

Adolescents' Willingness to Forgive Their Parents: An Empirical Model

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SYNOPSIS

Objective. Drawing on prior social psychological and marital research this study tested a model of forgiveness in parent – adolescent relationships. *Design.* 164 adolescents from 2-parent families in north Italy (67 boys and 97 girls) reported on the positive affect experienced toward each parent and completed a relationship events questionnaire that included transgressions by each parent. *Results.* Support was obtained for a model in which the quality of the parent – adolescent relationship predicted benign attributions for negative parent behavior, which in turn, were related to forgiving directly and indirectly through affective reactions to the behavior. Adolescent forgiving, in turn, was associated with a decreased likelihood of subsequent parent – adolescent conflict. Direct tests of gender differences showed that the model was invariant across mother – son, mother – daughter, father – son, and father – daughter relationships. *Conclusions.* This study is the first to show that social-cognitive variables, such as relationship quality, attributions, and emotions, play a role in adolescents' willingness to forgive parents. The pattern of results is consistent with research on forgiveness in the marital relationship.

INTRODUCTION

Interpersonal relationships can be a source of well-being, as well as a source of distress. Transgressions by intimate others can rupture relationships, increasing the likelihood of retaliation and conflict escalation in the relationship (McCullough, Bellah, Kilpatrick, & Johnson, 2002). Forgiveness is one mechanism that allows close relationships to be maintained despite the damage caused by such ruptures (Fincham & Beach, 2002). When people forgive, they reduce their motivation to seek revenge and/or withdraw from those who transgressed against them, thereby allowing prosocial motivations to take their place. These prosocial motivations, in turn, can lead to nonconflictual, conciliatory behaviors that repair the relationship. The importance of forgiveness in social life has recently captured the attention of

scientists and has spawned a growing research literature (e.g., Enright & North, 1998; Fincham, 2000; McCullough, Pargament, & Thoresen 2000; McCullough, 2001a; Worthington, 1998).

Forgiveness has both relational and individual benefits. At the relationship level, it inhibits destructive responses to the partner's transgressions and helps to restore relational harmony, helps to release bitterness and anger between partners, and helps to heal emotional wounds (e.g., Enright & North, 1998; Hope, 1987; McCullough & Worthington, 1994). At the level of the individual, people who are inclined to forgive their transgressors tend to be more agreeable, more emotionally stable, physically healthier, and some research suggests more spiritually or religiously inclined than people who do not tend to forgive their transgressors (McCullough, 2001b; Witvliet, Ludwig, & Vander, 2001). Consequently, researchers have sought to identify the psychological factors that promote forgiving in relationships.

One of the most prominent models of forgiveness is McCullough, Rachal, et al.'s (1998) social-psychological framework. According to this model, forgiving is promoted by social-cognitive and relationship factors. Specifically, social-cognitive variables related to the way the offended person thinks and feels about the offender and the offense (e.g., attributions, ruminative thoughts, empathic emotions) are the proximal determinants of forgiving. A victim's willingness to forgive is primarily determined by his/her empathy toward the offender and, less proximally, by the victim's attributions and rumination about the offense. Compared with social-cognitive variables, qualities of the relationship in which the offense takes place, such as level of intimacy, closeness, and satisfaction, are viewed as less proximal determinants of forgiveness and thus shape forgiveness, at least indirectly, through social-cognitive variables. Also, the model assumes that forgiveness has benign consequences for the relationship between the offender and the offended person. Specifically, forgiveness is hypothesized to foster relational closeness and cooperation, as well as positive behavioral exchanges between the victim and the transgressor.

McCullough, Rachal, et al. (1998) provided initial data to support their model, but these data are limited as they focus on individuals (psychology students) rather than intimate dyads, and do not consider the quality of the relationship between offender and forgiver. More recently, the model has been tested and partially confirmed in long-term marriage (Fincham, Paleari, & Regalia, 2002). This latter study provided evidence consistent with a model in which forgiveness was the result of a causal sequence in which positive relationship quality determined benign causal and responsibility attributions, which in turn, promoted forgiveness both directly and indirectly via affective reactions and emotional empathy.

This study is designed to further examine McCullough's model and determine whether it can be applied to parent – adolescent relationships. Research on forgiving in childhood and adolescence is relatively sparse. Here, the implications of age come into play. In his analysis of moral development, Piaget (1932) argued that forgiveness emerges only in late middle childhood once the child moves from a concrete, literal understanding of the principle of reciprocity to an understanding of reciprocity as an ideal (i.e., to abstract application of "if $A \leq B$ and $B \leq A$, then $A = B$ "). More recently, Enright and colleagues (e.g., Enright, Santos, & Al-Mabuk, 1989; Park & Enright, 1997) have offered a social-cognitive developmental model of forgiveness that parallels Kohlberg's (1976) stages of moral development. Their data show that children progress through a series of stages of reasoning about forgiveness and that with increasing age (from age 9 through adulthood) children develop a clearer idea of forgiving and the conditions necessary to forgive (e.g., Enright et al., 1989; Park & Enright, 1997). Other studies have not focused on reasoning about forgiveness per se but have instead compared adolescents' judgments of forgiveness to adults' judgments (Girard & Mullet, 1997; Subkoviak, Enright, Wu, & Gassin, 1995). Adolescents are apparently less inclined to forgive, and their responses to transgressions are more loosely connected to the nature of the relationship with the offender. Instead, their likelihood of forgiving depends on the sincerity and complexity of excuses given by the offender, an attitude that is developed during the early years of school and maintained through middle childhood (Darby & Schlenker, 1982).

