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DOES FORGIVENESS/ UN FORGIVENESS LOOKS AS WHITE/BLACK FOR OUR SUBJECTIVE WELL-BEING

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Abstract. Research on resentment (unforgiveness) and forgiveness is presented in the scientific literature in a clear disparity with its real-life implications. While forgiveness has been studied for more than 40 years, the study of resentment is only at an initial stage. Therefore, our task was both a phenomenological study of these psychological phenomena and a test of the new PPS scale for diagnosing resentment and forgiveness and its connections with subjective (psychological) well-being. The results of the phenomenological study indicate that the key point in the transition from resentment to forgiveness is the motivation to maintain a relationship with the offender, the belief in the unintentional nature of the offense, as well as the presence of good intentions and repentance of the offender. The results of the correlation study showed the expected negative relationship between resentment and its components with subjective well-being and a positive relationship with ill-being. However, there was the absence of such a connection between resentment and physical health or depression, while forgiveness had no significant connection with subjective well-being. The latter finding differs from numerous studies and requires additional research using a more diverse methodology.

Key words: resentment (unforgiveness), forgiveness, dispositional forgiveness, emotional forgiveness, subjective well-being.

Introduction. According to the Christian tradition in the European culture, forgiveness is considered to be a definite positive way of coping with a moral transgression. Many studies show positive links between a disposition toward forgiveness and subjective well-being. In a semi-structured interview, non-believers and especially believers connected forgiveness of particular transgressions with feelings of improvement of their own opportunities and relationships, spiritual growth and the increased sense of meaning (Akhtar et al., 2017). Potentially, forgiveness can decrease hostility, anger, and desire for revenge, and increase compassion, sympathy, or pity for an offender (Enright and Fitzgibbons 2000; Wade and Worthington 2005).

These effects are quite understandable, considering that forgiveness therapy reduces depression, anxiety and stress and increases subjective well-being (Baskin and Enright 2004; Wade et al. 2013). A large survey conducted in the United States has shown the link between forgiveness of others, oneself, and by God and decreased odds of depression for women (Toussaint et al., 2008). For men such a link was significant only for forgiveness of oneself. However, this type of forgiveness cannot be considered prosocial or similar to the forgiveness of others.

The concept of forgiveness is differentiated based on the different targets (i.e., oneself, others, God) and the type of process of forgiveness (i.e., offering, feeling, or seeking; Toussaint & Webb, 2005). Of course, the differentiation of two dimensions of forgiveness – internal or external is very important (Baumeister, Exline, & Sommer, 1998). The latter presupposes the possibility of excusing

somebody as a conventional act, without the actual feeling of forgiveness and possibility of feeling forgiveness without the appropriate communication with the offender.

Some researchers have differentiated emotional forgiveness from decisional forgiveness. Emotional forgiveness presupposes “a decision to try to act differently toward the offender and, not seeking pay-back, treating the person as a valuable and valued person” (Worthington, 2020, p.4). Emotional forgiveness has the most significant health effect because it reduces stress-related problems (see Griffin et al., 2016). That is probably because emotional forgiveness takes away much of the power behind angry, anxious and sad rumination. Decisions to forgive most likely have the largest effect on relational wellbeing (Riek & Mania, 2012). That is probably because intentions to behave more positively can result in changed relational behaviors. Emotional changes due to emotional forgiveness tend to be more internal. Decisional forgiveness is likely to be more related to spiritual health than is emotional forgiveness (Davis et al., 2013; Worthington & Sandage, 2016).

However, even making a sincere decision to forgive, one may still feel emotionally unforgiving (e.g., angry, resentful, and hurt) toward the offender” (Lichtenfeld, Maier, Buechner, Capo, 2019, p. 3). According to Enright and the Human Development Study Group (1991), forgiveness is a multidimensional construct that contains dimensions of affect, behavior, and cognition (Toussaint & Webb, 2005). However, this differentiation does not seem productive in the study of forgiveness because it does not lend itself to isolating and measuring the behavioral component of forgiveness. This seems strange, because isn’t possible identify a behavioral component of internal forgiveness, if we accept the previous differentiation.

Forgiveness removes or minimizes the need for retribution, restitution, reconciliation, or a return to vulnerability by the victim (Rosenak & Harnden, 1992). Some studies show positive associations between dispositional forgiveness and life satisfaction (Allemand et al. 2012; Chan, 2013; Krause & Ellison 2003), but all these studies were focused on very specific target groups and areas of satisfaction, especially, participants of psychotherapeutic or consultation process.

