

Maintaining Harmony Across the Globe: The Cross-Cultural Association Between Closeness and Interpersonal Forgiveness

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Johan C. Karremans¹, Camillo Regalia², F. Giorgia Paleari³,
Frank D. Fincham⁴, Ming Cui⁴, Naomi Takada⁵, Ken-Ichi Ohbuchi⁵,
Kari Terzino⁶, Susan E. Cross⁶, and Ayse K. Uskul⁷

Abstract

Although previous research shows that relationship closeness plays a central role in an individual's willingness to forgive an offender, it is based exclusively on data from Western, individualistic cultures. In the current study, the authors examined the association between relationship closeness and forgiveness across six countries, including both traditionally individualistic—Italy, the Netherlands, the United States—and collectivistic cultures—Japan, China (and one country, Turkey, with both individualistic and collectivistic features). Results demonstrated that, cross-culturally, there was a robust positive association between closeness toward the offender and level of forgiveness, both for trait-forgiveness and offense-specific forgiveness. However, this association was weaker in the collectivistic countries, which may suggest that strong norms in these countries to maintain social harmony may partly weaken the role of closeness in forgiveness. Overall, the present findings are discussed in terms of the possible evolutionary origins of forgiveness and the role of individualism/collectivism in forgiveness.

Keywords

forgiveness, culture and cognition, interpersonal relationships, evolutionary psychology, conflict

During the last decade, social scientists recognized the potential role of interpersonal forgiveness in effectively dealing with the inevitable offenses taking place in interpersonal relationships (Fincham, 2000). Forgiveness, defined as a prosocial change toward the offender despite the offender's hurtful actions (McCullough, Pargament, & Thoresen, 2000), may help people to reestablish valuable relationships, in part because forgiveness promotes prorelationship responses in the wake of an offense (e.g., Fincham & Beach, 2002; Karremans & Van Lange, 2004). Moreover, forgiveness is associated not only with relationship well-being but also with greater psychological well-being (e.g., Bono, McCullough, & Root, 2008; Karremans, Van Lange, Ouwerkerk, & Kluwer, 2003) and physical well-being (e.g., Lawler, Karremans, Scott, Edlis-Matityahou, & Edwards, 2008; Witvliet, Ludwig, & Vander Laan, 2001).

Forgiveness is influenced by a number of factors, including personality (e.g., agreeableness), offense-specific (e.g., severity, apologies), and sociocognitive factors (e.g., attributions; for an overview, Karremans & Van Lange, 2008). Besides these factors, a person's willingness to forgive an offender importantly depends on the nature of the relationship between the victim and offender (McCullough et al., 1998).

Specifically, several studies suggest that closeness or commitment to the offender is central in facilitating forgiveness. Finkel, Rusbult, Hannon, Kumashiro, and Childs (2002) demonstrated that experimental manipulations of relationship commitment, conceptualized as a person's dependence on and satisfaction with the relationship, induce higher levels of forgiveness. Moreover, a study by Karremans and Aarts (2007) demonstrated that subliminally priming people with the names of close relationship partners leads to increased judgments of forgiveness, suggesting that closeness at a very basic and unconscious level is associated with forgiveness. Finally,

¹Behavioural Science Institute, Radboud University Nijmegen, The Netherlands

²Catholic University of Milan, Italy

³University of Bergamo, Italy

⁴The Florida State University, Tallahassee, Florida, USA

⁵Tohoku University, Japan

⁶Iowa State University, Ames, Iowa, USA

⁷University of Essex, UK

Corresponding Author:

Johan Karremans, montessorilaan 1, Nijmegen, 6500 HE
Email: j.karremans@psych.ru.nl

others have shown that forgiveness indeed helps in restoring close bonds, as level of forgiveness regarding an offense is positively related to post-offense level of closeness and satisfaction with the offender (Fincham, Paleari, & Regalia, 2002; Karremans & Van Lange, 2008; McCullough et al., 1998; Paleari, Regalia, & Fincham, 2005).

These findings have been taken as suggestive evidence for an evolutionary functional perspective on forgiveness, as recently postulated by McCullough (2008; McCullough, Kurzban, & Tabak, in press; cf., de Waal, 2000). According to this view, forgiveness may have evolved because in our evolutionary history humans “who deployed this strategy enjoyed the fitness benefits that came from restoring potentially valuable relationships” (McCullough et al., in press). Close bonds with others were vital to the survival and reproductive fitness of our ancestors, for example through the provision of information and resources, mates, and care for offspring. Hence, through Darwinian selection, people have an evolved need to form close bonds and have acquired a set of internal mechanisms that help them to maintain those bonds (Baumeister & Leary, 1995). Given the inevitable conflicts and offenses taking place within these close relationships, the capacity to forgive may be one such specific mechanism that helps people in sustaining these bonds.