To our knowledge, there is no published research on adolescent forgiveness within the parent – child relationship. This is quite surprising, given the importance of parent – child relationships for development. Even though it is no longer characterized as a period of "storm and stress," adolescence is a period in which the likelihood of conflict between parents and children is high (Steinberg, 2001). Adolescents usually become critical of a wide range of parental behaviors, particularly parental behavior related to discipline and control. This more critical perspective is likely to make adolescents feel "misunderstood," "betrayed," or "hurt" by their parents' behaviors and to foster disagreement and/or conflict. As Holmbeck (1996) pointed out, conflict is not necessarily a problem in families with adolescents. Problems arise when the style of conflict management is inappropriate. In families plagued by dysfunctional relationships, discord over petty matters often escalates into major conflicts (Patterson, 1976, 1986; Reid & Patterson, 1989). When adolescents perceive a parental offense, negative feelings (e.g., anger, resentment) and thoughts are common, creating the potential for retaliatory behavior, which might disrupt the relationship, especially if the parent reciprocates the behavior. Such reciprocal negative exchanges can have long-

term effects. For example, Kim, Conger, Lorenz, and Elder (2001) showed that an adolescent's enmeshment in reciprocal negativity in the family of origin is carried over into early adult social relationships.

Consequently, the study of forgiveness of parents in adolescence seems important. It has the potential to uncover a mechanism that buffers the negative effects of escalating conflicts, which, in turn, may develop into characteristic styles of interacting across relationships. Building on McCullough, Rachal, et al.'s (1998) work, this study investigated the role of relationship-level variables (e.g., positivity of parent – child relationship) and social-cognitive variables (e.g., attributions, emotional reactions, and affective empathy) in promoting adolescents' willingness to forgive parents and thereby avoid potentially destructive conflict in the face of perceived parental offenses.

Consistent with McCullough, Rachal, et al.'s (1998) social-psychological model of forgiving, we hypothesized that the associations among relationship positivity, attributions, affective reactions, emotional empathy, willingness to forgive, and the likelihood of conflict avoidance could be conceptualized in the manner shown in Figure 1. As suggested by theoretical writings on forgiveness (e.g., Worthington, 1998), the model predicts that parent – child relationship quality is related directly to forgiveness (path a). People living in relationships characterized by satisfaction and cohesion are likely to forgive offenses perpetrated by the other person. In light of McCullough, Rachal, et al.'s (1998), and Fincham et al.'s (2002) work, indirect links, via attributions, affective reactions, and emotional empathy, are also posited.

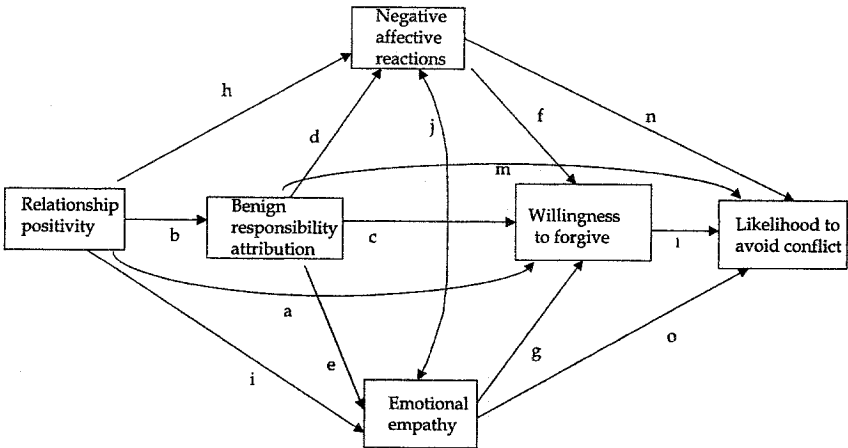


FIGURE 1

Posited structure of relations among parent – child quality relationship, attributions, affect, forgiveness, and likelihood to avoid conflict.

It appears that people in satisfactory close relationships are more likely to apologize for their offenses (e.g., Hodgins, Liebeskind, & Schwartz, 1996), make more benign attributions (e.g., Fincham & Bradbury, 1993), and experience more empathy. Accordingly, the model shows a direct path (path b) between positive parent – child relationships and benign attributions. The hypothesized link between relationship positivity and attributions is supported by existing data showing that, the more positive the relationship with the parent, the less likely the child makes negative or conflict-promoting attributions for negative parental behavior (Fincham, Beach, Arias, & Brody, 1998). In a longitudinal study, MacKinnon-Lewis, Castellino, Brody, and Fincham (2001) also found that fathers' earlier negative interactions with their children predicted children's subsequent attributions for paternal behavior.