Consequences of forgiveness may not only lead to minimization of tendency for retribution (Braithwaite, Selby, Fincham, 2011; McCullough, Rachal, Sandage, Worthington, Brown, & Hight, 1998), but also to repairing positive attitudes towards the transgressor (Fincham, 2009). Moreover, Hall and Fincham (2006) show that in a person who had experienced jealousy, negative attributions of partner’s transgressions (its attributions as internal, global, and repeated) may inhibit the forgiveness processes.

Data on forgiveness in marital relationships appear more conclusive. Partner-specific forgiveness was positively associated with life satisfaction, and this association was stronger than the association between general forgiveness and life satisfaction. Partner-specific and general forgiveness were positively related, as were spouses’ reports of partner-specific forgiveness (Karremans, Van Lange, Ouwerkerk, & Kluwer, 2003). Forgiveness was positively associated with marital satisfaction and communication in both the training and control groups. Couples in the forgiveness-based group showed a greater improvement in communication at follow-up than couples in the control group but did not differ from couples in the hope-focused group (Ripley & Worthington, 2002).

Also, it is possible to differentiate dispositional forgiveness and state forgiveness (e.g. Thompson et al., 2005; Eaton et al., 2006). Dispositional forgiveness refers to the general tendency to forgive independently of particular relationships and situations, while state (episodic) forgiveness is related to specific episodes when the target of the offense forgives the offender for a particular transgression (Berry et al., 2001; Brown, 2003; Paleari et al., 2009). Low dispositional forgiveness does not exclude state forgiveness but decreases its probability and requires more justification for the offender. For example, we feel a jolt on the bus that arouses our indignation, but upon looking back we see the man with a big backpack who accidentally bumped into us. The fact that our indignation has disappeared can be interpreted as emotional state forgiveness.

Dispositional forgiveness is more interesting and more attractive for researchers as the target of study. In particular, the study on gender and age differences in dispositional forgiveness in Poland and Italy show higher levels of forgiveness among male participants and older participants (Cabras, Kaleta, Mroz, Loi, Sechi, 2022). Some scholars believe that the disposition to forgive is more strongly associated with a quality of life than a single act of forgiveness (Munoz Sastre et al., 2003, Thompson et al., 2005).

In the metaanalysis we should take into account the very positive connotation of forgiveness in Christian culture. The majority of forgiveness studies were conducted at Catholic universities and were largely focused on argumentation of this positive significance. This does not mean that all previous data on forgiveness were falsified, but some of studies used very specific samples, measures that were not valid or reliable, and did not take into account the internal dimension and diversity of forgiveness. The concept of “good Samaritan” forgiveness appears very attractive, but its alignment with reality remains unclear.

Some data show important gender differences on forgiveness. Fincham and colleagues’ (Fincham et al., 2002) research with 92 married Italian couples showed that responsibility attributions were the best predictor of forgiveness for women; however, empathy was a stronger predictor on forgiveness for men. In addition, Fincham et al.’s (2004) two-site study of forgiveness and conflict resolution behaviors suggested that three identified components of forgiveness played different roles for wives and husbands in predicting future conflict resolution. Specifically, wives’ positive forgiveness behaviors (e.g., benevolence) were most important in predicting the couple’s conflict resolution, whereas husbands’ negative forgiveness behaviors (i.e., retaliation, avoidance) mattered most.

Enright and Coyle (1998) proposed to divide the process of forgiveness into four broad phases: uncovering, decision, work, and deepening. Uncovering refers to the awareness of the problem and emotional pain following an offense, including anger and insight. Decision includes realizing the need for an alternate resolution. Work includes processes such as reframing, empathy, and acceptance of moral pain. Deepening includes finding meaning and universality. It is carefully pointed out that the overall process of forgiveness is not likely to be linear. In the earliest stages of the process (i.e., uncovering and decision), forgiveness may actually be related to poorer mental health. As one works through the later phases (i.e., work and deepening), the effects of forgiveness should become more beneficial. This representation appears more hypothetical because there is no empirical verification and, for example, it is not easy to assess the decision stage before the need is met.