This reasoning is strongly in line with the Valuable-Relationships Hypothesis, which has received a fair amount of attention in the primate literature (Aureli, Cords, & van Schaik, 2002; Watts, 2006). According to this hypothesis, individuals are more likely to reconcile after conflict depending on the level of the “value” of the relationship. Ultimately relationship value depends on the extent to which a relationship provides survival and reproductive benefits and can be acquired for example when the partner provides resources (e.g., for food) or safety, or for a number of other reasons (Watts, 2006). What is important here is that studies generally have found that, when two animals (primates, monkeys) have strong affiliative ties, they have a much stronger tendency to reconcile after conflict (e.g., Aureli, van Schaik, & van Hoof, 1989; Cords & Thurnheer, 1993). Although reconciliation behavior is only an indication of forgiveness, as one can never be sure whether apes indeed experience forgiveness in the psychological sense (de Waal & Pokorny, 2005), such findings are strongly in line with the idea that forgiveness has evolved as a way to repair and maintain close bonds.

Although the strong link between closeness and forgiveness in studies with humans seems in line with the evolutionary account (McCullough, 2008), all these studies were conducted in Western populations, either in the United States or Western Europe. This raises the important question of whether the link between closeness and forgiveness generalizes to other cultures, as an evolutionary explanation of forgiveness would predict. However, it is also possible that the strong link between closeness and forgiveness as found in Western countries might—at least in part, or additionally—be explained by culture-specific factors. As proposed previously (Sandage & Williamson, 2005), the individualism-collectivism dimension

may be important in understanding forgiveness across cultures, and perhaps especially the role of closeness in forgiveness. People in individualistic cultures are focused to a relatively greater extent on a fairly small number of close relationship partners (Schwartz, 1990) and may therefore be more willing to forgive close as opposed to nonclose partners. Also, close others may become almost literally part of an individual’s self (Aron, Aron, & Smollan, 1992). This notion is reflected in the way closeness to a relationship partner has been conceptualized, and measured, in terms of self-other overlap (Aron et al., 1992). As close others are so tightly related to the self, forgiving close others, as compared to forgiving nonclose others, may be especially beneficial to the self. In line with this reasoning, research has demonstrated that—at least in the United States and Western Europe—the beneficial effects of forgiveness for the victim’s psychological well-being are more pronounced if the offender is a close rather than a nonclose other (Bono et al., 2008; Karremans et al., 2003).

Whereas there may be a stronger focus on close others as the primary unit of relationships in individualistic cultures (Goodwin, 1999), collectivistic cultures are characterized by a strong focus on the group or society as a whole (Hofstede, 1980; Triandis, 1995). Accordingly, collectivistic societies generally emphasize group norms that promote social harmony (Markus & Kitayama, 1991). Such norms are likely to influence how people generally respond to and deal with conflict. For example, it has been found that in collectivistic countries such as Japan people are relatively more concerned with avoiding or resolving conflict in order to preserve social harmony (see Hook, Worthington, & Utsey, 2009). This may suggest that, once conflicts do arise, collectivism could promote forgiveness as a way of maintaining social harmony (Fu, Watkins, & Hui, 2004; Sandage & Williamson, 2005). More importantly, it may also suggest that, unlike what has been found in individualistic countries, forgiveness may not so much depend on the nature of the relationship between victim and offender. In collectivistic societies, people may in part grant forgiveness because it is culturally expected (i.e., to comply with the norm of social harmony), and it may therefore be less important *who* the offender is. According to this view, as compared to individualistic countries, in collectivistic societies forgiveness may be less dependent on the level of closeness between victim and offender.

Although the theoretical and empirical literature on forgiveness has expanded enormously in the past decade, only a handful of studies have examined forgiveness in non-Western countries, and only a few studies have directly compared Western (individualistic) and non-Western (collectivistic) countries (for a recent overview, see Hook et al., 2009). These studies have demonstrated that there are cross-cultural similarities (e.g., the role of apologies; Takaku, Weinder, & Ohbuchi, 2001) but also cross-cultural differences in the correlates of forgiveness (e.g., attributions of controllability; Fukuno & Ohbuchi, 1998). However, no studies have explored the relative importance of closeness in forgiveness cross-culturally.

The Present Research

In the present research, we examined the association between closeness and forgiveness across a number of countries that traditionally endorse more collectivistic worldviews (Japan, China) or more individualistic worldviews (the Netherlands, United States, North-Italy). This classification is based on Hofstede (2001) and Diener, Gohm, Suh, and Oishi (2000), who both reported indices of collectivism-individualism for over 40 societies across the world. In both these studies, Japan and China scored below the mean of the index used, indicating collectivism; the United States, the Netherlands, and Italy scored well above the mean, indicating individualism. In an exploratory manner, we also included Turkey. Several studies suggest that the Turkish culture holds both individualistic and collectivistic elements and cannot be placed on one or the other side of the individualism-collectivism dichotomy (e.g., Cukur, de Guzman, & Carlo, 2004; Goregenli, 1997; Uleman, Rhee, Bardoliwalla, Semin, & Toyama, 2000; Uskul, Hynie, & Lalonde, 2004).