The model assumes that benign attributions promote forgiveness both directly (path c) and indirectly through affective reactions (path d–f) and emotional empathy (path e–g). There is growing evidence that benign responsibility attributions enhance willingness to forgive, because the offense is not interpreted by the victim as an intentional behavior and as reflecting a trait of the offender (Boon & Sulsky, 1997; Fincham, 2000; Weiner, Graham, Peter, & Zmuidinas, 1991). Moreover, some data suggest that benign responsibility attributions have such an impact as they increase emotional empathy, which in turn positively influences willingness to forgive (Fincham, Paleari, & Regalia, 2002; McCullough, Rachal, et al., 1998; McCullough, Worthington, & Rachal, 1997; Weiner, 1995; Worthington, 1998). These links have been tested and verified in marital relationships but are quite plausible in parent – children relationships as well. We therefore hypothesized that benign attributions for negative parent behaviors facilitate willingness to forgive by reducing negative affective reactions and by enhancing parent-focused emotional empathy. The amount of negative affect and emotional empathy experienced by children in reaction to negative parental behaviors is hypothesized to be inversely associated.

Moreover, parent – child relationship quality is posited to be linked directly to negative affective reactions (path h), and emotional empathy (path i), and indirectly through the mediation of attribution processes. These assumptions rest on empirical data showing that spouses in close and satisfying relationships, relative to spouses in dissatisfying marriages, are more likely to react to negative partner behaviors by feeling empathy and experiencing few negative emotions (Carstensen, Gottman, & Levenson, 1995; Levenson, Carstensen, & Gottman, 1994; McCullough, Exline, & Baumeister, 1998).

Finally, forgiveness is hypothesized to affect willingness to react to the offense in a conflictual manner. Following McCullough, Worthington,

and Rachel's (1997) finding that forgiving has positive relational consequences, it is expected that the more the adolescent forgives, the more he/she intends to avoid overt conflict (path l). It has been also posited that attribution, empathy, and affect have a direct effect on the likelihood of conflict. There is some empirical evidence to support this view as negative attributions about parental behavior foster conflictual relationships between adolescents and their parents (e.g., Grace, Kelley, & McCain, 1993; MacKinnon-Lewis, Lamb, Arbuckle, Bardaran, & Volling, 1992; MacKinnon-Lewis, Lamb, Hattie, & Baradran, 2001). It is therefore hypothesized that attributions act on conflict both directly (path m) and through their influence of affect (path d-n) and empathy (path e-o).

METHODS

Participants

One hundred and sixty-four adolescents (67 boys and 97 girls) were recruited from high schools in an industrialized community located near Milan in the north of Italy. Participants were 15 to 20 years old ($M = 17.4$, $SD = 1.0$) and came from two-parent families (96.1%). The sample varied widely in socioeconomic background. Twenty-five percent were in professional or managerial ranks, 35% were merchants or employees in various types of businesses, 19% were skilled workers, 11% were unskilled workers, 8% were retired and 2% were unemployed. Before conducting the study, a school council composed of parent and teacher representatives approved the research. In addition, parents gave consent for their children to participate, and the children themselves also gave their consent for participating in the study. All persons approached to participate in the study did so.

Procedure and Measures

During a class period, participants were asked to complete a questionnaire pertaining to their father and one pertaining to their mother. They were administered the set of scales measuring the variables of theoretical interest by two female researchers during specially scheduled sessions in the school. Each questionnaire consisted of two sets of materials: a relationship positivity questionnaire and a relationship events questionnaire. Several steps were taken to promote the validity and cultural appropriateness of these instruments in an attempt to develop translations that had "adapted equivalence" across cultures from a psychological perspective (van de Vijver & Leung, 1997). The questionnaires, originally constructed

and written in English, were first translated into Italian and then back-translated by bilingual bicultural Italian natives using standard back-translation techniques. The translated instruments were next checked for preservation of meaning and cultural appropriateness by the first two authors. Finally, pilot testing was undertaken to ensure that the instruments were comprehensible.

Relationship positivity. The Positive Affect Index (PAI; Bengston & Schraeder, 1982) was used to evaluate positive feelings toward the father and the mother. The PAI assesses the amount of positive affect that the respondent has for another person and the positive affect that he or she perceives another person has toward him or her. In this study, only the respondent's reports of his or her own affect were used. The respondent indicated the extent to which positive features (e.g., love, trust, understanding) described the relationship with each parent and responded to items (e.g., "How much love do you have toward your father (mother)?") using a 6-point scale 1 (*almost not at all*) to 6 (*very, very much*). Scores were summed on this 5-item scale with higher scores indicating more positivity (alpha coefficients: father - boys = .74; mother - boys = .76; father - girls = .83; mother - girls = .78).

