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*Do offender and victim typical conflict styles affect forgiveness? The roles of offender forcing style and perceived lack of offender remorse in response to a transgression and apology*

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Abstract:

**Purpose** - To examine whether victim and offender conflict management styles (yielding and forcing) predict forgiveness following an interpersonal transgression and apology. Perceived offender remorse, expectation of reoffending, and transgression severity along with trait empathy were also examined as potential mediators of conflict style effects and as direct predictors of forgiveness.

**Design/Methodology/Approach** - 112 Australian adults completed a questionnaire including a written scenario describing a hypothetical transgression perpetrated either by a forcing- or yielding-prone offender.

**Findings** - Offender conflict style was significantly related to forgiveness, with the yielding-offender compared to forcing-offender scenario resulting in higher forgiveness, an effect fully mediated by perceived offender remorse. Additionally, perceived offender remorse, transgression severity and likelihood of reoffending, and participant empathic concern added to predictions of forgiveness.

**Research Implications** - This paper highlights how an offender’s conflict style may lead to perceptions by an injured party that the offender is less remorseful following a specific offence and apology. Individuals with a history of dominating, competitiveness and self serving may need to modify their conflict resolution methods, or explicitly demonstrate sincere remorse, in order to elicit forgiveness from an injured party following interpersonal transgressions.

**Originality/Value** - This study is the first to our knowledge to examine how an offender’s tendency to yield or force during conflict affects an injured party’s decision to forgive following a transgression and apology and to provide an explanation of this relationship.
Findings are potentially useful to clinicians, mediators, negotiators and managers in facilitating better interpersonal or workplace relationships.

**Keywords:** Conflict, yielding, forgiveness, apology, remorse, empathy

**Article Type:** Research paper.
The present study aimed to draw a link between the fields of conflict management and forgiveness. Specifically, we examined whether the overall conflict management styles of an offender and an injured party (forcing versus yielding proneness) would be associated with forgiveness by an injured party following a specific interpersonal transgression and associated offender apology. Our aim was to incorporate a range of factors shown to promote forgiveness within a fuller model that included conflict styles of both the offender and injured party and variables that might mediate the relationship between those conflict styles and victim forgiveness.

**Conflict Management Styles**

The most widely cited model of conflict management styles, adapted from Blake and Mouton’s (1964) managerial grid approach, is the dual concern model (Rubin et al., 1994). The dual concern model maps conflict styles along two dimensions portraying an individual’s motivational orientations during conflict as concern for own outcomes and concern for others’ outcomes. When adopting this paradigm, the ways in which people handle conflict can be conceptualised as a function of high or low concern for self, combined with a high or low concern for others. This mapping generates five CMSs including forcing (also called dominating, contending or fighting), yielding (obliging, conceding, smoothing), avoiding (withdrawing), problem solving (integrating) and compromising (Holt and DeVore, 2005).

A study by Sorenson et al. (1999) found that the CMSs yielding and forcing (referred to as ‘dominating’ in that study) clearly fit the concern for own and other outcomes patterns proposed by the dual-concern model (although avoiding, compromising and problem solving did not map onto the grid as expected). Preferences for forcing in specific situations were associated with high concern for self combined with low concern for others, while yielding was associated with low concern for self plus high concern for others (Sorenson et al., 1999).
These findings are consistent with studies that have shown that forcing (or dominating) is associated with low levels of perspective taking and agreeableness, and is usually the most overtly destructive of the five styles, while yielding is associated with high levels of perspective taking and agreeableness, and generally results in conflict being resolved in the opponent’s favour (Antonioni, 1998; Rizkalla et al., 2008).

Conflict management styles can be conceptualised as either situation-specific responses during conflict or cross-situational dispositions. Dispositions to favour particular CMSs have been proposed by numerous authors and these dispositional tendencies have been supported empirically (Barry and Friedman, 1998; Moberg, 2001).

In the dual-concern model yielding and forcing styles are theoretically conceptualised as polar opposites (Graziano et al., 1996; Van de Vliert et al., 1995). When examining an individual at a single time point these styles may indeed be mutually exclusive; however, when examining conflict styles across situations, studies have shown that self-reported tendencies to yield and to force are sometimes only weakly negatively correlated or uncorrelated (Antonioni, 1998; De Dreu et al., 2001; Rizkalla et al., 2008). These weak associations suggest that although some individuals might be more inclined to either yield or force during conflict, individuals often report using a combination of conflict management approaches, and the context is likely to influence particular style used in any one instance. Thus dispositions to yield and force may be best considered separate dimensions, with some individuals prone towards yielding, some towards forcing and some responding with a combination of both.

Conflict and forgiveness

Many interpersonal conflict situations involve one or more parties feeling deeply hurt, disappointed or wronged by the actions of another party. In some contexts, parties may view themselves as ‘the injured party’ or ‘victim’ while another party is viewed as the ‘offender’.
In these contexts, the injured party’s hurt and anger may lead to a desire to retaliate or avoid an offender, thus inhibiting cooperative negotiations. One way of moving forward constructively in these situations is through the process of apology and forgiveness.

Although definitions of forgiveness vary, a common theme is that forgiveness involves replacing negative thoughts, affect and behaviour towards an offender, with those that are positive (Thompson et al., 2005). Forgiveness may also be conceptualised as a motivational shift from avoidance and revenge to conciliation and goodwill (McCullough et al, 1998). Forgiveness is usually viewed as internal to the individual and as distinct from excusing, condoning and reconciliation (which involves both parties’ participation), although forgiveness can lay the groundwork for reconciliation (Enright and Coyle, 1998).