An evolutionary functional approach to forgiveness suggests that level of closeness to an offender is associated with forgiveness across cultures (both in the documented individualistic and collectivistic countries, and in Turkey). However, we suggested that cultural differences may in part explain the central role of closeness in forgiveness as found in previous research in Western individualistic countries, and that closeness may be less central to forgiveness in collectivistic countries (i.e., China and Japan). Thus, there may be cross-cultural variation in the strength of this association that might be shaped by different worldviews between these cultures. (Given the ambiguous status of Turkey on the individualism-collectivism dimension, this latter hypothesis is less clear with regard to Turkey.)

We employed two strategies to examine these predictions in six countries by looking at general inclinations to forgive and offense-specific forgiveness (which are generally not highly correlated; e.g., Allemand, Amberg, Zimprich, & Fincham, 2007; Paleari et al., 2005). We measured participants' general inclinations to forgive close others versus nonclose others and explored whether the countries differed in their general inclinations to forgive close versus nonclose others. In addition, participants were asked to recall an offense and to indicate their level of closeness with the offender and their level of forgiveness regarding this specific offense. Importantly, we examined whether closeness was linked to forgiveness while controlling for other variables that have been found to be central in predicting forgiveness (i.e., time since the offense, severity of the offense, and the extent to which the offender apologized).

Method

Participants

A total of 1,060 participants participated in the study. One hundred and fifty-seven Japanese (40.9% males, 59.1% females; $M_{\text{age}} = 19.6$), 135 Chinese (37% males, 63% females;

$M_{\text{age}} = 20.0$), 141 Turkish (22.7% male, 77.3% females; $M_{\text{age}} = 21.2$), 120 Italian (31.7% males, 68.3% females; $M_{\text{age}} = 21.6$), 181 Dutch (23.8% males, 76.2% females; $M_{\text{age}} = 21.5$), and 326 U.S. (31.6% male, 68.4% females; $M_{\text{age}} = 19.5$) university students participated in the study. In each country, participants were recruited at a single university, except in the United States, where the sample consisted of students from two different universities (Florida and Iowa).

Procedure and Materials

Participants were recruited at the university campuses (either classes, cafeterias, hallways, etc.). If they agreed to participate, they could fill in the questionnaire on the spot or were given a questionnaire that they could take home, fill out, and return at a central place. The questionnaire was part of a larger project and contained several parts that will not be further discussed here. The original English version of the questionnaire was translated into Japanese, Chinese, Italian, Turkish, and Dutch, and then back-translated into English by a second translator to ensure compatibility and equivalence in meaning (Brislin, 1986). Differences were discussed until a consensus translation was obtained. The translated instruments were next checked for preservation of meaning and cultural appropriateness (see below). For the purpose of the present study, participants completed several measures that are discussed below. As noted in the introduction, we employed two strategies to explore the role of closeness in forgiveness.

Strategy I: General inclinations to forgive close versus nonclose others. In the first part of the questionnaire, participants indicated their general inclination to forgive a close other and their general inclination to forgive a nonclose other. Participants were first instructed to think of a same-sex friend they felt most close to and to write down the initials of this person. After doing so, participants completed the General Inclination to Forgive (GIF) scale twice (Berry, Worthington, O'Connor, & Wade, 2005; 7 items, e.g., "I forgive him/her almost everything," "If he/she treats me badly, I treat him/her the same" [reverse-coded]). The first time, participants were instructed to complete the scale as it applied to the close other they just named. Instructions stated that we were interested in how the participant would generally respond if the close other behaved offensively towards him or her. The second time, scale instructions stated that we were now interested in how the participant would generally respond to offensive behavior of someone one they did *not* feel close to.

Strategy II: The role of closeness in forgiving a past offense. Later in the questionnaire, participants were asked to recall an instance in the past year when they felt offended by someone else. They were asked to think back to the most severe offense and to briefly write down what happened.

Participants indicated on two items the *perceived severity* (e.g., "How severe was the offense?" 1 = *not severe at all*, 7 = *extremely severe*; Cronbach's alphas $\geq .85$). One item measured *how long ago* the offense took place (in months). Level of *perceived closeness* was measured with the Inclusion

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of Other in the Self scale (Aron et al., 1992). This scale consists of seven circle-pairs that differ in their level of overlap, from nonoverlapping to almost complete overlap. Participants were instructed to indicate which of these circle pairs best represented their relationship with the other person. This single-item scale has been widely used in previous research as an indicator of experienced closeness and has been successfully used in previous cross-cultural studies (Uskul et al., 2004).