Furthermore, scholars (Fincham et al., 2004; Rye et al., 2001, Worthington and Wade, 1999) have pointed out that forgiveness consists of two distinct domains – negative and positive. The negative aspect entails overcoming unforgiveness, namely, reducing the resentment and retaliatory or avoidant impulses (Wade & Worthington, 2003). Maintaining a considerable physical and psychological distance from the transgressor might, in fact, be an attempt to avoid an unacceptable self-image. Thus, overcoming unforgiveness can be seen as the successful abandonment of the negative self-view resulting in decreased avoidance motivation, which in turn removes an internal barrier to connecting with the perpetrator (Fincham et al., 2004).

Data show the mediating role of relationship features and transgressors’s apologies in the link between forgiveness and life satisfaction (Bono, McCullough, & Root, 2008). This means that we prefer to forgive our close friends and relatives more often than less close persons, especially if they ask us to excuse them for a transgression. Offenders who apologize, take responsibility for the harm they caused, express remorse, and engage in amends-making are more likely to be forgiven than those who do not (Fehr et al., 2010; Merolla & Zhang, 2011). However, even forgiveness of close partners can lead to negative consequences (McNulty, 2011).

Meanwhile, even superficial phenomenological analysis persuades us that resentment toward other’s transgressions is experienced more often than forgiveness of these transgressions.. Every act

of forgiveness can become an unique event in our mental life, but resentment is an everyday phenomenon that may transform into a latent condition or could become a subject-matter of life-long rumination. Some of these rumination topics later may lead to forgiveness. Such transformations do not occur frequently, but each case is reflected in our consciousness quite clearly. One of the factors influencing forgiveness is the victim's ability to differentiate between the offender's personality and their wrongful actions (Fincham, 2000).

According to some data, forgiveness without deservingness (did not apologize/make amends) does not ensure a high level of well-being. If a victim forgives when it is not deserved, the victim's well-being is equivalent to not forgiving at all (Strelan, McKee & Feather, 2016). In turn, unforgiveness or resentment may be connected with many negative processes, including the decrease of well-being. Stackhouse and colleagues view unforgiveness not as the polar opposite of forgiveness but as a distinct—though overlapping—construct (Jones Ross et al., 2018; Stackhouse et al., 2016, 2018). In part, this view rests on the assumption that unforgiveness can be reduced through means other than forgiving (e.g., cognitive reframing, exacting revenge; Worthington, 2001).

At the same time, the small proportions of forgiveness acts in the number of moral transgressions show the existence of some serious barriers to forgiveness. It isn't only emotional-ruminative elements with hard and long-term feelings, but also cognitive-evaluative elements that reasonably reject the value of forgiving in the particular situation and offenders' reconstrual that change own view of offender in a more negative fashion as a morally wrong person (Boon, Hojjat, Paulin, Stackhouse, 2022).

This doesn't reject recently proposed interpretation of resentment (unforgiveness) as the tertiary emotion including primary and secondary emotions (TenHouten, 2018). However, it is challenging to combine such a complicated phenomenon with the concept of emotion; especially, given the lack of data on the link between resentment and disgust, anger or contempt that author has considered as the basis of resentment. According to Worthington (2001) unforgiveness looks as a cold emotional complex that can result when people ruminate about experiences in which they have been wronged.

If the offender denies responsibility, refuses to show contrition, or declines to apologize, what is referred to as the 'injustice gap' widens (Davis et al., 2015). Eventually, this leads to cognitive reframing of the transgression as reasonable and essential for the offender. "Victims" may experience residual resentment (unforgiveness) despite having forgiven when they cannot forgive fully or have ambivalence in their attitudes toward the subject-matter of forgiveness (Boon et al., 2022) or fluctuations in their desires to forgive (McCullough et al., 2003). Perhaps, this ambivalence is more often revealed when forgiveness has communicative character only; external, but not internal. It could signify traces of previous resentment maintenance that can stay for a long time in the latent condition till the next open conflict with the offender.

Offenders who express excuses or remorse and make some amends are more likely to be forgiven than those who do not (Eaton, Struthers, 2006; Fehr et al., 2010; Merolla & Zhang, 2011). This suggests that the lack of remorse, excuse or amends can diminish victims willingness to forgive (e.g., Rapske et al., 2010; Younger et al., 2004). Additionally, the offender's actions (or the lack of these actions) can create some barriers to forgiveness, described as fear of one's dignity and trust in the offender loyalty, decreased self-esteem, the loss of control in communicative situation, denial of justice requirements, concerns that forgiving might fail to prevent further wrongdoing, moral outrage, and desires for vengeance (Pearce et al., 2018; Strelan et al., 2017). According to some studies, only apology-based-forgiveness leads to the victim's subjective well-being improvement, while forgiveness without an apology and remorse leads to the same low level of well-being as unforgiveness (Strelan et al., 2016).