While more than one party in a conflict situation may view the other as ‘the offender’, the current study examines this process from the point of view of a single party being injured, who is referred to frequently in the forgiveness literature as a ‘victim’. The aim of our study was to explore factors that promote and inhibit forgiveness following a particular transgression, with a specific focus on how offender and victim CMSs of yielding and forcing may influence how forgiving a victim is following an offender’s hurtful actions. These two conflict styles were chosen since they are theoretically polar opposites and reflect the clearest opposing motivations in the dual concern model. A further aim of this research was to examine whether several factors that have been found to predict forgiveness of an offender’s actions (victim empathy, and perceptions of the seriousness of the offence, offender remorse, and perceived likelihood of the offender repeating the transgression) explain the relationship between offender and victim conflict styles and forgiveness, and whether they further predict forgiveness over and above conflict styles of the parties involved.

*Factors Related to Forgiveness*
Three main types of factors appear to influence forgiveness. These include offence-related, victim-related, and perceived offender-related factors.

**Offence-related factors.** Offence-related factors include the type and characteristics of the offence itself. In this context, more severe transgressions have been found to be associated with lower levels of forgiveness (Brown, 2003; Girard and Mullet, 1997).

**Offender-related factors.** Perceived offender-related factors can include injured party perceptions about reasons for the offender’s hurtful behaviour as well as offender personal attributes and post-offence behaviours. Evidence exists from responses to hypothetical scenarios and actual transgressions, that forgiveness is more likely when the offender’s behaviour is perceived as unintentional and non-malicious (Girard and Mullet, 1997; Koutsos et al., 2008). In addition, post-offence positive (or conciliatory) actions of the offender can influence forgiveness (Koutsos et al., 2008). The most well-established of these actions is offender apology, which has been shown to promote forgiveness (Exline and Baumeister, 2000; Frantz and Bennigson, 2005; McCullough et al., 1997).

**Apologies** are viewed as admissions of blameworthiness and regret for a fault, without defence. They can indicate that the offender understands the nature of their wrongdoing and is able to accept responsibility and feel remorse (Exline and Baumeister, 2000). Apologies potentially allow the victim to empathise with an offender, and disassociate the transgression from the offender, so the transgression is viewed as situationally determined instead of reflecting the offender’s enduring personality (McCullough et al., 1997). They may also assist in promoting forgiveness through promoting altruistic motivations in a victim (McCullough et al., 1997).

A further possible offender-related factor, which to date has not been examined, is an offender’s tendency towards a particular conflict management style. Consistent with empirical evidence about yielding and forcing styles (Antonioni, 1998; Rizkalla et al., 2008),
individuals with a tendency to yield during conflict may be perceived by others as generally more selfless, considerate and agreeable, whereas people who tend to force during conflict may be perceived as highly assertive and competitive. Therefore, it is possible that those more prone to forcing may be forgiven less easily than those who yield more readily because a forcing style may be associated with characteristics that suggest lesser remorse following a transgression or more likelihood of repeating offences. This question will be a focus of the present study.

Victim-related factors. Regarding victim-related factors, an injured party’s personality, particularly agreeableness, has been linked with a propensity to forgive (Brose et al., 2005; Koutsos et al., 2008). McCullough (2001) proposes that agreeableness encompasses characteristics such as generosity, altruism, tolerance and empathy and, therefore, strongly promotes forgiveness which is a pro-social response.

A further victim-related factor is empathy towards an offender (Wertheim, in press). Empathy refers to the ability to perceive the internal states of others and experience an emotional response that is similar, but not identical, to that of another person (Gold and Rogers, 1995; McCullough et al., 1997). The concept of empathy includes both affective and cognitive components, with the cognitive component frequently referred to as perspective taking (McCullough et al., 1997). Empathy is thought to elicit victims’ capacity to care for the thoughts, feelings and needs of offenders (McCullough et al., 1998). Worthington (1998) theorises that empathy involves an active effort to view the interpersonal hurt from the offender’s perspective, rather than from the perspective of one’s own experience. As a result, the more global characteristics of the offender, outside of the transgression are considered, thus facilitating forgiveness (McCullough, 2000).

The empathy-forgiveness association has received empirical support. Based on self report, significant other reports, and scenarios, individuals’ empathy and their propensity to
forgive are consistently positively correlated (Hodgson and Wertheim, 2007; Konstam et al., 2001), and empathy has mediated between apologies and forgiveness (McCullough et al., 1997).

A final victim-related factor influencing forgiveness may be their conflict management style. It may be expected that a conflict style such as yielding, which involves an ability to take another’s perspective and consider an offender’s viewpoint, may be more associated with forgivingness than a more aggressive style such as forcing. In the one study to the authors’ knowledge that examined CMS and forgiveness, participants who scored higher on tendency to yield and problem solve did indeed receive higher scores on disposition to forgive others and significant other reports of forcing style were associated with lower forgivingness (although forcing self-report only had a nonsignificant tendency) (Rizkalla et al., 2008). Furthermore, this relationship was partially mediated by yielders and problem solvers more often taking the perspective of the other party (cognitive empathy), although the role of empathic concern (affective empathy) was not examined in this study.

