relationships between personality variables and general disposition to forgive and other studies have examined relationships between personality and situational forgiveness, multi-factorial models of all these variables are uncommon. Brose et al. (2005) measured the extent to which the domains of a five-factor model of personality as well as religiousness were related to a person’s situational and dispositional forgiveness, finding that people who were less neurotic, more agreeable and more religious reported a higher disposition to forgive and greater situational forgiveness. Like much forgiveness research, their study had
limitations, including a restrictive sample of mostly Caucasian, female, and Catholic college students. Furthermore, contextual factors were not addressed.

**Study Aims**

The first aim of this study was to examine in a multi-cultural community sample a conceptual model of forgiveness similar to Brose et al. (2005), which posits that personality variables of agreeableness, neuroticism and spirituality will each contribute unique variance in predicting disposition to forgive. To assess robustness of findings across studies, specific personality and forgiveness measures used differed from Brose et al. and spirituality (instead of religiousness) was focussed on given its applicability to a religiously diverse sample. The second aim was to examine how well disposition to forgive predicts an individual’s willingness to forgive following a specific transgression, and further, whether disposition to forgive fully mediates the relationship between personality variables of the offended party and situational forgiveness.

The third aim was to examine the role of disposition to forgive in the context of a broader model predicting forgiveness following a specific transgression; this model integrated personality of the offended party, disposition to forgive and contextual factors related to the transgression (offence severity, positive offender actions, perceived non-malicious intent of offender, expecting the transgressor to reoffend, valuing the relationship, and pre-offence closeness/commitment to the offender). It was hypothesized that dispositional factors (the offended party’s personality, spirituality and disposition to forgive) would predict unique variance in forgiveness of a specific transgression over and above contextual factors.

**Method**
Participants

Participants included 128 respondents (39% males and 61% females) recruited from Australia (62%) and New Zealand (38%) for convenience (not comparison) reasons through a social network/snowball principle. Mean age for participants was 39.2 (SD= 11.5; range = 19-74). Participants were born in Australia (48%), New Zealand (33%), or UK, Europe, or other (6-7% each). Religion was described as Christian (27%), Catholic (23%), Greek Orthodox (12%), no religion (32%), and other (7%).

Self-Report Measures

Self-report measures were completed in the following order, starting with demographic information, and with religiosity and spirituality rated separately from not at all (1) to extremely (5) religious or spiritual. In all scales described below, higher scores represent greater amounts of the construct named in the scale.

The Big Five Personality Inventory (John, Donahue & Kentle, 1991) agreeableness and neuroticism subscales were used, with items randomised. Good psychometric properties have been demonstrated (John & Srivastava, 1999). The Forgive Others Subscale of the Heartland Forgiveness Scale (DispForgive) measured disposition to forgive and has demonstrated good internal consistency, test-retest reliability and construct validity (Thompson et al., 2005). The Spiritual Transcendence Scale short version (Piedmont, 1999) measures spirituality, assessing one’s ability “to stand outside of his/her immediate sense of time and place and to view life from a larger, more objective perspective” (Piedmont, 1999, p. 988). Good internal consistency, factor structure, construct and predictive validity have been demonstrated (Piedmont, 1999; 2004; Leach & Lark, 2004).
Participants thought of an actual recent hurtful action by another, which they described, and then completed the *Transgression Related Interpersonal Motivations Inventory* (TRIM-18-R; McCullough & Hoyt, 2002), which assesses motivations to forgive the transgressor on three dimensions: *avoidance, revenge, and benevolence* towards the transgressor. Internal consistency, test-retest reliability and construct validity have been demonstrated for avoidance and revenge (McCullough et al., 1998; 2001), with a new scale, benevolence, showing internal consistency and predictive ability, but a high $r$ with avoidance ($-0.79$; McCullough & Hoyt, 2002).

