

# Forgiveness as a Mediator of the Intergenerational Transmission of Violence

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## Abstract

Bowen Family Systems Theory and Social Learning Theory served as a framework for examining the potential role of offspring maternal forgiveness in the intergenerational transmission (IGT) of violence. Using 285 emerging adults, we tested the hypotheses that higher accounts of witnessed interpersonal violence perpetrated by either parent would relate to increased reports of dating violence, and that offspring's capacity to forgive mothers for current transgressions would mediate this relationship. Witnessing interpersonal violence perpetrated by either parent significantly related to offspring dating violence perpetration and victimization. In addition, witnessing violence perpetrated by either parent significantly related to offspring dating violence perpetration, via offspring's capacity to forgive. Contrary to expectation, offspring's capacity to forgive mothers did not mediate the link between father-perpetrated violence and dating violence victimization; however, it did serve as mediator in the association between mother-perpetrated violence and offspring dating violence victimization. Overall, the findings suggest that witnessing violence perpetrated by either parent explains a portion of the variance in offspring dating violence indirectly through offspring's capacity to forgive mothers for current transgressions. The present study contributes to previous research on the IGT of violence by identifying forgiveness as a mechanism in which intimate partner violence

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is transmitted generationally. Implications and future directions are discussed for researchers and clinicians.

**Keywords**

violence, alcohol and drugs, family issues and mediators, child abuse, children exposed to domestic violence, domestic violence, dating violence, domestic violence, violence exposure

Experiencing interparental violence during childhood is one of the most commonly studied risk factors associated with dating intimate partner violence. The intergenerational transmission (IGT) of violence hypothesis proposes that child exposure to violent parental functioning predisposes them for future involvement in violent intimate relationships (Elbow, 1982; Kantor & Jasinski, 1998; Straus, Gelles, & Steinmetz, 1980). The focus on the association found between experiencing family-of-origin violence and subsequent violence in dating relationships begs the question of why this association exists. What is the mechanism by which the IGT of violence occurs? The present study addresses this issue by examining how offspring's capacity to forgive can contribute to our understanding of the transmission of violence across generations. First, we test whether witnessing interpersonal violence perpetrated by either parent relates to current violence perpetration or victimization in offspring dating relationships. Then, we examine offspring's capacity to forgive as a possible mechanism that might account for the transmission of violence.

**Theoretical Considerations*****Social Learning Theory (SLT)***

SLT is regularly used in studies on the IGT of violence (Bandura, 1973, 1977; Bandura, Ross, & Ross, 1962; Bell & Naugle, 2008). According to SLT, parents model violence in their conflict behavior, and children thereby learn directly and indirectly that violence is an acceptable means of behaving in close relationships (Mihalic & Elliott, 1997). There is widespread support for this explanation regarding the transmission of violence across generations (Black, Sussman, & Unger, 2010; Carr & VanDeusen, 2002; Gover, Kaukinen, & Fox, 2008; Heyman & Slep, 2002; Jankowski, Leitenberg, Henning, & Coffey, 1999; Milletich, Kelley, Doane, & Pearson, 2010; Smith, Ireland, Park, Elwyn, & Thornberry, 2011). Furthermore, research has supported gender as an influential factor on the witnessed interparental violence and dating

violence link (Carr & VanDeusen, 2002; Jankowski et al., 1999). Milletich et al. (2010) identified stronger associations between witnessed interparental violence and perpetration of physical dating violence when the parent who perpetrated the violence was of the same gender as the offspring. Furthermore, Gover et al. (2008) found no relationship between witnessing interparental violence and subsequent physical dating violence perpetration, but found support for a relationship between witnessing father-perpetrated violence and physical violence victimization for females. Collectively, research on the relationship between witnessed interparental violence and subsequent dating violence has produced mixed findings (Stith et al., 2000), leaving open the possibility that other mechanisms might be responsible for the IGT of violence.