Taking into account that resentment can be considered as a primary reaction on moral transgression, while forgiveness is the result of reappraising the transgression, that is a secondary phenomenon based on the same event – we can presuppose a definite but small overlap in the mental con-

tent of these phenomena. The first aim of our study was to specify the similarities and differences between forgiveness and resentment using phenomenology of these feelings. The second aim was to study links between forgiveness, resentment and subjective well-being. This variable is very important and generally accepted as an indicator of life quality and is useful for more effective strategies of psychological help and support elaboration.

Study 1. On the first stage of our phenomenological study 57 participants – second and third grade undergraduates (42 women and 15 men 20-52 years old; Av. Age – $M = 33.5$, $SD = 8.26$) wrote two autobiographical narratives on forgiveness and resentment (unforgiveness). Later qualitative analysis of these narratives was applied. All phrases were separated into content units that represent individualized specific information, simply sorting one unit out from another unit.

These units were successively enumerated and appropriate part of them was distributed into 14 categories (1) feeling of cheating (fraud), 2) blight on offender, 3) indignation, 4) desire to end the relationship, 5) desire to inflict vengeance for transgression, 6) astonishment, 7) understanding of the transgression's accidentality, 8) decreased self-esteem, 9) reduced contact with the offender, 10) belief in the offender's good intentions, 11) belief in offender's remorse, 12) feeling that the transgression was undeserved, 13) ruminations on the reasons for the transgression, 14) desire to maintain the relationships). All these categories were developed based on previous studies of forgiveness and resentment (Boon, Hojjat, Paulin, Stackhouse, 2022; Jones Ross, Boon, Stackhouse, 2017; McCullough et al., 2003; Pearce et al., 2018; Stackhouse, 2016; Stackhouse, et al., 2018; Strelan et al., 2016; Wade & Worthington, 2005).

Results. The results of the content units' distribution in two narratives on resentment (unforgiveness) and forgiveness are presented in the figure № 1.

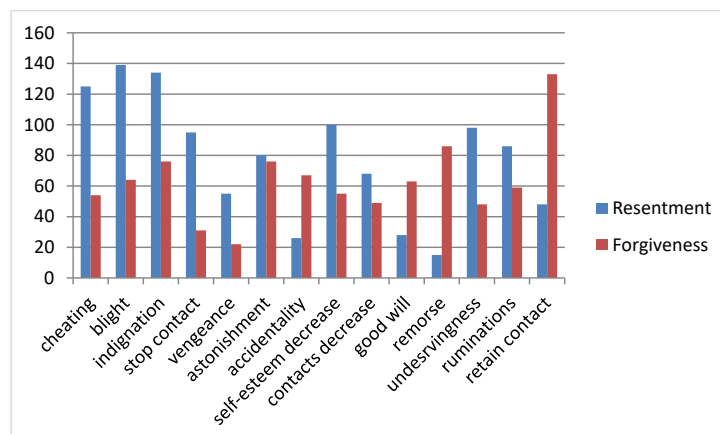


Fig. 1. Distribution of content units on forgiveness and resentment stories

In accordance with these data only the sixth category 'astonishment' shows similarity in both stories, while all other categories show significant differences for resentment and forgiveness. The chi-squared test of association $\chi^2 = 904.01$ ($p \leq .001$) shows general difference between resentment and forgiveness on the basis of the link between resentment/forgiveness and selected categories. Four categories were significantly higher (according to the number of content units) in forgiveness: 1) faith in transgression's accidentality, 2) belief in the offender's good intentions, 3) belief in the offender's remorse, 4) desire to maintain the relationship. This indicates that we have four main specific elements of forgiveness – relationships-preservation-motivation and three types of cognitive attributions directed on the decrease of offender's responsibility and guilt. If these elements predominate over other feelings and attributions we can expect forgiveness with higher probability. When other elements, excluding astonishment, predominate resentment is more likely to occur.