**Aims of the Present Study**

Rizkalla et al. (2008) found that individuals more prone to force during conflict reported a lower disposition to forgive, while individuals prone to yield during conflict reported a greater disposition to forgive. However, they did not address whether the opposing party’s tendency towards a particular CMS might influence the forgiveness process, nor did they address the possibility that certain offender-injured party CMS combinations may be more conducive to forgiveness than others. They also only examined cognitive, not affective, empathy. Therefore, the present study followed on from Rizkalla et al.’s findings by examining how offenders’ conflict styles and the interactions between victims’ and offenders’ tendency to yield and force during conflict, might affect the likelihood of forgiveness following a hypothetical transgression. Furthermore, what appeared particularly
imported to examine was responses to a transgression followed by an apology. An apology can serve as an important facilitator of forgiveness in relationships; however, while apologies have been found to promote forgiveness, they are not always effective. For example, a less sincere-appearing apology or one accompanied by less expressed remorse or regret will lead to less forgiveness (Darby and Schlenker, 1982). Therefore various contextual factors may influence whether a transgression and apology lead to forgiveness.

Our first offender style-related hypothesis (H1), therefore, was that following a transgression and apology, victims would be less likely to forgive when the offender was perceived as prone to forcing rather than yielding during conflict. Several possible reasons, or mediators, for this were examined. First, forcing-prone individuals have been found to be more aggressive and less empathic (Antonioni, 1998; Rizkalla et al., 2008) and are likely to be perceived in that way by those who have been injured by them. Therefore, an aggressive and non-empathic style across situations may influence whether forgiveness will take place via victim doubts about the offender’s true levels of remorse for the offence (H2a). Thus, even if an offender self-reports being sorry for their actions, the disclosure may not be received as reflecting actual guilt and remorse.

A further possible factor explaining less forgiveness of a forcing-prone offender after a transgression and apology involves the victim’s expectation that the offender’s hurtful actions may be repeated in the future (Koutsos et al., 2008). Forcing-prone individuals may be seen as more likely to repeat offences due to their conflict style, and an injured party may be less likely to forgive if forgiving is not seen as safe from further offences (H2b). A third factor is the possibility that when forcing individuals perpetrate an offence, the transgression itself may appear more severe or hurtful, which reduces willingness to accept an apology (H2c).
Therefore it was expected that victim perceptions of offender remorse, likelihood of the offender repeating an offence, and severity of the transgression would each predict forgiveness, and further that they would mediate the relationship between offender conflict style and forgiveness. To test these propositions, a written scenario describing a hypothetical transgression perpetrated either by a forcing-prone or yielding-prone offender was used. Scenarios are useful experimental manipulations as they more successfully control for transgression context than reports of actual transgressions. In addition, forgiveness-focussed scenarios have been found to predict responses to actual transgressions in past research (Fincham, 2000).

While we have suggested thus far that an offender’s conflict style may be important in influencing forgiveness, the style of the victim may be important as well (H3). Therefore a possible model of this relationship is that offender style and victim style each independently add to the prediction of forgiveness. A forcing-prone person’s lesser ability to empathise might mean that forcing-prone victims only consider the fact that they have been personally wronged or transgressed, therefore minimising the importance of a mitigating context or an apology. A second possible model of the relationship between offender and injured party styles is that the victim’s conflict style may moderate the effect of the offender CMS with the combination of a forcing-prone victim and a forcing-prone offender leading to substantially less forgiveness. This possibility of an interaction between victim and offender styles was therefore examined (H4).

The final aim of this study was to develop a multi-factorial model of forgiveness, by examining the contribution of the combination of factors described in the preceding discussions in predicting forgiveness, and to examine their precise relationships. In addition to victim and offender CMSs, the roles of perceived offender remorse, expectation of offences being repeated, and lower transgression severity along with trait empathy
(perspective taking and empathic concern) of the victim were examined to uncover their roles both as possible mediators of conflict style effects found and as additional direct predictors of forgiveness. Figure 1 displays a model of the proposed relationships.

Insert Figure 1 here

**Summary of hypotheses**

**H1**: Following an interpersonal transgression and apology, offenders perceived as high in yielding during conflict will be forgiven more than offenders perceived as high in forcing.

**H2 (a, b, c)**: A significant effect of offender CMS will be mediated by perceived offender remorse (**H2a**), perceived transgression seriousness (**H2b**), and perceived likelihood of offences being repeated (**H2c**), all three of which will predict forgiveness.

**H3**: Victims prone to yielding during conflict will report greater forgiveness of a transgression than victims prone to forcing during conflict.

**H4**: Victims’ conflict style will moderate the effect of the offender CMS on forgiveness, with the combination of a forcing-prone victim and a forcing-prone offender leading to substantially less forgiveness.

**H5**: Trait empathy will be associated with greater forgiveness and will partially mediate the effect of victim CMS on forgiveness.

**Method**

**Participants**

In total 112 Australian adults (75 females, 37 males; mean age = 30.63, SD = 12.77) were recruited using investigator social networks (79%) and a psychology department participant registry of non-psychology students (21%). Most participants (91%) were born in
Australia, as were their fathers (61%) and mothers (62%). Mean religiosity scores for participants (1.96, $SD = 0.89$) indicated a slightly religious sample, with religion affiliations identified as Catholic (47%), no religion (21%), Christian (14%), Anglican (8%), or Orthodox (4%). Highest education levels reported were: 7% Year 10 ($10^{th}$ grade) or less; 21% secondary (high) school completion; 18% a graduate diploma; 24% some university but not a completed degree; 21% a bachelor degree; and 7% a postgraduate degree.

**Materials**

Self-report measures were presented to participants in the following order:

*Demographic Information.* Participants reported their gender, age, education, country of birth of self and parents, religion and degree of religiosity and spirituality.