### ***Bowen Family Systems Theory***

An underutilized theoretical framework in the IGT of violence literature is Bowen family system theory (Bowen, 1978). According to Bowen theory, the concept of *differentiation of self* involves maintaining emotional stability and objectivity through an intrapsychic process that consists of balancing one's emotions with thoughts, and an interpsychic process that involves balancing closeness with autonomy (Bowen, 1978; Kerr & Bowen, 1988; Licht & Chabot, 2006). Higher differentiation results in less emotional reactivity in emotionally provoking moments, ultimately leading to thought driven, rather than emotion driven, functioning. Furthermore, differentiation is thought to result in the capacity to be emotionally involved in intimate relationships while maintaining a sense of self and autonomy in emotional and behavioral functioning (Bowen, 1978; Kerr & Bowen, 1988). Past research links lower differentiation to poor boundaries in intimate relationships (Bartle-Haring, Rosen, & Stith, 2002), child abuse potential (Skowron & Platt, 2005), psychological and interpersonal distress (Krycak, Murdock, & Marszalek, 2012; Skowron & Friedlander, 1998; Skowron, Stanley, & Shapiro, 2009), reactive and suppressive coping (Murdock & Gore, 2004), and mental health symptoms (Sandage & Jankowski, 2010).

Rosen, Bartle-Haring, and Stith (2001) proposed that differentiation of self could aid in understanding the mechanisms by which violence is transferred generationally. Their study of young adults in serious dating relationships indicated that greater differentiation was related to less dating violence, controlling for family-of-origin violence. Findings also indicated that the link between witnessing interparental violence and current dating violence was partially mediated by differentiation, and that witnessing interparental violence was positively related to differentiation and the likelihood of experiencing dating violence.

*Differentiation of self and forgiveness.* Although researchers have given very little attention to forgiveness within the family context (see Fincham, 2010, for a review), some family scholars have theoretically linked higher differentiation of self with a greater capacity to forgive (e.g., Shults & Sandage, 2003). It is believed that the capacity of a more highly differentiated individual to rely on a thought driven process, rather than an emotion driven process, allows him or her to achieve emotional stability when faced with negative emotions pertaining to an offense (intrapsychic process of differentiation). This, in turn, is thought to result in the ability to self-regulate and engage in forgiveness. In addition, the capacity to separate the transgressions of others from one's sense of self (interpsychic process of differentiation) is also believed to facilitate the process of forgiveness (Sandage & Jankowski, 2010; Shults & Sandage, 2003).

In their study on the relationship between differentiation and forgiveness of interpersonal hurts and religious attacks, Holeman, Dean, DeShea, and Duba (2011) reported that emotional reactivity, the "I" position, fusion, and cutoff subscales of the Differentiation of Self Inventory–Revised (DSI-R; Skowron & Schmitt, 2003), positively predicted the Reduction of Negative Emotions subscale of the Emotional Forgiveness Scale (Worthington et al., 2012). Furthermore, they found that the DSI-R subscale of "I" position and Emotional Cutoff predicted the subscale of the Decisional Forgiveness Scale, Inhibition of Harmful Intention. Sandage and Jankowski (2010) found support for a theoretical model suggesting an indirect link between the capacity to forgive and indices of well-being, via differentiation. Particularly relevant to the present study, support was found for a positive association between differentiation of self and the capacity to forgive.

## **The Current Study**

The present study examines the role that forgiveness plays in the IGT of violence. We tested separate models for father- and mother-perpetrated interpersonal violence because prior research indicates that experiencing father- or mother-perpetrated interpersonal violence may have differing effects on subsequent offspring dating violence. First, we tested whether witnessing of interpersonal violence perpetrated by either parent directly relates to offspring dating violence perpetration or victimization. Then, we examined whether offspring's capacity to forgive their mothers for current transgressions mediates the relationship between witnessed interpersonal violence perpetrated by either parent and current offspring dating violence perpetration or victimization. Data on offspring paternal forgiveness were not collected and therefore not included in our analyses. Informed by SLT and Bowen theory frameworks, and based on previous research, we examined three hypotheses:

**Hypothesis 1:** Offspring accounts of witnessed interpersonal violence perpetrated by either parent will account for variance in rates of offspring dating violence.

**Hypothesis 2:** Offspring's capacity to forgive their mothers for current transgressions will mediate the relationship between accounts of witnessed interpersonal violence perpetrated by either parent and current dating violence *perpetration* in offspring dating relationships.

**Hypothesis 3:** Offspring's capacity to forgive their mothers for current transgressions will mediate the relationship between accounts of witnessed interpersonal violence perpetrated by either parent and current dating violence *victimization* in offspring dating relationships.