Relationship events questionnaire. This booklet contained four negative parental behaviors that commonly occur in parent adolescent relationships (e.g., "You and your mother/father arrange to spend the evening together. When evening comes your mother/father tells you he/she is going to do something by him/herself." "Your father/mother is cold and distant.") and instructed respondents to vividly imagine each parent performing the behavior. After each event description, participants answered questions about attributions, emotions, willingness to forgive, and future conflict. The order of the questions was counterbalanced across participants. Responses to corresponding questions for the four events were summed in subsequent analyses.

Adolescents' attributions for each parent's behavior were assessed using items from the Children's Relationship Attribution Measure (CRAM; Fincham, Beach, Arias, & Brody, 1998). Adolescents were asked to rate on 6-point scales (1 = *disagree strongly*; 6 = *agree strongly*) the extent to which they agreed with six attribution statements made about each negative parental behavior. Three statements pertained to causal attribution dimensions (locus, stability, and globality) and three focused on responsibility attribution dimensions (intentionality, motivation, and blame). Because some adolescents had trouble understanding the blame question, responses to that statement were ignored. For each parent, the five re-

maining attribution statements were summed to form a single attribution index (see Fincham et al., 1998). Higher scores on the index indicate more benign or less damaging attributions, namely attributions which do not locate the cause in the parent, view it as unstable and specific, and see the behavior as unintentional and unselfishly motivated (alpha coefficients: father – boys = .71; mother – boys = .70; father – girls = .72; mother – girls = .65).

Emotions were measured by asking participants to imagine how they would feel if each parental behavior occurred that day. They then rated the extent to which they would experience each of five emotions on a 7-point scale (1 = *not at all*; 7 = *very much*). Principal-components analyses with oblique rotation were conducted to reduce these items to a smaller set of underlying components. Two factors emerged: (1) negative affective reactions (angry, sad, nervous) and (2) emotional empathy (sympathetic, soft-hearted). For father – boys and mother – boys relationships the negative affective reactions factor yielded an eigenvalue of greater than 2.70 and explained more than 53.9% of the variance (alpha coefficients: father – boys = .86; mother – boys = .85); the emotional empathy factor had an eigenvalue of greater than 1.19 and explained more than 23.9% of the variance (alpha coefficients: father – boys = .86; mother – boys = .85). For father – girl and mother – girl relationships, the negative affective reactions factor had an eigenvalue greater than 2.32 and explained more than 46.4% of the variance (alpha coefficients: father – girls = .82; mother – girls = .84); the emotional empathy factor had an eigenvalue of greater than 1.50 and explained more than 30.1% of the variance (alpha coefficients: father – girls = .83; mother – girls = .83). In view of these findings, a negative affective reaction index and an empathy index were formed.

Willingness to forgive was assessed using 4 items from a 5-item measure of forgiving used by McCullough, Worthington, and Rachal (1997). The four items were “I would disapprove of my father/mother.”, “I would think favorably of my father/mother.”, “I would condemn my father/mother.”, and “I would forgive my father/mother.” The fifth item, “I wish my father/mother well” was omitted because it did not lend itself to assessing forgiveness in parent-child relationships. Adolescents responded to each item using a 5-point scale (1 = *not at all*; 5 = *completely*). Scores on the first and third items were reverse scored and then summed with the remaining items. Higher scores indicate more forgiveness (alpha coefficients: father – boys = .76; mother – boys = .62; father – girls = .72; mother – girls = .68).

Overt conflict was measured by an item, asking participants to rate the extent to which each parent’s behavior, would be likely to lead to conflict if it occurred. The item ranged from 1 (*very likely*) to 7 (*very unlikely*).

RESULTS

Before conducting any analyses, we examined the data for univariate and multivariate outlying cases following the procedure outlined by Tabachnik and Fidell (1996). Two participants, one boy and one girl, were detected as outliers in the data for the father – child relationship and were eliminated from subsequent analyses. None of the variables presented problems of normality, with skewness of the variables in the $-.99$ to $.20$ range and kurtosis in the $-.97$ to $.69$ range. The relations among the variables were also found to be linear.

Tables 1 and 2 present the means, standard deviations, and correlations for the variables studied. One-way ANOVAS revealed gender differences only in relation to mothers. Compared to boys, girls reported that they were more likely to engage in conflict with mothers, $F(1,162) = 13.05, p < .01$, to have less empathy, $F(1,162) = 5.61, p < .05$, and to experience more negative reactions, $F(1,162) = 7.82, p < .01$. Correlations computed between age and each of the variables studied showed that age was not significantly related to any of them; age was therefore not considered in further analyses of the data.