*Conflict Management Style.* The forcing and yielding subscales of the Dutch Test for Conflict Handling (DUTCH) (De Dreu et al., 2001) were used. Participants rated the degree they displayed CMS behaviours from (1) *not at all* to (5) *very much*. A sample item (forcing) is “I fight for a good outcome for myself”. Self-report scores have been positively correlated with observer and opponent ratings during a negotiation task ($r = .30$ to $.70$), providing evidence for convergent validity (De Dreu et al., 2001) and factor analyses demonstrated discriminant validity among scales. These four-item subscales have also demonstrated acceptable Cronbach’s alphas (.63 to .69) and predictive validity in an Australian sample (Rizkalla et al., 2008); alphas in the present study were forcing = .74 and yielding = .52; however, with four-item scales, inter-item correlations are often used (Kline, 1986; Pallant, 2007), which were satisfactory ($r > .20$).

*Dispositional Empathy.* The Interpersonal Reactivity Index (IRI) empathic concern and perspective taking subscales assessed level of affective and cognitive empathy respectively (Davis, 1980). Participants rated how well each empathy statement describes them from (0) *not well* to (4) *very well*. Cronbach’s alphas have ranged from .71 to .77
Conflict management styles and forgiveness (Davis, 1980) and convergent (Davis et al., 1983) and discriminant (Alterman et al., 2003) validity of scores have been supported. Cronbach’s alphas were .79 and .73 respectively.

Scenario. Participants read a hypothetical scenario involving an interpersonal transgression, for which they were asked to imagine themselves as the victim. The scenario involved the victim lending his or her highly sentimentally valued car to a close friend, under strict conditions that the friend could only use the car to attend a particular work event. The scenario then described the victim’s friend (gender unspecified) using the car to visit a sick sister, clearly violating the conditions. The scenario described that, on the way, the car was damaged, and repairing the car would be expensive and difficult. The scenario concluded with, “your friend apologises, saying they are very sorry about what happened.”

Description of the Offender (Condition). Participants then received one of two randomly allocated descriptions of the scenario offender, suggesting the offender had either a tendency towards yielding or forcing during conflict. Descriptions were matched for structure and length, and included traits and qualities associated with yielding and forcing CMSs in past research (Antonioni, 1998; Munduate et al., 1999; Rizkalla et al., 2008). Sample extracts are “During conflict, your friend [offender] usually puts others’ interests before their own interests, and can tend to give in” (yielding-prone offender), and “During conflict, your friend [offender] usually puts their own interests before the interests of others, and can tend to get pushy” (forcing-prone offender).

Perceived Transgression Seriousness. Participants rated perceived seriousness of the incident from (1) not at all serious to (10) extremely serious (Tsang et al., 2006), and the degree to which they would feel hurt from (1) no hurt to (5) a great deal of hurt. Participants also rated the degree they believed the offender behaviour was wrong from (1) not at all wrong to (5) extremely wrong. Perceived transgression seriousness was represented by summing the three items; Cronbach’s alpha was .75.
**Manipulation Check.** Participants rated their offender on four characteristics—empathy, unselfishness, passiveness and agreeableness, on a semantic differential scale from (1) to (7). Higher scores indicated participants perceived the offender as having characteristics associated with yielding tendencies.

**Offender-related Factors.** Four items assessed perceived offender remorse, responsibility, guilt and regret, for example “How likely is it that your friend [offender] feels remorse?” was rated from (1) not at all likely to (5) very likely. These items were summed to represent Perceived Offender Remorse; Cronbach’s α = .95. Participants then rated, “How likely is it that your friend [offender] would do a similar thing again?” on a scale from (1) not at all likely to (5) very likely, which represented Perceived Likelihood of Reoffending.

**Forgiveness.** The State Forgiveness Measure (SFM) assessed likelihood that participants would forgive their friend (offender) following the scenario, including seven items covering having forgiven, and experiencing warmth and lack of ill will versus avoidance and hostility towards the offender (Brown and Phillips, 2005). Items were adapted using conditional language to make them suitable to the scenario. For example, “I have forgiven this person” was changed to “I would forgive this person”. Participants’ rated statements from (1) strongly disagree to (5) strongly agree. Higher scores indicated higher likelihood of forgiveness. The SFM has demonstrated convergent and discriminant validity and internal consistency (Brown and Phillips, 2005). Cronbach’s alpha in the current study was .81.

**Procedure**

Following university ethics approval, questionnaires were piloted to ensure the scenario could be adequately followed, and that offender descriptions conveyed a tendency towards yielding and forcing as assessed by manipulation check items. Necessary adjustments were made, and the questionnaire was more widely distributed. Questionnaires
(140) were either handed to participants or given to individuals from the investigator’s social network to distribute to family, friends and colleagues; subsequently 112 were returned fully completed (response rate = 80%).

Participants received an information sheet explaining that participation was voluntary and anonymous and that questionnaire completion indicated consent. Participants were asked to complete questions in order of appearance. Description of the offender was randomly allocated to participants, creating two conditions: yielding offender and forcing offender.

Participants from the researcher’s social network returned completed questionnaires in a sealed envelope handed to the investigator or mailed in reply-paid envelope. Participants from the participant registry completed questionnaires in a psychology department research office and left the questionnaire in a sealed envelope with the researcher.

Data Analysis

Preliminary Analyses. Preliminary correlations were calculated between all key variables. Analyses were then conducted to determine variables that would need to be controlled for in main analyses, including t-tests and chi square analyses between conditions on demographic variables. Manipulation check items were compared (t-test) across conditions to ensure offender CMS manipulation was successful.

Main Analyses. A hierarchical multiple regression predicted forgiveness in four steps: 1) offender condition, and participant (i.e., victim) yielding and forcing tendencies, 2) interactions between participant and offender tendency to yield and force during conflict, 3) empathy and perspective taking and 4) perceived offender remorse, perceived transgression seriousness and perceived likelihood of reoffending to predict forgiveness.