## Method

### Participants

Participants comprised emerging adults in romantic relationships ( $N = 285$ ) at a large state university in the Southeastern United States. Students were taking an introductory class in human sciences that met university liberal studies requirements in social sciences, so students potentially represent all colleges and majors on campus. Participants ranged in age from 18 to 26 ( $M = 19.45$ ;  $SD = 1.27$ ), were dominantly female (86.2% female;  $n = 243$ ), 71% lived with their parents part of the year, 2% lived with their parents year-round, and 27% lived on their own year-round. They identified as Caucasian (70%), Latino (12%), African American (10%), Asian (1%), Native Hawaiian or Pacific Islander (1%), Biracial (4%), and 2% did not report a race.

### Procedures

Students were offered a number of extra credit options, with one of the options being participation in the present study. All procedures were approved by the local Institutional Review Board. Prior to participation, students read a consent form explaining the voluntary nature of the participation. Responses to all surveys completed by participants were collected online. The data were collected at baseline (T1) and at follow-up 7 weeks later (T2).

### Measures

*Witnessed interparental violence.* Twelve items were from the Revised Conflict Tactics Scale (CTS2; Straus, Hamby, Boney-McCoy, & Sugarman, 1996) to assess participant's accounts of father- or mother-perpetrated interpersonal violence (e.g., "my father twisted my mother's arm or hair" and "my

mother called my father fat or ugly”) at T1 and T2. Eight items from the Physical Assault subscale and four items from the Psychological Assault subscale were rated on a 1 (“this has never happened”) to 7 (“more than 20 times”) scale, summed at T1 and T2, and averaged to create scores for witnessed father and witnessed mother-perpetrated interpersonal violence. Cronbach’s alpha was .80 for father perpetrated and .76 for mother-perpetrated interpersonal violence.

**Forgiveness.** Offspring’s capacity to forgive their mothers for current transgressions was measured by the nine-item Relationship Forgiveness Scale (Fincham, Beach, & Davila, 2004) at T1 and T2. Items were rated on a 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 9 (*strongly agree*) scale and assessed retaliation (“when my mother wronged or hurt me . . . I tend to give her the cold shoulder”), withdrawal (“I tend to withdrawal from her”), and benevolence (“it is easy to feel warmly again toward her”). Retaliation and withdrawal items were reversed scored so that higher scores reflect greater forgiveness. The mean scores at T1 and T2 were averaged to create a score for child’s level of forgiveness toward their mother ( $\alpha = .90$ ).

**Violence in offspring romantic relationships.** Thirteen items taken from the physical assault and psychological aggression subscales of the CTS2, and were used to measure levels of offspring dating violence perpetration and victimization (Straus et al., 1996). Items administered at T1 and T2 were rated on a 1 (“this has never happened”) to 7 (“more than 20 times”) scale. Seven items assessing victimization (e.g., “my partner twisted my arm or hair” and “my partner shouted or yelled at me”) and six items perpetration (e.g., “I twisted my partner’s arm or hair” and “I insulted and swore at my partner”) were summed at T1 and T2, and then averaged to create a score for levels of dating violence victimization ( $\alpha = .74$ ) and perpetration ( $\alpha = .74$ ) in offspring dating relationships.

### Statistical Analysis Plan

To test mediation, we used PROCESS (available at <http://www.afhayes.com>). Four simple mediation models were tested through a series of ordinary least squares regressions, which yields unstandardized path coefficients for the total, direct, and indirect effects (Hayes, 2012). For each model, 10,000 biased-corrected bootstrap resamples based on 95% confidence intervals (CI) were used to estimate the indirect effect. For studies with small sample sizes, bootstrapping is the preferred inferential test when examining the indirect effect in mediation (Preacher & Hayes, 2004). Furthermore, as suggested by

Hayes (2013), we focus on the indirect effects rather than the individual paths in our analyses. We used Kappa-squared ( $\kappa^2$ ) to quantify the effect size of the indirect effects, which is the “proportion of the maximum possible indirect effect that could have occurred, had the constituent effects been as large as the design and data permitted” (Preacher & Kelly, 2011, p. 106). Kappa-squared is bound between 0 and 1, where 0 indicates a nonexistent indirect effect and 1 an indirect effect that is as large as it could have been. It has been suggested that the value of  $\kappa^2$  be interpreted similar to squared correlation coefficients, where .01, .09, and .25 are considered small, medium, and large effect sizes (Cohen, 1988; Preacher & Kelly, 2011).