To test whether the structural relations among relationship positivity, attributions, negative affective reactions, emotional empathy, willingness to forgiveness, and likelihood of avoiding overt conflict were consistent

TABLE 1
Relationship Quality with Fathers, Attribution, Negative Affective Reactions, Emotional Empathy, Forgiveness, Likelihood to Avoid Overt Conflict

	Males		Females		1	2	3	4	5	6
	M	SD	M	SD						
Child – father										
1. Relationship quality	23.22	3.69	22.58	4.42	—	.36**	.05	.42**	.46**	.09
2. Attributions	52.77	13.60	54.10	13.70	.39**	—	-.27**	.22*	.60**	.38**
3. Negative affective reactions	42.35	14.25	44.67	14.61	-.01	-.41**	—	-.24*	-.35**	-.66**
4. Emotional empathy	29.42	9.42	26.98	8.61	.28*	.27*	-.35**	—	.60**	.35**
5. Forgiveness	57.33	10.60	58.36	9.77	.32**	.59**	-.42**	.66**	—	.56**
6. Likelihood of avoiding overt conflict	13.00	4.31	14.26	5.41	.09	.28*	-.60**	.28*	.44**	—

Note. Correlation coefficients for boys ($n = 60$) are below the diagonal, those for girls ($n = 89$) are above the diagonal.

* $p < .05$. ** $p < .01$.

TABLE 2
 Relationship Quality With Mothers, Attribution, Negative Affective Reactions,
 Emotional Empathy, Forgiveness, Likelihood To Avoid Overt Conflict

	Males		Females		1	2	3	4	5	6
	SD	M	M	SD						
Child – mother										
1. Relationship quality	23.43	3.85	23.29	4.04	—	.22*	.28**	.28**	.07	-.11
2. Attributions	49.16	13.56	67.14	13.00	.24*	—	-.20	.19	.42**	.17
3. Negative affective reactions	40.84	14.92	47.55	15.20	.11	-.20	—	-.07	-.45**	-.60**
4. Emotional empathy	30.60	9.66	27.39	7.62	.07	.23	-.40**	—	.50**	.18
5. Forgiveness	59.28	9.66	57.66	9.41	.13	.33**	-.40**	.61**	—	.48**
6. Likelihood of avoiding overt conflict	13.10	5.36	11.91	5.08	-.10	.30*	-.45**	.51**	.54**	—

Note. Correlation coefficients for boys ($n = 67$) are below the diagonal, those for girls ($n = 96$) are above the diagonal.

* $p < .05$. ** $p < .01$.

with the hypothesized model, we examined a series of structural equation models using EQS Version 5 (Bentler, 1990, 1995). We estimated separate models for father – child relationships and mother – child relationships.

Father – Child Relationship

The hypothesized model provided a very good fit to the father – child data, $\chi^2(1, N = 162) = .00, p = .98; NNFI = 1.050; CFI = 1.00$, and $RMSEA = .00$ (90% confidence interval: .000, .118). As some near-zero paths remained in the estimated model, we generated a series of nested models by removing one nonsignificant path at a time from it. Compared to the hypothesized model, the nested model in which the paths *a* (from relationship quality to willingness to forgive), *e* (from attributions to emotional empathy), *m* (from attribution to likelihood to avoid conflict), *o* (from emotional empathy to conflict avoidance), and *f* (from negative affective reactions to willingness to forgive) were dropped, did not result in a significant decrement in model fit, $\chi^2(5, N = 162) = 6.14, p > .10$, and provided a more parsimonious model that was an adequate description of the data, $\chi^2(6, N = 162) = 6.14, p = .41; NNFI = 1.00; CFI = 1.00; RMSEA = .014$ (90% confidence interval, .000, .107). Parameter estimates for this final model, which accounted

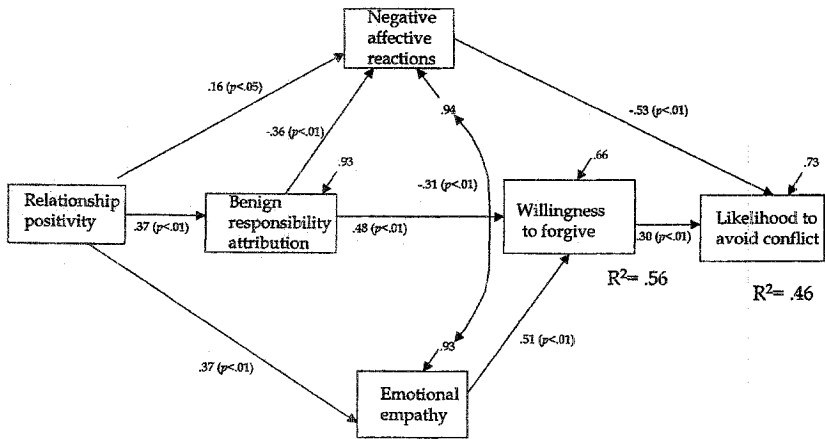


FIGURE 2

Path analysis of the obtained relations among father – child quality relationship, attributions, affect, forgiveness, and likelihood, to avoid conflict (standardized solution). All the coefficients are significant beyond the $p < .05$ level.

for a substantial amount of variance in willingness to forgive ($R^2 = .56$), and in likelihood to avoid conflict ($R^2 = .46$), are presented in the Figure 2.