Study 2. Based on previous measures and studies of forgiveness and unforgiveness we elaborated new 65 items two-factor scale Pārdzīvojumu pēdas skala (PPS – Traces of our experiences scale) which includes a unitary scale of dispositional forgiveness and a multifaceted scale of dispositional resentment (unforgiveness), including such three subscales as emotional-ruminative unforgiveness, cognitive-evaluative unforgiveness, and offender reconstrual (Stackhouse, Jones Ross, & Boon, 2018). The subscale of forgiveness includes 16 items, such as – ‘If a person confesses to being guilty, we should forgive’, ‘Being late to an informal meeting is a venial sin’). Emotional-ruminative unforgiveness on resentment subscale includes 23 items, such as ‘My soul wounds of past offenses remain bleeding’, ‘I am obsessed with idea that my boss isn’t fair to me’), cognitive-evaluative unforgiveness includes 8 items (such as ‘It is impossible to forgive a person who intentionally discloses in Internet information on intimate life of me or my close persons’, ‘I cannot leave behind piggishness perpetrated by guests in my house’), offender reconstrual includes 6 items (as ‘I remember all persons who put me in the line of fire’, ‘it is highly unlikely that I will continue friendly relationships with person who have expressed xenophobic ideas’).

All subscales of the PPS questionnaire have sufficiently strong indices of reliability by internal consistency. Cronbach's Alpha is 0.88 for the general scale PPS, including 0.70 for the Inclination to forgiveness (13 items) and 0.91 for the Inclination to resentment (52 items) (see table. 1).

The aim of the study was to specify the links between resentment/forgiveness and subjective well-being. Based on previous studies, different connections with well-being can be expected not only for resentment and forgiveness but for three elements of resentment (Stackhouse, Ross, & Boon, 2016; 2018). At the same time, resentment as the subject-matter of psychological study is quite new (Breslav, 2020) and first measures of resentment (offense, unforgiveness) are unfledged. This means that the research aim will be inevitably supplemented by methodological aim – verification of the new measure of resentment.

The main hypothesis states that resentment and forgiveness have different links with well-being; resentment more negative, but forgiveness – positive link (Chan 2013; Krause & Ellison 2003). For more advanced measurement of well-being the multidimensional 39-item measure – BSW (Berne Questionnaire of Subjective Well-Being) was used, which includes different positive and negative aspects of well-being (Grob, 1991; Grob, Lüthi, Kaiser, Flammer, Mackinnon, & Wearing, 1991). This measure, initially developed for adolescents and later adapted for adults, demonstrates strong psychometric properties: – Cronbach's α for internal consistency ranges from 0.69 till 0.87 and results of confirmatory factor analysis align with expectations (Grob, 1995).

The 39-item measure of well-being with a 5-point scale includes two high order variables – Satisfaction and Ill-being and six specific variables: Positive Attitude toward Life (such as ‘I enjoy life more than most people do’); Problems (as ‘How often in the past few weeks did you worry because... you had problems with other people?’), Somatic Complaints (as ‘In the past few weeks have you had stomach ache? ... suffered from heart beating or heart pains?’); Self-Esteem (as ‘I am capable of doing things just as well as most other people’; Depressive Mood (as ‘I have lost interest in other people and do not concern myself with them’); and Joy in Life (as ‘In the past few weeks have you ... been pleased because you had achieved something? ‘).

35 women and 15 male Latvian residents aged 30 to 37 years participated in the study (M female = 33.1; M male = 34.1). All participants were surveyed online via email and social networks using Microsoft Word to presentation the two inventories. The time allocated for completing the inventories was controlled and all responses were collected on the same day they were sent out.

Results. The main data are represented in Figure 2. The tendency to forgive shows no significant correlations with well-being or ill-being. The tendency toward offense (resentment) shows a positive correlation with ill-being (.80) and with problems (.37) and a negative correlation with joy in life (- .45). Accordingly, all resentment components have similar significant negative correlations with

well-being and its components, as well as positive correlations with ill-being and with problems (mainly with other people), but not with depressive mood and somatic complaints.