## Results

### *Hypothesis 1: Do Offspring Reports of Witnessed Interpersonal Violence Perpetrated by Either Parent Account for Variance in Offspring Dating Violence?*

Witnessing father-perpetrated interpersonal violence was significantly related to offspring dating violence perpetration ( $B = .74, p < .001$ ) and victimization ( $B = .86, p < .001$ ). Similarly, witnessing mother-perpetrated interpersonal violence was significantly related to offspring dating violence perpetration ( $B = .59, p < .001$ ) and victimization ( $B = .68, p < .001$ ). Thus, the first hypothesis was supported, indicating that higher accounts of witnessing interpersonal violence perpetrated by either parent related to higher levels of offspring dating violence perpetration and victimization (see Table 1 for bivariate correlations).

### *Hypothesis 2: Does Offspring's Capacity to Forgive Mediate the Relationship Between Witnessed Interpersonal Violence Perpetrated by Either Parent and Dating Violence Perpetration?*

Our first model assessed whether offspring's capacity to forgive mediated the relationship between accounts of father-perpetrated interpersonal violence and offspring dating violence perpetration (see Table 2). Offspring's capacity to forgive mothers significantly mediated the relationship between accounts of witnessing father-perpetrated interpersonal violence and dating violence perpetration, indicated by a significant indirect effect ( $B = .05, 95\% \text{ CI } [.001, .105]$ ). However, the direct association between witnessing father-perpetrated interpersonal violence and dating violence perpetration remained significant ( $B = .69, p < .001$ ), thereby showing that the mediation was only partial. Finally, the proportion of the maximum indirect effect observed was  $\kappa^2 = .06$

**Table 1.** Bivariate Correlations and Descriptive Statistics ( $n = 285$ ).

Variable	1	2	3	4	5
1. Experienced father-perpetrated interpersonal violence	—				
2. Experienced mother-perpetrated interpersonal violence	.81***	—			
3. Offspring's capacity to forgive mothers	-.46***	-.41***	—		
4. Dating violence victimization	.83***	.68***	-.41***	—	
5. Dating violence perpetration	.71***	.59***	-.40***	.84***	—
Range	15	15	5	6	5
<i>M</i>	15.73	16.18	4.06	8.57	7.50
<i>SD</i>	3.20	3.10	.67	.94	.88

\*\*\* $p < .001$ .

with a bootstrap 95% CI [.007, .128], suggesting a small to medium effect size.

Next, we examined whether offspring's capacity to forgive mothers mediated the relationship between accounts of mother-perpetrated interpersonal violence and offspring dating violence perpetration (see Table 2). Offspring's capacity to forgive their mothers was found to significantly mediate the relationship between accounts of witnessing mother-perpetrated interpersonal violence and dating violence perpetration, indicated by a significant indirect effect ( $B = .08$ , 95% CI [.029, .143]). Finally, the  $\kappa^2 = .09$  with a bootstrap 95% CI [.034, .157] suggests a medium effect size.

### *Hypothesis 3: Does Offspring's Capacity to Forgive Mediate the Relationship Between Witnessed Interpersonal Violence Perpetrated by Either Parent and Dating Violence Victimization?*

Our third model examined whether offspring's capacity to forgive mothers mediated the relationship between accounts of witnessing father-perpetrated interpersonal violence and offspring dating violence victimization (see Table 2). Offspring's capacity to forgive mothers was not supported as a mediator of this relationship, indicated by the nonsignificant indirect effect ( $B = .02$ , 95% CI [-.016, .065]).

Finally, we examined whether offspring's capacity to forgive mothers mediated the relationship between accounts of witnessing mother-perpetrated

**Table 2.** Mediation Models: Offspring Dating IPV and Experienced Interparental IPV, via Offspring Forgiveness of Mothers (*n* = 285).