Consistent with our theoretical model there were also several significant indirect effects. Specifically, relationship positivity was indirectly related to willingness to forgive, $\beta = .37, p < .001$, and to negative affective reactions, $\beta = -.14, p < .005$. Also consistent with our model were the significant indirect effects between benign responsibility attributions and conflict avoidance, $\beta = .34, p < .001$, and between emotional empathy and conflict avoidance, $\beta = .15, p < .001$.

Next, to explore whether paths in our final model were statistically different across adolescent gender, we used a multiple groups modeling strategy that estimated simultaneously parameters for boys and girls. An initial model with no constraints produced a good fit, $\chi^2 (12, N = 162) = 14.72, p = .25; NNFI = .98; CFI = .99; RMSEA = .041$ (90% confidence interval .000, .097). When corresponding paths in the models for boys and girls were constrained to be equal, the model provided an adequate fit to the data, $\chi^2 (24, N = 162) = 21.30, p = .62; NNFI = 1.01; CFI = 1.00; RMSEA = .000$ (90% confidence interval: .000, .058) with no significant decrement in model fit compared to the fit of the model with no constraints, $\chi^2 (12, N = 162) = 6.58, p > .10$. Thus, the paths did not differ significantly in magnitude across adolescent gender.

Mother – Child Relationship

The hypothesized model provided a good fit to the mother – child data, $\chi^2 (1, N = 164) = 1.30, p = .25; NNFI = .98; CFI = .99$, and $RMSEA = 0.043$ (90%

confidence interval: .000, .218). As some near-zero paths remained in the estimated model, we generated a series of nested models by removing one nonsignificant path at a time from it. Compared to the hypothesized model, the nested model in which the paths *a* (from relationship quality to willingness to forgive), *i* (from relationship quality to emotional empathy), *m* (from attribution to likelihood to avoid conflict), and *o* (from emotional empathy to likelihood to conflict avoidance) were dropped did not result in a significant disimprovement in model fit, $\chi^2(4, N = 164) = 6.45, p > .10$, and proved to be a more parsimonious model that adequately described the data, $\chi^2(5, 164) = 7.75, p = .17; NNFI = .96; CFI = .99; RMSEA = .059$ (90% confidence interval: .000, .133). Parameter estimates for this final model, which accounted for a fairly good amount of variance in willingness to forgive ($R^2 = .45$), and in likelihood to avoid conflict ($R^2 = .40$), are presented in the Figure 3.

Again indirect effects were found that were consistent with our theoretical model. Relationship positivity was indirectly related to both negative affective reactions, $\beta = -.07, p < .03$, and emotional empathy $\beta = .05, p < .05$, via benign responsibility attributions (paths b–d and b–e, respectively). Benign responsibility attributions were, in turn, indirectly related to willingness to forgive, $\beta = .18, p < .001$, via negative affective reactions (path d–f)

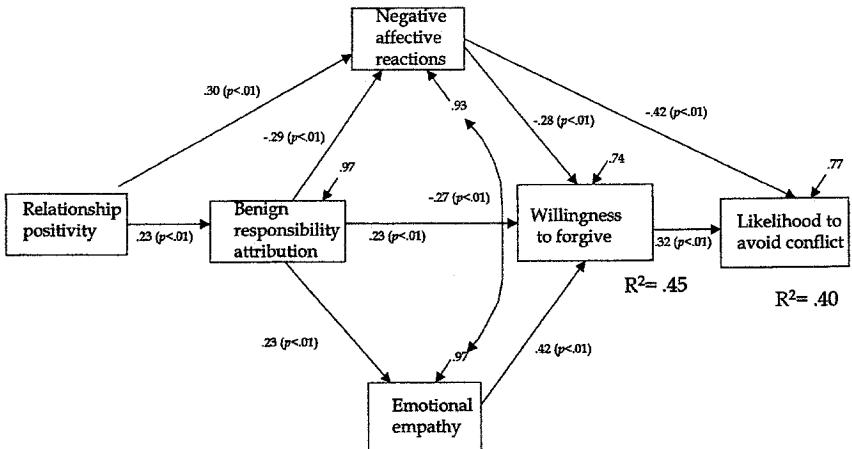


FIGURE 3

Path analysis of the obtained relations among: mother – child quality relationship, attributions, affect, forgiveness, and likelihood to avoid conflict (standardized solution). All the coefficients are significant beyond the $p < .05$ level.

and emotional empathy (path e-g). Both negative affective reactions, $\beta = -.09, p < .001$, and emotional empathy, $\chi = .14, p < .001$, were also indirectly linked to likelihood to avoid conflict (paths f-l and g-l, respectively).