Two questions (Tsang, McCullough, & Fincham, 2006) with previously reported construct validity assessed pre-offence closeness and commitment (e.g., “indicate how close you were to the person who hurt you before the offence”). Participants also rated *Offence Severity* on a scale from 1 = *not at all serious* to 10 = *extremely serious*.

Forty-three items which measured transgression-related contextual factors were rated from *strongly disagree* (1) to *strongly agree* (5), reflecting: positive offender actions (e.g., “the person who hurt me apologised”), perceived offender intent (“I realised that what they did was not personal”), expectation of likelihood of transgressor re-offending (“I believed the person would never do it again”, reversed item), and value placed on the relationship with the offender (“I realised I valued the relationship with the person”). Items were derived from respondent descriptions in a forgiveness interview study (Wertheim, 2003). An additional Australian community sample of 216 participants (mean age = 31.0, $SD = 13.7$, range 18-70), obtained in a similar social network process completed these contextual factor items (but not the other measures) regarding a specific transgression to obtain a sample of 344 for exploring internal structure of these items (see results).

*Procedure*
Following university ethics approval, adults were asked to participate in a study of “factors that promote or hinder the resolution of grievances.” Volunteers received a packet containing instructions and anonymous questionnaire; participants were informed that consent was taken as given on completing the questionnaire. Response rate was 41%.

Results

Structure of the Contextual Factors Related to Forgiveness Subscales

A principle components analysis (PCA) with Varimax rotation was conducted on the 43 new contextual items yielding five factors with Eigenvalues over 1.0; however, scree plot indicated only four should be interpreted, and some items loaded >0.40 on two factors, or <0.40 on the first four factors. On removing those items, a PCA on 31 items yielded four clear non-overlapping factors labelled Positive offender actions (18 items), Eigenvalue=17.1, percentage variance = 43.9%; Valued relationship (5 items), Eigenvalue=4.95, 12.4%; Nonmalevolent intent (5 items) Eigenvalue = 2.52, 6.4%; and Expecting offender to re-offend (3 items) Eigenvalue = 1.43, 3.7% (factor items available by writing to 2nd author). Subscales were created from the sum of item scores. Cronbach’s alphas for subscales were satisfactory (item-total rs >0.37); see Table 1.

Data Preparation and Descriptive Analyses

Normality and linearity assumptions were met. Independent groups t-tests indicated no differences (t < 1.25, p >.20) on disposition to forgive or TRIM scores on the basis of gender or nationality. Table 1 shows descriptive information.

Scale Correlations and Validation
Pre-offence closeness and commitment correlated $r = .69$ and were combined into a
closeness/commitment measure. Pre-offence closeness/commitment was correlated $r = .39$, $p < .01$
with (post-offence) valued relationship but not forgiveness measures. Religiousness correlated
$r = .43$, $p < .01$, with spirituality, but not significantly with any other measures. Table 1 displays
other correlations. As expected, disposition to forgive was correlated positively with
agreeableness and spirituality and negatively with neuroticism. The three TRIM subscales were
highly intercorrelated, suggesting that benevolence and avoidance ($r = -.80$) were multi-collinear,
and revenge and avoidance ($r = .58$) were related but distinct; therefore, only avoidance and
revenge were used in further analyses. Disposition to forgive correlated moderately with
avoidance ($r = -.39$, $p < .01$) and revenge ($r = -.49$) motivations. It also correlated low to
moderately with offence severity, unlikelihood of reoffending, and valued relationship.
Significant associations were observed between TRIM subscales and all situation-specific factors
except pre-offence closeness.

**Personality Variables and Disposition to Forgive**

A standard multiple regression analysis was performed predicting disposition to forgive
from the three personality variables. Agreeableness ($\beta = .42$, $p < .001$), Neuroticism ($\beta = -.19$, $p <
.05$), and Spirituality ($\beta = .22$, $p < .01$) all contributed significantly, $F (3, 124) = 22.47$, $R^2 = .35$,
$p < .001$.