	Path Coefficients			Kappa Squared		
	B	SE	95% CI	$\kappa^2$	SE	95% CI
<b>Model 1: Dating IPV perpetration</b>						
a-path: Experienced father-perpetrated violence	-.50***	.07	[-.628, -.364]			
b-path: Offspring forgiveness	-.10*	.05	[-.189, -.003]			
Direct effect	.69***	.07	[.549, .837]			
Indirect effect	.05*	.03	[.001, .105]	.06	.03	[.007, .128]
<b>Model 2: Dating IPV perpetration</b>						
a-path: Experienced mother-perpetrated violence	-.42***	.06	[-.549, -.300]			
b-path: Offspring forgiveness	-.19**	.06	[-.300, -.077]			
Direct effect	.51***	.07	[.362, .657]			
Indirect effect	.08*	.03	[.029, .143]	.09	.03	[.034, .157]
<b>Model 3: Dating IPV victimization</b>						
a-path: Experienced father-perpetrated violence	-.50***	.07	[-.628, -.364]			
b-path: Offspring forgiveness	-.04	.04	[-.117, -.037]			
Direct effect	.84***	.06	[.729, .953]			
Indirect effect	.02	.02	[-.016, .065]	.03	.02	[.001, .104]
<b>Model 4: Dating IPV victimization</b>						
a-path: Experienced mother-perpetrated violence	-.42***	.06	[-.549, -.300]			
b-path: Offspring forgiveness	-.15**	.05	[-.258, -.051]			
Direct effect	.61***	.07	[.472, .754]			
Indirect effect	.06*	.03	[.021, .123]	.09	.03	[.029, .151]

Note. Missing response patterns were analyzed and estimated using expectation-maximization algorithm (Dempster, Laird, & Rubin, 1977). B = unstandardized coefficients; CI = confidence interval.

\**p* < .05. \*\**p* < .01. \*\*\**p* < .001.

interpersonal violence and offspring dating violence victimization (see Table 2). Offspring’s capacity to forgive mothers significantly mediated the relationship between accounts of witnessing mother-perpetrated interpersonal violence and dating violence victimization, indicated by a significant indirect effect (*B* = .07, 95% CI [.021, .123]). Finally,  $\kappa^2$  = .09 with a bootstrap 95% CI [.029, .151] indicating a medium effect size.

## Discussion

The purpose of the present study was twofold. We first tested whether accounts of witnessing interpersonal violence perpetrated by either parent

related to violence in offspring dating relationships, and, consistent with past research, found support for relationships between witnessing interparental violence and offspring dating violence perpetration and victimization. Next, we examined a possible mechanism that might account for the association documented. Offspring's capacity to forgive mothers for current transgressions mediated the associations between accounts of witnessing interpersonal violence perpetrated by *either* parent and offspring dating violence perpetration. Regarding victimization in dating relationships, offspring's capacity to forgive mothers only mediated the association between accounts of witnessing mother-perpetrated interpersonal violence and offspring dating violence victimization. Thus, we found that forgiveness played a mediating role in the link between witnessing mother-perpetrated interpersonal violence and dating violence victimization, but it did not play the same mediating role in the analogous link involving father-perpetrated interpersonal violence and dating violence victimization.

Our first hypothesis examined accounts of witnessed interpersonal violence perpetrated by either parent in relation to subsequent offspring dating violence perpetration and victimization. Replicating prior studies, we found that participants who had witnessed higher levels of interparental violence reported higher levels of dating violence perpetration and victimization. As expected, interpersonal violence perpetrated by either parent accounted for a moderate amount of the variance in offspring dating violence. This finding supports the SLT framework in understanding the IGT of violence, but also suggests that there is a need for research examining mediators and moderators that can aid in explaining the IGT of violence. Bowen theory may offer theoretical guidance for IGT of violence researchers. Studies examining differentiation of self as a mechanism in which the IGT of violence operates are needed, and will offer insight into an often neglected area within the IGT of violence literature.

Regarding our second hypothesis, support was found for offspring's capacity to forgive as a mediator of the witnessed interpersonal violence perpetrated by either parent and offspring dating violence perpetration. Results from model one and two indicated that offspring who differ by one unit in their accounts of witnessed father- or mother-perpetrated interpersonal violence are estimated to differ by .05 and .08 units, respectively, in reported dating violence perpetration. The .05 and .08 difference is attributable to the tendency for those who have witnessed higher levels of interpersonal violence perpetrated by either parent to have a lower capacity to forgive their mothers, which subsequently is related to greater dating violence perpetration.