Again we explored whether paths were statistically different across gender in the final model, using a multiple groups modeling strategy that estimated simultaneously parameters for boys and girls. An initial model with no constraints produced an adequate fit, $\chi^2 (10, N = 164) = 14.48, p = .15$; $NNFI = .94$; $CFI = .98$; $RMSEA = .053$ (90% confidence interval: .000, .107). When corresponding paths in the models for boys and girls were constrained to be equal the model again provided an adequate fit to the data, ($\chi^2 (23, N = 164) = 25.66, p = .32$; $NNFI = .98$; $CFI = .99$; $RMSEA = .028$ (90% confidence interval: .000, .072), and showed no significant decrement in model fit when compared to the fit of the model with no constraints, $\chi^2 (13, N = 164) = 11.18, p > .01$. Thus, again the paths did not differ significantly in magnitude across gender.

The pattern of relations was equivalent across child gender for both father - child and mother - child relationships. The final models for father - child and mother - child relationships were very similar but not identical. A positive relationship with the parent was significantly related to emotional empathy directly (in the case of fathers) and indirectly through attributions (in the case of mothers). Contrary to predictions, relationship positivity was not linked directly to forgiveness for either parent, though there was an indirect link for the father - child relationship, and was positively related to negative affective reactions for both parents; adolescents were likely to react in a negative way to parents' behavior when the relationship was perceived positively. As expected, attributions were related to willingness to forgive directly and, in the case of mothers, also indirectly through negative affective reactions and emotional empathy. Specifically, adolescents making benign attributions were more likely to react to their mothers' negative behaviors by being empathic and not experiencing negative affects. Although they covaried, negative affective reactions and emotional empathy predicted willingness to forgive independently, such that adolescents were more likely to forgive their mother for her negative behaviors when they felt empathy or did not experience negative emotional states.

Finally, consistent with our assumptions, negative affective reactions were related to conflict avoidance with the father/mother directly and, in the case of mothers, also indirectly through willingness to forgive her. Specifically, adolescents experiencing negative emotional states in the face of their mothers' negative behaviors were less likely to forgive their mother and, consequently, to avoid overt conflict with her. Contrary to predictions, emotional empathy predicted conflict avoidance only indirectly via propensity to forgive.

DISCUSSION

The benefits of forgiving in close, long-term relationships are widely recognized, and several studies have shown that there is an interplay between relational and cognitive-affective determinants of forgiveness in marital relationships (e.g., Fincham, 2000; Fincham, Paleari, & Regalia, 2002). However, no study has to date investigated the determinants of forgiving in parent – child relationships. This study therefore drew on prior work on forgiveness in marital and dating relationships to model potential processes leading adolescents to forgive and thereby avoid potentially destructive conflict with their parents. Drawing on McCullough, Rachal, et al.'s (1998) framework, it was posited that relationship quality between adolescents and parents functioned as a distal variable or context that influenced conflict avoidance through more proximal variables such as cognitive (attributions) and affective responses (empathy and negative reactions).

Overall, results were consistent with the posited hypotheses. Support was obtained for a model where willingness to forgive and likelihood of conflict avoidance were promoted by social-cognitive variables. Specifically, the data were consistent with a model in which the quality of the parent – adolescent relationship was related to benign attributions, which, in turn, were related to forgiving directly and, in the case of mothers, indirectly through affective reactions. The likelihood of conflict avoidance was directly related to forgiving and negative affective reactions to parent offenses. The hypothesized direct relation of positivity of the parent – child relationship with forgiveness was not confirmed. This result is consistent with other findings concerning forgiveness in the marital relationship (e.g., Fincham, et al., 2002), and it suggests that general relationship quality has only an indirect effect in facilitating forgiveness.

We expected that a positive relationship with parents would enhance adolescents' ability to positively re-interpret parents' behavior, to emotionally identify with them, to mitigate negative reactions, and ultimately to forgive them. As hypothesized, a positive climate in the parent – child relationship turned out to be linked to responsibility attributions, but it also correlated positively with negative reactions to parental transgressions. That is, the more positive the relationship with the parents, the more negative the affective reaction to a parental negative behavior. A possible explanation for this finding is that adolescents may feel free to express their disappointment and anger regarding parents' behavior when they have a strong positive relationship with the parent. Negative reactions on the part of the adolescent may also reflect his or her investment and commitment to the parent – adolescent relationship.

Overall, these findings are highly consistent with the marital literature, underlining the pivotal role of attributions and emotions in determining responses to perceived negative behaviors in interpersonal relationships. Replicating research on other relationships (e.g., Boon & Sulky, 1997; Geist & Gilbert, 1996; Fincham, 2000; Miller & Bradbury, 1995), it was again found that partners' attributions, and emotions, shape their reactions to problematic interpersonal situations.

In the clinical literature there is some evidence that forgiveness has positive relational consequences for people involved in close relationships. These results lend further support to this finding as they arose in the context of "normal" parent - child relationships. Adolescents who forgive are likely to avoid potentially destructive conflict with the parent following a parental transgression. This is important because conflict in family relationships easily escalates into quarrels and arguments that can be destructive and difficult to manage. Negative interactions with parents, in turn, can, over time, have detrimental effects on adolescents' social development and their role in the family (Patterson, 1997).