**Disposition to Forgive Mediating Between Personality Variables and Situational Forgiveness**

To examine the mediation effect of disposition to forgive on relationships between
personality variables (agreeableness, neuroticism, spirituality) and situational forgiveness, Baron
and Kenny’s (1986) causal steps method was used.
The first phases ensured that personality variables predicted the final criterion variable and the proposed mediator (DispForgive); see Table 1. Whereas all three personality variables correlated significantly with DispForgive, only agreeableness correlated significantly with avoidance and revenge (criterion variables); therefore, spirituality and neuroticism were not considered subsequently.

Next, when agreeableness and DispForgive were entered together to predict avoidance they accounted for 15% of the variance, \( F(2, 125) = 11.24, p < .001 \), with only DispForgive contributing significantly (DispForgive \( \beta = -.39, p < .001 \), Agreeableness \( \beta = -.007 \)) indicating that it fully mediated the effect. In predicting revenge, the model accounted for 24% of the variance, \( F(2, 125) = 19.77, p < .001 \); again only DispForgive contributed significantly (DispForgive \( \beta = -.48, p < .001 \), Agreeableness \( \beta = -.01 \)) indicating it fully mediated the relationship. Sobel’s (1982) Product of Coefficients Approach confirmed the mediation effects (Avoidance = -3.88, \( p < .001 \); Revenge = -5.06, \( p < .001 \)), with the indirect effect of agreeableness on avoidance of \( \beta = -.20 \), and on revenge of \( \beta = -.25 \).

Since DispForgive might simply be a subcomponent of Agreeableness or equivalent to the combined personality variables, an analysis was conducted in which Agreeableness, Spirituality and Neuroticism were entered first in predicting each forgiveness variable, and in step two DispForgive was entered to determine additional variance it accounted for. While personality variables accounted for 5.7% and 7.4% of the variance in avoidance and revenge respectively, DispForgive accounted for a further 12.0%, \( \Delta F(1, 123) = 17.94, p < .0005 \), and 18.0%, \( \Delta F(1, 123) = 29.64, p < .0005 \), respectively, supporting its being a separate construct.

Path Model of Forgiveness including Dispositional and Contextual Variables

Next, standard regressions were conducted in three steps to produce a model of unique direct predictors and indirect (mediated) effects for situational forgiveness. First contextual
factors were entered as predictors of avoidance to ascertain which factors explained unique variance; second, disposition to forgive was added as a predictor; and finally agreeableness was entered to determine whether either dispositional factor explained further variance. This series was then repeated predicting revenge.

At step one predicting avoidance, valued relationship, $p < .001$, expecting offender to reoffend, $p < .003$, and positive offender actions, $p = .04$ contributed significantly (but not nonmalevolent intent, $p = .06$, pre-offence closeness, or offence severity), $F(4, 123) = 31.09$, $R^2 = .50$, $p < .001$. In predicting revenge from contextual variables, valued relationship, $p < .001$, and expecting offender to re-offend, $p = .03$ contributed significantly (but not positive offender responses, $p = .05$, or nonmalevolent intent), $F(4, 123) = 17.46$, $R^2 = .37$, $p < .001$.

In step two, DispForgive contributed 3% additional variance in predicting avoidance, $\Delta F(1, 122) = 8.44$, $p = .004$, and 9% in revenge, $\Delta F(1, 122) = 20.90$, $p < .001$. When DispForg was entered, valued relationship became the only significant contextual predictor of revenge.

In step three, the change in variance after adding agreeableness was not significant for either avoidance or revenge. The full model accounted for 51% of the variance in avoidance, $F(6, 121) = 23.31$, $p < .001$, and 43% in revenge, $F(6, 121) = 17.02$, $p < .001$. Figure 1 shows the standardized regression coefficients ($\beta$) of the combined models including significant variables when all contextual variables and disposition to forgive were entered simultaneously, and the indirect effect of agreeableness.

