



# The roles of emotion management and perspective taking in individuals' conflict management styles and disposition to forgive

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## ABSTRACT

This study aimed to link two fields of research: conflict management and forgiveness. Adult participants ( $n = 122$ ) and a validating sample of significant others ( $n = 122$ ) completed measures of disposition to forgive, conflict style, emotion management, and perspective taking; and multi-dimensional models of their relationships were tested. Disposition to forgive was most consistently associated with problem solving and yielding conflict styles. Greater perspective taking was associated with greater forgiveness, and greater problem solving and yielding conflict styles, as well as with lesser fighting style; and perspective taking fully or partially mediated the relationship between ability to repair emotions and dispositions to forgive and problem solve during conflict. Significant other reports confirmed most of the findings based on self-report.

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## 1. Introduction

Conflict is a normal part of human interactions; however, depending on how it is managed it can have constructive or destructive outcomes (Deutsch, 2006). Furthermore, individuals appear to have conflict management *styles* or *dispositions* that are relatively stable over time and across situations (Blake & Mouton, 1964; Sternberg & Soriano, 1984). Five conflict styles are usually discussed: fighting, yielding, avoiding, compromising and problem solving. These styles vary along dimensions of the individual's *motives* (concern for self versus others; Carnevale & Pruitt, 1992), *approach* (competitive or cooperative; Deutsch, 2006), and *outcome* (who 'wins'; Blake & Mouton, 1964; Wertheim, Love, Peck, & Littlefield, 2006).

*Fighting* (or *forcing*) involves endeavoring to meet one's own interests, even at the expense of another party, generally with a win-lose (or lose-lose) result (Spangle & Isenbart, 2003; Wertheim et al., 2006). A *yielding* style involves managing conflict by fulfilling the *other* party's needs at the expense of *self*-interests. *Avoiding* involves withdrawing from disputes; which generally fails to resolve the dispute. However researchers disagree about whether avoidance reflects lack of concern for others or a concern for others with the aim of preventing open conflict (Gabrielidis, Stephan, Ybarra, Dos Santos Pearson, & Villareal, 1997). While *compromising* involves seeking a common solution in which both parties give up something to reach a mutual middle ground, a *problem solving* style aims to find solutions acceptable to all parties, through addressing everyone's interests creatively (Weitzman & Weitzman, 2006; Wertheim et al., 2006).

As these styles show, conflict can be resolved with varying degrees of satisfaction for each party. When conflict remains unresolved, a party 'loses', or a hurtful transgression takes place, grievances and resentment can form against the other party

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(Fincham, Beach, & Davila, 2004; Hall, 1993). One way to handle such past grievances is through forgiveness (Fincham et al., 2004; Hill, 2001; Worthington & Diblasio, 1990). In the context of an interpersonal grievance, forgiveness involves transforming negative thoughts, affect, behavior or motivations towards the 'offender' to more positive ones (Enright & Fitzgibbons, 2000; McCullough, Fincham, & Tsang, 2003). While forgiveness depends partly on situational variables (e.g., relationship context, offense severity), a *disposition to forgive* has been identified with some individuals more prone to forgive than others (Emmons, 2000; Koutsos, Wertheim, & Kornblum, 2008).

### 1.1. Conflict management styles and forgiveness

While conflict resolution styles have been approached from different perspectives (De Dreu & Van De Vliert, 1997; Jones & White, 1985; Kurdek, 1994), their relationship with the tendency to forgive has been neglected. Given that forgiveness involves setting aside resentments, we proposed that a disposition to forgive would be related to greater yielding and lesser fighting styles, a hypothesis consistent with personality research linking forgiveness with agreeableness (Brose, Rye, Lutz-Zois, & Ross, 2005; Koutsos et al., 2008). However, a proneness to forgive might also involve a conflict style involving use of constructive problem solving, since one way to achieve forgiveness would be to find creative ways to address past hurts and meet one's own (as well as others') needs without harboring anger towards the offender. Finally, a less forgiving disposition might also be associated with distancing from 'problematic' relationships by avoiding confronting conflicts. The first aim of our study was, therefore, to explore these hypothesized relationships.