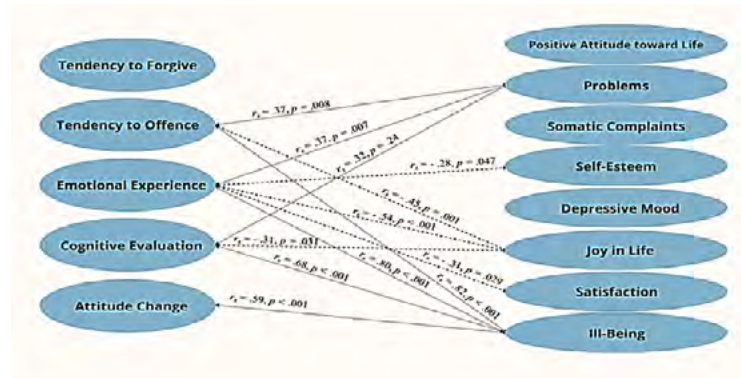


Fig. 2. Correlation table of the main variables in the PPS and BSW scales

Table 1

Data on the resentment and forgiveness scale (PPS) and subscales' reliability

	Cronbach's Alpha	Number of Items
General scale	.88	65
Inclination to forgiveness	.70	13
Inclination to resentment	.91	52
Emotional subscale of resentment	.87	23
Cognitive subscale of resentment	.78	8
Reappraisal of wrongdoer	.70	6

The internal consistency data (Cronbach's Alpha) indicate that our scale and subscales of resentment and forgiveness demonstrate sufficient reliability, with values ranging from 0.7 to 0.91.

Discussion. The results of the phenomenological study show a partial intercrossing of resentment and forgiveness features which appears to be an expected outcome. As mentioned previously, resentment is a primary reaction to a moral transgression, but forgiveness is a secondary reaction to a similar offense. The similarity in astonishment is easily understandable as obviously people unwittingly share a presumption of innocence. Namely, they expect more or less appropriate conduct in communicative situations from significant others. As a consequence, the moral transgression or something perceived as such by the offender creates the cognitive dissonance and surprise in both cases.

In the same way we can explain the high level of indignation in the forgiveness narrative as a natural reaction to moral transgression. It is understandable that the level of indignation is higher in cases of resentment, but in the forgiveness story it is higher than beliefs on good intentions but not on remorse of the offender. The key factor of the difference appears to be the motive to retain the relationship with the offender that links with a higher level of the faith in the randomness of misconduct, beliefs in the good intentions and in the remorse of the offender. This link is understandable taking into account that the remorse facilitates forgiveness (Eaton, & Struthers, 2006; Exline, & Baumeister, 2000). These beliefs can be considered part of emotion-focused coping with transgression, which is associated with forgiving (Konstam, Holmes, & Levine, 2003).

The results of the correlational study align with expectations in some aspects – the negative link between resentment and subjective well-being and the positive link with ill-being. However, they deviate from expectations in the lack of the associations between resentment and some subscales of ill-being (somatic complaints and depression), as well as the lack of the link between forgiveness and well-being.

The latter is understandable given that forgiveness is more strongly linked to well-being for people who reported being closer and more committed to their partners before the transgression, as well as among those whose partners apologized and made amends for the transgression (Bono, McCullough, & Root, 2008). At the same time, changes in attitude toward the partner appear to explain the link between forgiveness and well-being. This suggests that the negative changes in the attitude to the offender may weaken the link between forgiveness and well-being. In addition, if the victim perceives the offense as intentional such behaviors as apologies and restorative actions are experienced as less useful for forgiveness (Martinez-Diaz, et al., 2021).

We can see that the positive link of resentment with ill-being based mainly on 'the increase of problems' subscale, which reflects tensions in personal communications. This is understandable, given that the offender is typically part of one's closest social circle. But it is not the same on the link between resentment and somatic complaints or depression.

Conclusions. It is difficult to overstate the importance of studying the phenomena of resentment and forgiveness, as they can have significant and long-lasting effects on an individual's life. The phenomenological and correlational study conducted revealed new characteristics of these phenomena and shows the complexity of their role in an individual's life. While a significant number of previous studies have indicated a direct and indirect link between forgiveness and subjective or psychological well-being, our study did not confirm this.

At the same time, given the multidimensional nature of forgiveness, future studies should utilize multidimensional methodologies, unlike a single-measure methodology used in this study. Such studies would allow researches to control for the characteristics of the situation related to the offense, and provide an opportunity to analyze forgiveness as a multi-stage process. This study confirms the negative correlation between resentment and subjective well-being (in the area of communication problems), but did not confirm a positive link between forgiveness and well-being.

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