Finally, our third hypothesis was partially supported. Unexpectedly, offspring's capacity to forgive did not mediate the relationship between accounts

of witnessing father-perpetrated interpersonal violence and offspring dating violence victimization. This finding may reflect the fact that the forgiveness measure concerned the mother. If so, one might expect similar results for interpersonal violence perpetrated by fathers when using a measure of forgiveness toward the father. Consistent with this view, offspring's capacity to forgive mothers for current transgressions did mediate the association between mother-perpetrated interpersonal violence and offspring dating violence victimization. Offspring who differ by one unit in their accounts of witnessing mother-perpetrated interpersonal violence are estimated to differ by .06 units of reported dating violence victimization, which is attributable to their capacity to forgive mothers.

Overall, the current findings are consistent with Rosen et al.'s (2001) proposition that Bowen theory can aid in explaining the mechanisms by which violence is transmitted generationally. Past research has indicated that higher differentiation is related to a greater capacity to forgive and to lower levels of dating violence (Holeman et al., 2011; Rosen et al., 2001; Sandage & Jankowski, 2010). Our models reflected the nature of these relationships by indicating higher capacities to forgive related to lower levels of offspring dating violence perpetration and victimization. It is possible that forgiveness is an index of differentiation of self, which is reflected in our findings, and would suggest that forgiveness is possibly part of self-regulatory intrapsychic and interpersonal processes that serve to achieve emotional stability, in the face of current and past transgressions that may influence an individual's affective state.

### *Limitations*

The present study provides evidence supporting the capacity to forgive as a potential mechanism that might facilitate our understanding of the IGT of violence. However, due to the nature of the data, several questions have been left unanswered. A clear question arises in regard to paternal forgiveness. To better understand how the process of forgiveness explains the IGT of violence it will be necessary to examine the potential mediational role of maternal and paternal forgiveness on the IGT of violence. Furthermore, there is a need for research to examine additional influential factors on the pathways among interparental violence, offspring forgiveness, and dating violence in offspring intimate dating relationships.

The sample used in the present study is also a limitation. It was primarily female and represented those who pursue higher education; it is therefore not representative of all emerging adults. Furthermore, the individual-level data and the retrospective accounts used to assess accounts of witnessed

interparental violence are limitations of the present study. Retrospective accounts are vulnerable to biases and inaccuracies, possibly through social desirability or distorted recall.

### ***Practical Implications***

Due to the limited attention given to forgiveness in research on the IGT of violence and dating violence, further studies are needed to examine the links between witnessed family-of-origin violence, forgiveness, and dating violence to inform more fully preventive intervention efforts. However, given the findings of the present study, it is possible that practitioners attempting to prevent dating violence may increase the efficacy of their interventions by targeting differentiation of self. Interventions attending to differentiation of self may increase individual's capacity to forgive, and ultimately directly and indirectly assist in the development of emotion regulation skills that allow individuals to achieve emotional stability in a functional way, which in turn, may reduce the likelihood that the participants will experience dating violence.

It is also possible that targeting and developing the capacity to forgive may increase awareness of how the transgressions of others affect emotional functioning, leading to increases in the ability to be intentional with emotional functioning. Kerr and Bowen (1988) believed that "differentiation is a product of a way of thinking that translates into a way of being" (p. 108). Following this perspective, we could speculate that increases in intentional functioning may lead to an increase in differentiation of self, which in turn, decreases the likelihood of experiencing dating violence. Further research is needed to fully understand these relationships and support these inferences.

### **Conclusion**

Research examining the causes of dating violence perpetration and victimization has ignored the interpersonal process of forgiveness. To our knowledge, the present study is one of the first to provide empirical evidence connecting family-of-origin violence, forgiveness, and interpersonal violence through a family-process-oriented theory. Our results indicate that offspring's capacity to forgive mothers mediates the relationships between accounts of witnessing interpersonal violence perpetrated by either parent and offspring dating violence. It draws attention to the need for further explanatory models on the IGT of violence that examine the role of offspring forgiveness. Finally, the current findings provide support for previous work suggesting that the Bowen theory may aid in explaining the IGT of violence by providing evidence that suggests higher levels of witnessed interparental violence result in higher

levels of offspring dating violence as a result of lower forgiveness, a construct that may index differentiation of self.

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