To ensure a Type I error had not occurred through omitting non-significant variables, regressions were repeated with agreeableness, neuroticism, spirituality and religiousness all included in step three. All significant (and non-significant) findings were replicated, with the final equations significant: avoidance $F(9, 118) = 16.11$, $p < .001$; revenge $F(9, 118) = 11.62$, $p < .001$. 
Discussion

The aim of this study was to examine the role of three personality variables in predicting disposition to forgive as well as forgiveness following a specific transgression (situational forgiveness) when considered together with contextual factors specific to the transgression. Findings suggested that agreeableness, neuroticism, and spirituality all predicted disposition to forgive, and in turn disposition to forgive predicted the two components of situational forgiveness tested: avoidance of the offender and revenge motivations. However, of the personality variables, only agreeableness predicted situational forgiveness, and that relationship was completely mediated by disposition to forgive. Disposition to forgive added unique variance to the prediction of both avoidance and revenge after contextual variables were considered, several of which were found to predict situational forgiveness.

The finding that agreeableness and neuroticism each played independent roles in predicting disposition to forgive is consistent with other studies that have used the Big Five (Berry et al., 2001; 2005) or NEO (Brose, et al., 2005) Inventories. Disposition to forgive was correlated .52 with agreeableness and -.34 with neuroticism, which fall within the ranges of correlations reported by Berry et al. (2001; 2005) and Brose et al. (rs for agreeableness .25 to .60 and for neuroticism -.27 to -.49).

The finding that spirituality also predicted disposition to forgive (r = .32) is consistent with Leach and Lark’s (2004) findings, although the current study, using a single scale, yielded a greater r than Leach and Lark’s study using separate subscales (rs = .14 to .19). Furthermore, in the current study, religiousness correlated with spirituality, but not with forgiveness. Differences in findings may be due to the diverse religious backgrounds of our sample, compared to the Brose et al’s (2005) Catholic sample or Leach and Lark’s mostly fundamentalist Christian group;
an hypothesis worth testing in future. Our study further found that agreeableness was the only predictor of forgiving an offender for a specific transgression, providing strongest evidence for that personality-forgiveness link.

A moderate relationship between disposition to forgive and situational forgiveness was also found. Together the findings support conceptualisations that individual differences exist in relation to proneness to forgive, that agreeableness is a fundamental component of dispositional forgiveness, and that forgiving in specific situations is related to a disposition to forgive.

That neither neuroticism nor spirituality was significantly related to situational forgiveness was unexpected and contrary to some research (e.g., Brose et al., 2005; McCullough & Hoyt, 2002). This could be due to the smaller sample size or community sample (versus psychology undergraduates) in this study or to different research methods. McCullough and Hoyt aggregated situational forgiveness scores across 12 scenarios rather than using a single transgression. Future research should confirm these findings using multiple forgiveness situations and varying methods and samples.

A unique aspect of this study involved identifying important contextual factors that predicted situational forgiveness and examining whether dispositional measures predicted over and above contextual factors. Findings suggested that disposition to forgive predicted both avoidance and revenge motivations following a specific transgression, even after accounting for transgression-specific contextual variables. This supports the conceptualisation of a disposition to forgive as an individual difference variable that could predict forgiveness in specific situations.

In bi-variate analyses, a range of context-specific factors predicted revenge and avoidance motivations, as well as benevolence, towards the offender. These included how much the injured party valued the relationship after the offence, which was the strongest predictor. However, while pre-transgression closeness/commitment to the offender predicted value placed
on the relationship after the offence, it did not predict forgiving that offender after the offence, suggesting that post-offence a shift may occur in an injured party’s view of the relationship and that the new relationship value becomes more important in deciding to forgive. A range of other predictive factors were more important than pre-offence closeness: positive post-transgression offender actions, perceiving the offender’s actions as nonmalicious, expecting the offender would not re-offend, and lesser perceived offence severity, which all correlated with situational forgiveness. Combined into a multivariate model, less valuing of the relationship, fewer positive offender actions, and expecting repeated offences combined to predict avoidance, while not valuing the relationship was the only unique context-specific predictor of revenge.