Empathy was not related directly to the likelihood of conflict avoidance; emotional empathy was related to conflict avoidance only indirectly through its positive effect on forgiveness. However, negative affective reactions were directly related to conflict. Negative reactions may thus foster engagement with the source of distress. It may be that engaging in conflict helps adolescents to express and overcome the emotional distress they feel. Emotional empathy, in contrast, fosters understanding (and by implication reduces distress), which may account for the absence of a direct effect with conflict avoidance. In any event, the consistent relation found between empathy and forgiveness supports the central role accorded empathy in theoretical models of forgiveness (e.g., McCullough et al., 1997, McCullough, Rachal, et al., 1998).

One notable finding was the absence of gender differences across parent - child relationships. It is believed that there are different parent - child interactions and perceptions according to both the parents' and the child's gender (see Russell & Saebel, 1997). However, this study found no evidence that the investigated model varies with the child's gender and only minimal evidence for possible differences as a function of parent gender. Of 11 paths, two (attribution → empathy; affective reaction → forgiveness) attained significance for mother - child and not father - child relationships, whereas one path (relationship positivity → empathy) was significant in the father - child but not the mother - child model. However, it is important to note that, while these paths' coefficients significantly differ from zero for one parent but not the other, this does not necessarily imply that corresponding paths in mother - child and father - child models differ

in magnitude from each other. We found some more robust links for father – child dyads, but with the exceptions noted above, the patterns are similar across gender. The similarity across mother – son, mother – daughter, father – son, and father – daughter relationships may reflect the nature of the instruments used in this study: Adolescents were asked to imagine hypothetical scenarios which may not capture “hot cognitions” that could accompany recall of parents’ real negative behaviors. Thus, adolescents’ reports may differ from their actual reactions to their fathers’ and mothers’ offenses.

This study has several limitations. Foremost among these, as noted, is that adolescent responses were based on imagined parental behaviors; therefore, the study does not address actual forgiving but only the disposition or willingness to forgive. As a result, the current findings cannot be generalized to actual forgiveness occurring in parent – child relationships in the absence of further research. However, willingness to forgive, assessed via hypothetical transgressions, has been shown to predict behavioral responses to an actual transgression in the marital relationship (Fincham, 2000). Specifically, willingness to forgive imagined transgressions predicted retaliatory and conciliatory behavior following the partners’ most hurtful actual transgression independently of the degree of hurt experienced and time since the harm-doing. This finding, together with the results of this study, points to the potential fruitfulness of investigating naturally occurring transgressions in parent – adolescent relationships. Second, the models tested are based on data from a single source and are correlational. They therefore do not provide a basis for drawing conclusions about causal relations. Longitudinal research using multiple informants would be useful in exploring more fully causal links among the variables investigated. Third, the fact that the data were consistent with our proposed model does not rule out the possibility that other models with different directions of effects might also fit the data. Finally, the adolescent sample was restricted in that it comprised boys and girls who came from two-parent families in which they experienced general well-being.

Despite these limitations, this study is the first to examine the contribution of relationship and affective-cognitive variables to forgiveness in the parent – child relationship. The pattern of results is consistent with the findings of a previous study on forgiveness in the marital relationship (Fincham, Paleari, et al., 2002). This study extended those findings to adolescents and confirms that relationship quality, attributions, and emotions are crucial variables leading to willingness to forgive and to avoid conflict in interpersonal relationships.

The practical implications of these findings are noteworthy. Although the beneficial direct and indirect relationship effects of forgiveness in close

relationships are widely recognized, most clinical interventions fail to include activities designed to facilitate forgiveness. Given the evident links among attribution, affective reactions, and adolescents' tendency to forgive, one important goal of programs for improving parent – child relationships might be to bolster adolescents' prosocial attitudes by changing their attributions for hurtful events and by reducing their negative reactions toward parents. Of course, such attempts would need to be studied to determine whether those links hold up as causal ones. In this regard, much work remains to be done in illuminating the impact that these variables have on forgiveness within different samples of families as well as in investigating their impact after controlling for other determinants of adolescent forgiveness.

Notwithstanding the need for such research, it behooves parents to note the potential impact of adolescents' social-cognitive processes on their responses to parental transgressions. In particular, the results of this study suggest that sharing benign motives for behavior that the adolescent experiences as a transgression may influence the adolescent's responses to the behavior. This is likely to be particularly important in cases where the adolescent experiences an unintended outcome as intentional (e.g., "You wanted to embarrass me in front of my friends."). Making the benign intent known to the adolescent (e.g., "I just wanted to be clear about when you needed to be home so as to avoid any misunderstanding"), particularly when coupled with an apology (e.g., "I am sorry. In the future I'll try to be more sensitive to who can hear us when I talk to you about curfews."), is likely to make a difference. However, in view of adolescents' sensitivity to the sincerity of apologies (Darby & Schlenker, 1982) it is important that any apology be viewed as credible and sincere.

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