### 1.2. A model of forgiveness, emotions and empathy

A second aim of this study was to examine some key determinants of both forgiveness and conflict resolution styles. Malcolm and Greenberg (2000) proposed an emotion-centered model of forgiveness in which negative affect and behaviors were transformed into positive ones in five phases. The first proposed phase involves acceptance and awareness of strong emotions (e.g., anger, sadness). In phase two (decision), the injured party realizes the importance of letting go of unmet interpersonal needs. Phase three involves reframing, where the forgiving person's view of the offender shifts. In phase four, the injured party develops empathy and compassion for the offender. Finally, the forgiver moves forward and constructs a new narrative of self and other.

A key element of this model includes the ability to manage emotions or what has sometimes been referred to as 'emotional intelligence' (EI; Mayer & Salovey, 1997; Mayer, Salovey, & Caruso, 2004). An awareness of one's emotions is thought to lay the foundation for regulating or *repairing* one's emotions (Mayer & Salovey, 1997) which enables forgiveness to eventuate. Self-report studies support this idea that greater levels of emotional intelligence are associated with greater agreeableness, cooperativeness (Schutte et al., 2001) and disposition to forgive (Emmons, 2000; Hodgson & Wertheim, 2007).

A second key component of Malcolm and Greenberg's (2000) model is the role of perspective taking, a form of empathy involving "accurately perceiving the internal frame of reference of another" (Gold & Rogers, 1995, p. 79). McCullough, Worthington, and Rachal (1997) hypothesized that empathy interrupts people's negative motivations regarding perceived transgressors and can elicit the offended party's capacity to care for the needs of an offender. The important role of empathy for the transgressor in forgiveness has received empirical support (Hodgson & Wertheim, 2007; Konstam, Chernoff, & Deveney, 2001; McCullough et al., 1997).

A recent study suggested that dispositional empathy *mediates* the relationship between emotion management and forgiveness (Hodgson & Wertheim, 2007). Path modeling indicated that *attention to* and *repair of emotions* (but not clarity) added *unique* variance specifically to the *perspective taking* form of empathy, which was the sole direct predictor of forgiveness. The findings, supporting Malcolm and Greenberg's (2000) theorizing, suggested that the ability to attend to and repair emotions enables individuals to take another's perspective, which in turn fosters forgiving. Our second study aim was to replicate this model in a new sample.

Given possible associations between forgiveness and conflict styles, a final aim was to examine whether Hodgson and Wertheim's (2007) model could be extended to predicting dispositions towards particular conflict management styles. In the few studies on this question, authors suggest that effective conflict management requires attending to emotions that can disrupt negotiations (Bodtker & Jameson, 2001; Rahim & Psenicka, 2002) such as anger or distress. In a study of workplace conflict, greater self-awareness was associated with better self-regulation, empathy and social skills; and self-regulation in turn was associated with empathy and social skills (Goleman, 2001). A further study (Smith, Heaven, & Ciarrochi, 2008) found that emotional intelligence was associated with reports of more constructive intra-couple conflict-related communication patterns. Whether individuals' conflict management styles are related to different aspects of emotion management, empathy or both still needs to be studied. The present study examined that question.

In summary, we hypothesized (H1) that a disposition to forgive would be associated with greater problem solving and yielding, and lesser avoiding and fighting conflict management styles; (H2) that Hodgson and Wertheim's (2007) findings would be replicated with attention to and repair of emotions predicting the perspective-taking form of empathy, which would predict disposition to forgive; and (H3) that conflict styles would be predicted by emotion management and perspective taking dispositions. Specifically, the prediction of *problem solving* style was expected to parallel the model predicting forgiveness. In contrast, individuals prone to *yielding* were expected to be low in attending to and repairing emotions, but high in perspective taking. Individuals prone to *fighting* were also expected to be low in managing emotions, but to report

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