These findings of the importance of contextual factors have potential implications for counselling and reconciliation approaches. For example, interventions focused on raising people’s awareness of how much they value the relationship may be of benefit. From the point of view of the offender, one can make a difference in whether one is forgiven for hurtful actions, through empathic listening, apology, repairing damage, taking action to avoid repeating an offence, and possibly explaining when actions were not intentionally hurtful. While offenders’ efforts at reconciliation are more likely to be successful when the injured party has characteristics of agreeableness and a greater disposition to forgive, context specific factors appear to be highly important in outcomes.

This study contributes to forgiveness theory by supporting the idea that interpersonal forgiveness involves the interplay of factors that are both intrinsic and extrinsic to individuals. Future multi-factorial models should add other variables that have correlated with forgiveness, such as trait rumination (Berry, et al., 2001; Brown, 2004), narcissism (Brown), dispositional empathy and ability to manage emotions (Hodgson & Wertheim, in press). In addition,
alternative models could be tested using structural equation modelling and examining the
influence of disposition to forgive on contextual variables.

Limitations of this study include the cross-sectional, self-report method, precluding
conclusions related to direction of effects. Longitudinal studies are needed to explore how
people’s responses unfold over time. Experimental manipulations could explore the forgiveness
process in various relationship contexts (e.g., romantic partners, parent/child), through use of
unobtrusive measures, such as videotaping and coding responses to offence scenarios in lab
settings, or recording discussions between parties concerning previous actual unresolved
offences.

Volunteer or self-selection bias and cultural effects (Suwartono, Prawasti & Mullet, 2007)
may also influence findings, although a strength of this study was the use of a broader
community sample than typical, with variety in age, gender and nationality, as compared to
typical primarily female, psychology student samples. Our use of only two subscales from the
Big Five Inventory departed from standard usage, however, correlations with forgiveness were
similar to past findings suggesting that it was not overly problematic. Finally, the internal
structure of the new contextual scales needs to be confirmed in independent samples.

In conclusion, this is one of the few studies that have examined the predictive and
mediating relationships among both situational and personality determinants of forgiveness,
combining them into a new multi-factorial model of forgiveness. Individuals with personality
traits of agreeableness in particular, as well as lower neuroticism and greater spirituality, reported
a greater disposition to forgive. Furthermore, people’s willingness to forgive in a particular
situation was associated with both a general disposition to forgive and contextual factors related
to the transgression, such as the value that the offended party places on the relationship with the
transgressor, expectations that the offender will transgress again, and positive remedial actions by the offender.
References


Table 1.

Descriptive Statistics and Correlations among Personality Measures, Disposition to Forgive, Situational Forgiveness and Contextual Factors Related to Forgiving a Transgression (N = 128)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Scale</th>
<th>Personality</th>
<th>DF</th>
<th>Situational Forgiveness</th>
<th>Factors Related to Forgiveness</th>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>1 Agreeableness</td>
<td></td>
<td>2 Neuroticism</td>
<td>3 Spirituality</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>--</td>
<td>-.29**</td>
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<td>.52**</td>
</tr>
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<td>-.34**</td>
<td>.15</td>
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<tr>
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<td>--</td>
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<td>-.48**</td>
<td>.40**</td>
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<tr>
<td>4 Disposition to Forgive</td>
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<td>.09</td>
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<td>.50**</td>
<td>.51**</td>
<td>--</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12 Perceived Non-Malicious intent</td>
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<td>.40**</td>
<td>--</td>
<td>--</td>
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<td>13 Valued Relationship</td>
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**Significant at the .05 level
*Significant at the .01 level
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<th>Mean</th>
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<td>.74</td>
<td>.95</td>
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*p<.05, **p<.01, one-tailed; N=128
Note: Offence Severity was 1 item
Figure 1.
Path model showing standardized regression coefficients ($\beta$) of the direct and indirect effects predicting situational avoidance and revenge motivations

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