Regression analyses, rather than ANOVAs, were performed so participant yielding and forcing tendencies remained continuous variables, preventing loss of information (Tabachnick and Fidell, 2007). Scores on the yielding and forcing subscales were centred so
interaction terms condition x yielding and condition x forcing could be computed (Tabachnick and Fidell, 2007). Interaction terms were computed by multiplying the variable ‘condition’ (coded 0 = forcing offender, 1 = yielding offender) with the relevant centred victim CMS scale. Barron and Kenny’s (1986) approach and Sobel’s Product of Coefficients Approach were used to confirm mediation effects. Alpha level of .05 was used for main analyses.

Results

Data Preparation and Description

As missing values were randomly spread, they were replaced with the relevant scale mean and univariate outliers were trimmed (Tabachnick and Fidell, 2007). Assumptions for analyses were met. Table 1 displays descriptive statistics.

Preliminary Analyses

A principal components analysis on the eight CMS items confirmed two separate factors (eigenvalues = 2.41 and 1.72) with all items loading >.46 on the expected factors reflecting forcing (30.2% of variance) and yielding (21.5%) respectively (nonorthogonal factor analysis confirmed the factors). Yielding and forcing subscales were weakly and non-significantly correlated, indicating two separate constructs. Higher yielding scores were significantly related to greater dispositional empathy ($r = .22$, $p < .05$) and perspective taking ($r = .38$, $p < .01$); higher forcing scores were significantly related to lower dispositional empathy ($r = -.23$, $p < .05$) and perspective taking ($r = -.21$, $p < .05$). Greater dispositional empathy and perspective taking also correlated with greater forgiveness (see Table 2).

Examining Possible Control Variables. Independent sample $t$-tests examining effect of condition (yielding-offender versus forcing-offender) on age, religiosity and spirituality yielded no significant differences, $t (1, 110) < 0.70$, $p > .49$. Chi square analyses comparing
offender types on gender, nationality, religion and education yielded no significant
differences, \( p > .20 \), and age did not correlate with forgiveness \( r = .09, p = .37 \). Also, no
significant gender differences were found on forgiveness levels, \( t (110) = 1.72, p = .09 \).
However, because gender differences approached significance, the main regression analysis
was replicated with gender entered at Step one; no differences in results were found with and
without gender, so analyses without gender are reported. No other demographic variables
were controlled for in main analyses.

**Manipulation Checks.** Almost all participants reported they would be at least
somewhat hurt (95%) by the transgression, and that it was at least moderately serious (87%)
and wrong, while no participants indicated they would feel no hurt. One-way between-
subjects ANOVAs on perceived offender empathy, unselfishness, passiveness and
agreeableness between conditions (yielding-offender, forcing-offender) confirmed significant
differences between conditions, \( F (1, 110) > 106.0, p < .0005 \), with large effect sizes (\( \eta^2 = .48 \)
to .74) in the expected direction, indicating successful manipulation of offender CMS.

**Main Analyses**

The full hierarchical multiple regression predicting forgiveness, with predictors
entered in four steps, was significant, final \( F (10, 101) = 3.55, \text{Adj } R^2 = .63, p < .0005 \). At
Step 1, entering condition \((H1)\) and participant \((H3)\) yielding and forcing tendencies was
significant, \( F (3, 108) = 12.53, p < .0005 \). The only significant effect was condition, the
yielding-offender condition leading to greater forgiveness supporting H1. At Step 2 (testing
\( H4 \)), the yielding x condition, and forcing x condition interactions were not found to add
significant variance, \( F\Delta (2, 106) = 1.58, p = .21 \). At Step 3 (testing \( H5 \)), entering trait
empathic concern and perspective taking was significant, \( F\Delta (2, 104) = 7.51, p = .001 \), with
empathic concern reaching significance and perspective taking only tending to. Step 4
variables accounted for further variance, \( F\Delta (3, 101) = 28.79, p < .0005 \), with perceived
offender remorse and transgression seriousness contributing significantly, and likelihood of reoffending having a nonsignificant tendency to contribute further ($p = .05$). Table 3 shows that the effect of condition ($\beta = .03, p = .75$) became non-significant when perceived offender remorse, transgression seriousness and likelihood of reoffending were entered at Step 4.

To directly test $H2$ (a, b and c) regarding which of those variables mediated the effect between condition and forgiveness, Baron and Kenny’s (1986) method was used. Significant correlations existed between all relevant variables (Table 2) indicating that mediation effects were possible. The effect of condition on forgiveness ($\beta = .46$) was reduced to $\beta = .30$ when perceived transgression seriousness and condition were entered together ($H2b$), and to $\beta = .33$ when perceived likelihood of reoffending and condition were entered together ($H2c$), however condition still remained significant after each regression ($p < .001$). Only when perceived offender remorse was entered with condition ($H2a$), did condition no longer significantly contribute to the model (condition $\beta = .03, p = .84$; remorse $\beta = .54, p < .0005$), indicating that perceived offender remorse fully mediated the effect of offender CMS on forgiveness. Sobel’s Product of Coefficients Approach confirmed a significant indirect effect of condition on situational forgiveness via offender remorse ($\beta = .44, p < .05$), but not for perceived seriousness of the transgression or perceived likelihood of reoffending, confirming that the only mediating variable was remorse.

To rule out the possibility that the preceding relationships ($H2a, H2b, H2c$) actually reflected moderation (not mediation) effects, three separate regression analyses were conducted in which, in each case, centred versions of condition and the possible moderator (perceived offender remorse, likelihood of repeating offence, transgression severity) was entered at Step1 and then the interaction effect was entered in Step 2. None of the interaction effects significantly predicted forgiveness.
Discussion

The primary purpose of this study was to expand on past findings by Rizkalla et al. (2008), by determining whether both victims’ and offenders’ tendency towards a particular CMS (yielding, forcing) affects the forgiveness process. In addition to victim and offender styles, the roles of perceived offender remorse, expectation of offences being repeated, and lower transgression severity along with trait empathy (perspective taking and empathic concern) of the victim were examined to uncover their roles as possible mediators of conflict style effects found or as additional direct predictors of forgiveness. Figure 2 depicts a model of the study findings.

Insert Figure 2 here

Consistent with H1, offender CMS was found to be a highly significant contributor to the forgiveness process (explaining at least 21% of the variance), providing support for the hypothesis that offenders perceived as high in yielding would be forgiven more than offenders perceived as high in forcing following a transgression and apology. However, H3 and H4 were not supported; victim CMS was not significantly related to forgiveness, nor was there evidence that it moderated the relationship between offender style and forgiveness. That is, offender CMS highly influenced participants’ decision to forgive, regardless of the victim’s disposition to yield or force during conflict, thus supporting the importance of situational or contextual variables in the prediction of forgiveness.

The finding that participant yielding tendency did not predict their forgiveness level was unexpected, since many studies have found positive associations between the related construct of agreeableness and forgiveness (Brose et al., 2005; Koutsos et al., 2008). One possible explanation is that the constructs of yielding and agreeableness are not identical (e.g., yielding implies giving up fulfilling one’s own interests, whereas agreeableness implies altruistic responses, but not necessarily at one’s own expense). Indeed Brose et al. (2005)
found that some facets of agreeableness correlated with particular measures of forgiveness while others did not. While it is possible that the yielding measure we used was unreliable, this is unlikely to explain the findings since Rizkalla et al. (2009) used the same measure in a similar sample and found yielding style was associated at a low but significant level with greater disposition to forgive ($r = .21$). It may also be that our scenario, including the specific offence and offender description, provided strong situational cues that superseded ‘victim’ dispositional tendencies. Indeed, past studies (Brose et al., 2005; Koutsos et al., 2008) have found agreeableness to correlate more highly with dispositional measures of forgiveness than situational ones and situational variables have been stronger predictors of forgiveness than dispositional factors (Koutsos, et al.). Therefore a victim yielding tendency may not predict forgiveness following particular hurtful offences.

Perception of the CMS adopted by the opposing party appears to strongly affect victims’ perceptions of the offender, and thus their response to interpersonal wrongs or conflict. The offender CMS-forgiveness association found in the present study is consistent with a body of research indicating that during conflict cooperation yields cooperative responses and that competition yields competitive responses (Deutsch, 2006). That is, destructive or competitive processes of conflict resolution (i.e. forcing, dominating), are unlikely to elicit pro-social responses, such as forgiveness, from the opposing party. Furthermore, the offender CMS-forgiveness association points to a previously un-researched offender-related variable that may need to be considered when conducting research into factors that promote or inhibit forgiveness.

The present study also examined several mediators that might explain the relationship between offender CMS and forgiveness ($H2$), of which perceived offender remorse was strongly supported ($H2a$). Victims’ perception that their offender felt remorseful, guilty and regretful for the transgression fully mediated the effect of offender CMS on forgiveness. An
offender who had transgressed and apologised was much more likely to be viewed as remorseful if the offender had a past history of yielding and obliging during conflict, rather than a past history of forcing, dominating and self-serving actions; in turn this remorse was associated with the injured party being more forgiving. This finding is consistent with past studies, which have found that not all apologies are equally effective in promoting forgiveness, especially if they are accompanied by less expressed remorse or regret (Darby and Schlenker, 1982; McCullough et al., 1997). However it is notable that in the current study, the expression of remorse did not actually differ between conditions; instead it was past behaviours that influenced inferences about current levels of remorse.

It should be noted that apology itself was not manipulated in this study (both scenarios included an apology), so one cannot conclude that apologizing per se affected remorse levels. However the findings are consistent with the idea that transgressions paired with apologies are strongly influenced by contextual factors. Even if an offender with a tendency towards forcing apologises and is truly remorseful, their characteristics, past behaviour, and how they are perceived as a person and negotiator might inhibit victims’ forgiveness.

It was further found that forcing offenders were perceived as more likely to repeat the offence in the future compared to yielding offenders, and that the transgression itself was perceived as more serious and hurtful when the offence was perpetrated by a forcing individual compared to a yielding individual. However, contrary to hypotheses \((H2b \text{ and } H2c)\) that perceived likelihood of reoffending and perceived transgression seriousness would mediate the relationship between offender CMS and forgiveness, these variables did not explain this relationship. Instead, they directly added to the prediction of forgiveness, above and beyond offender CMS.
The finding that these two variables were additional direct predictors of forgiveness is consistent with research that suggests a more severe or hurtful transgression is likely to have longer lasting consequences for the victim, therefore making the decision to forgive a more difficult one (Boon and Sulsky, 1997). It is also consistent with the idea that when offenders are seen as more likely to repeat a transgression, victims are less likely to forgive because they are not seen as safe from further offences (Koutsos et al., 2008).

A further variable that accounted for additional unique variance in forgiveness was empathic concern. This finding augments research by Konstam et al. (2001) and McCullough et al. (1997), which have found that empathy and forgiveness are strongly related. It is also consistent with the idea that empathy elicits victims’ capacity to care for the thoughts, feelings and needs of offenders, thus increasing the likelihood of forgiveness (McCullough et al., 1998). (Hypothesis H5 proposing empathy as a mediator between victim CMS and forgiveness was not tested since victim CMS was not a predictor of forgiveness.)

Furthermore, although cognitive empathy (i.e., perspective taking) predicted forgiveness in univariate analyses, it did not account for unique variance when included with the study’s remaining variables in the final model. As such, it appears that in this study emotional empathy was somewhat more influential to the forgiveness process compared to an individual’s capacity to perspective take. This finding is not consistent with research by Hodgson and Wertheim (2007), who found that perspective taking was more strongly related to forgiveness. However, Hodgson and Wertheim measured participants’ general tendency towards forgiveness, whereas the current study measured forgiveness following a specific and relatively serious transgression. The current study supports theories that stress the importance of an affective empathic response to offenders following a transgression in order for forgiveness to take place (Enright et al., 1991). It is further possible that cognitive versus affective forms of empathy may promote forgiveness in different sorts of contexts, and that
they both remain relevant to the forgiveness process. The ability to understand another’s perspective cognitively may lay the foundations for the more affective form of empathy to take place, which in turn elicits compassionate and forgiving responses to others’ actions.

Methods Considerations

The transgression responded to in this study was a hypothetical scenario, which increases internal validity as extraneous variables can be controlled, but may limit external validity. Scenarios have no real consequences for participants and may not evoke the same level of emotion as that evoked by actual transgressions. Nevertheless, manipulation checks demonstrated that participants rated the scenario as highly hurtful and serious. This implies that the interpersonal hurt, although hypothetical, still made an impact at an affective and cognitive level, supporting use of hypothetical scenarios in investigating forgiveness (Fincham, 2000). Nonetheless, future research examining actual transgressions, significant other reports, and experimental manipulations would reduce the possibility of self-report bias. Although this study’s sample was broader than many others which have often relied on reports of undergraduate students from a single discipline, findings still need replication in different cultures and settings and in a larger sample. Additionally, while participants rated the offence as wrong and severe, the scenario transgression involved the offender visiting a sick sister, which could be considered an extenuating circumstance. Future research should examine a broader range of scenario types. Finally, since all scenarios included an apology (see point above), future research should also replicate findings manipulating presence of apology and would benefit by examining alternative offender responses such as compensation and reparation.

Implications and Directions for Future Research

The present study established a model, which included offender yielding and forcing; perceived offender remorse, transgression seriousness, and likelihood of reoffending; and
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victim empathic concern as major predictors in the forgiveness process. The model confirms that offender-related, contextual and victim-related factors combine in predicting forgiveness. Future research could expand on this model, however, by examining the effect of the remaining CMSs on forgiveness. The CMSs yielding and forcing were investigated in the current study because theoretically, they manifest as the most distinct, polar opposites. However, a study that examines problem solving, avoiding and compromising as predictors of forgiveness might help in determining which CMS or CMS combinations are most conducive to the forgiveness process.

The current findings could also be interpreted in the context of the needs-based reconciliation model of Shnabel and Nadler (2008), which states that victims experience disempowerment as a result of transgressions and feel a need to be empowered by the transgressor before being willing to forgive. A forcing prone offender is likely to be perceived as generally more disempowering, which may form a basis for perceptions of low remorse. Future studies should directly assess victim perceptions of empowerment and disempowerment in this context.

Finally, given that offender yielding and offender forcing were highly significant contributors to the forgiveness process, the present findings may also have implications for interpersonal and workplace relationships. That is, knowing that the way in which people handle conflict can influence whether or not they are forgiven, can potentially be used by clinicians, mediators, negotiators or managers in work settings to enhance productive communication. For example, these findings might provide useful data to encourage ‘offenders’ in interpersonal or workplace conflicts to understand why after transgressions followed by an apology they may not be perceived as truly remorseful by those who have been hurt. Furthermore, in order to promote better interpersonal or workplace relationships, individuals with typically competitive and dominating methods of managing conflict may
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need to more strongly demonstrate remorse through overt positive actions (e.g., fixing harm done) and changes in their typical conflict behaviour. In addition, if forcing styles of handling conflict lead to enduring injured party resentment after transgressions, then supervisors and managers may do well to support forcing-prone employees in learning less dominating, more cooperative, methods for resolving disputes. These possibilities all require further research.

Conclusion

This study is the first to our knowledge to examine how an offender’s tendency to yield or force during conflict affects an injured party’s decision to forgive following a transgression and apology. It also supported the idea that an interplay of contextual factors, offender-related factors and victim trait empathy, is influential in the forgiveness process.

The current investigation contributes to forgiveness theory by providing a model that accounted for much of the variance in forgiveness, with offender CMS (yielding or forcing) as a highly significant contributing factor, an effect fully mediated by perceived offender remorse. The study established a strong link between offender CMS and forgiveness, where yielding-offenders were more likely to be forgiven compared to forcing-offenders following a specific transgression and apology scenario. Given these findings, the present study suggests that regardless of actual intentions of an offending party, offenders prone to force during conflict who have transgressed and apologised may not be perceived as remorseful by injured parties. Consequently, individuals with a past history of dominating, competitiveness or self-serving may need to modify their conflict resolution methods, or further demonstrate remorse, in order to elicit positive and pro-social responses from an injured party following interpersonal disputes or transgressions.
References


Table 1

*Participant Mean Scores and Standard Deviations Within Condition for Measures of Conflict Management Style, Trait Empathy, Trait Perspective Taking, Perceived Transgression Seriousness, Perceived Offender Remorse, Perceived Likelihood of Reoffending and Situational Forgiveness*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Scale/Item</th>
<th>Yielding Offender ($N=56$)</th>
<th>Forcing Offender ($N=56$)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>$M$</td>
<td>$SD$</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Conflict Management Style</td>
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<td>Yielding</td>
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<tr>
<td>Forcing</td>
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<td>Empathic Concern</td>
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<td>0.57</td>
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<tr>
<td>Perspective Taking</td>
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<td>0.73</td>
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<tr>
<td>Perceived Transgression Seriousness</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Perceived Offender Remorse</td>
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<td>2.05</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Perceived Likelihood of Reoffending</td>
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<td>1.23</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SFM</td>
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<td>0.58</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Note: SFM = State Forgiveness Measure.*
Table 2

Scale and Subscale Correlation Matrix Among Offender CMS, and Measures of Conflict Management Style, Trait Empathy, Trait Perspective Taking, Perceived Transgression Seriousness, Perceived Offender Remorse, Perceived Likelihood of Reoffending and Situational Forgiveness

<table>
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<tr>
<th>Scale</th>
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<th>2</th>
<th>3</th>
<th>4</th>
<th>5</th>
<th>6</th>
<th>7</th>
<th>8</th>
<th>9</th>
</tr>
</thead>
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<td>.01</td>
<td>-.11</td>
<td>-.06</td>
<td>-.30**</td>
<td>.81**</td>
<td>-.48**</td>
<td>.46**</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2 Yielding</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>- .05</td>
<td>.22*</td>
<td>.38**</td>
<td>-.17</td>
<td>-.02</td>
<td>.13</td>
<td>.15</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
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<td>-</td>
<td>-.23*</td>
<td>-.21*</td>
<td>.04</td>
<td>-.05</td>
<td>-.06</td>
<td>-.14</td>
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<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4 Trait Empathic Concern</td>
<td>-</td>
<td></td>
<td>.43**</td>
<td>-.07</td>
<td>-.07</td>
<td>.04</td>
<td>.28**</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5 Trait Perspective Taking</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-.15</td>
<td>.00</td>
<td>.02</td>
<td>.24**</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>6 Perceived Transgression Seriousness</td>
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<td></td>
<td>-.34**</td>
<td>.25**</td>
<td>-.66**</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<td>7 Perceived Offender Remorse</td>
<td>-</td>
<td></td>
<td>-.54**</td>
<td>.56**</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>8 Perceived Likelihood of Reoffending</td>
<td>-</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>-.43**</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9 State Forgiveness</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

ª Point biserial rs, coded 0 = Offender perceived as high in Forcing, 1 = Offender perceived as high in Yielding.

*p < .05, **p < .01.
Table 3

Hierarchical Regression of Condition, Participant Yielding and Forcing Tendencies, the Interaction Between Yielding and Condition and Forcing and Condition, Trait Empathy and Perspective Taking, Perceived Offender Remorse, Perceived Transgression Seriousness and Perceived Likelihood of Reoffending in Predicting Situational Forgiveness

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Predictor</th>
<th>Adj $R^2$</th>
<th>$\beta$</th>
<th>$t$</th>
<th>$p$</th>
<th>$sr$</th>
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<tr>
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<td>5.66</td>
<td>&lt;.0005</td>
<td>.48</td>
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<td>.06</td>
<td>.18</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
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<td>-.15</td>
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<td><strong>Step 2</strong></td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Yielding x Condition</td>
<td>.01</td>
<td>.13</td>
<td>.90</td>
<td>.01</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
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<td>1.78</td>
<td>.08</td>
<td>.17</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Step 3</strong></td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Conditionª</td>
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<td>6.39</td>
<td>&lt; .0005</td>
<td>.53</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Empathic Concern</td>
<td>.23</td>
<td>2.58</td>
<td>.01</td>
<td>.25</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Perspective Taking</td>
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<td>1.71</td>
<td>.09</td>
<td>.17</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Step 4</strong></td>
<td>.29***</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Conditionª</td>
<td>.03</td>
<td>0.32</td>
<td>.75</td>
<td>.03</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Yielding</td>
<td>.03</td>
<td>0.51</td>
<td>.61</td>
<td>.05</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Forcing</td>
<td>-.06</td>
<td>-1.01</td>
<td>.32</td>
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<tr>
<td>Yielding x Condition</td>
<td>-.07</td>
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<td>.27</td>
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<td>.001</td>
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<td>.11</td>
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<tr>
<td>Perceived Offender Remorse</td>
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<td>.005</td>
<td>.28</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Perceived Transgression Seriousness</td>
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<td>-7.47</td>
<td>&lt; .0005</td>
<td>-.60</td>
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<tr>
<td>Perceived Likelihood of Reoffending</td>
<td>-.14</td>
<td>-1.98</td>
<td>.05</td>
<td>-.19</td>
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</table>
Note: Steps 1-2 display newly entered variables only, Step 3 includes newly entered variables plus condition, Step 4 displays full equation, with all variables entered.

**p=.001, ***p<.0005.

a Dichotomous variable coded 0 = Offender perceived as high in Forcing, 1 = Offender perceived as high in Yielding.
Figure 1. Hypothesized model of relationships among offender conflict style; injured party conflict style; perceived offender remorse and transgression severity; expectation of offences being repeated; and injured party trait empathy in the prediction of forgiveness following an offence and apology (solid lines indicate direct effects, dotted line indicates interaction effect)
Figure 2. Summary of the final model in which relationship between offender conflict style and forgiveness was mediated by perceived offender remorse, and participant empathic concern and perception of lower transgression severity added unique variance to predicting forgiveness following a hypothetical transgression and apology (lines predicting forgiveness = beta weights in final step of regression)