Next, participants rated the extent to which the offender tried to *repair* the harm that was done, on eight items (e.g., “Admitted regret,” “Showed remorse,” “Apologized”). Finally, eight items measured *level of forgiveness* regarding the specific offense, further referred to as the Offense-Specific Forgiveness (OF) questionnaire (e.g., “I easily forgave the offender,” “I do not hold a grudge against him/her”; adapted from Maio, Thomas, Fincham, & Carnelley, 2008). The repair and forgiveness items were scored on 7-points scales, ranging from 1 = *completely disagree* to 7 = *completely agree*.

Data Analytic Strategy

Before testing our main predictions, we verified the equivalence of the scales (Byrne & Watkins, 2003; Van de Vijver & Leung, 1997) to rule out the possibility that differences observed between countries were artifacts of measurement bias. Specifically, using multi-sample CFAs via EQS (Bentler, 1995), we tested conceptual, configural, and metric equivalence (for details, see Meredith, 1993; van de Vijver & Leung, 1997) for the GIF scale, the OF questionnaire, and the Repair Strategies (RS) questionnaire.¹

General inclinations to forgive close versus nonclose others. Conceptual and configural equivalence of the GIF close and GIF nonclose scales were evaluated by estimating a multigroup two-factor oblique model, in which (a) the seven items referring to a close other were allowed to load on one factor and the seven items referring to a nonclose other on another factor and (b) errors of corresponding close and nonclose other items were allowed to correlate. After removing the same two items from the close other and the nonclose other factor of the scale (i.e., “If he/she treats me badly, I treat him/her the same”; “There are some things for which I could never forgive the other person”), the two-factor oblique model obtained a very good fit, $R-\chi^2(176) = 266.3124$, $p = .000$, $R-CFI = .968$, $R-RMSEA = .022$, and all of its item loadings were substantial and significant. The final scales used in the analysis included the remaining five items. These findings indicate that the items used were meaningful and valid indicators of the construct in all six countries.

Metric equivalence was tested by constraining all factor loadings to be equal and examining the Lagrange Multiplier test and χ^2 difference test. These tests revealed a number of items with differing factor loadings across the countries. Constraints on these loadings were then relaxed and the model re-estimated. This model had good fit indices, $R-\chi^2(212) = 328.416$, $p < .001$, $R-CFI = .958$, $R-RMSEA = .022$, indicating partial metric equivalence for the GIF scale.

Forgiveness for a past offense. Conceptual and configural equivalence of the eight-item OF questionnaire was evaluated by estimating a multigroup one-factor model, which yielded a poor fit. Inspection of factor loadings and residual covariances revealed that the four reversed-coded items were problematic in all groups. Removing these items yielded an acceptable fit, $R-\chi^2(12) = 58.92$, $p < .001$, $R-CFI = .977$, $R-RMSEA = .059$, providing evidence for conceptual and configural equivalence of the remaining four-item OF scale.

Metric equivalence was tested by constraining all four factor loadings to be equal across the groups. Three items had differing factor loadings at least in one sample. When constraints on these loadings were relaxed and the model was re-estimated, the model fit was good, $R-\chi^2(24) = 86.03$, $p < .001$, $R-CFI = .970$, $R-RMSEA = .048$, indicating partial metric equivalence for the four-item version of the OF scale.

Repair strategies. We finally tested conceptual and configural equivalence of the eight-item RS questionnaire by estimating a multigroup one-factor model, which obtained a good fit, $R-\chi^2(115) = 399.81$, $p < .001$, $R-CFI = .968$, $R-RMSEA = .047$, indicating conceptual and configural invariance across the six groups.

Metric equivalence was tested by constraining all factor loadings to be equal across the groups. The Lagrange Multiplier test and χ^2 difference test indicated that four items had differing factor loadings across the countries. When constraints on these loadings were relaxed and the model re-estimated, there was a good fit to the data, $R-\chi^2(146) = 471.10$, $p < .001$, $R-CFI = .964$, $R-RMSEA = .044$, indicating partial metric equivalence for the RS scale as well.

In light of the above analyses, we averaged scores across items so that higher scores indicated stronger inclinations to forgive close and nonclose others, higher levels of forgiveness regarding the offense, and more perceived willingness to repair the offense by the offender. Reliability coefficients were adequate and ranged from .67 to .97.

The fact that the GIF, OF, and RS measures all had full conceptual and configural equivalence indicates that the scales are appropriate for assessing forgiveness and repair strategies and examining their relationship with other variables (e.g., closeness) between cultures. However, given the partial metric equivalence of the scales, it is important to note that the measures should not be used to compare absolute levels of forgiveness and repair strategies between countries (for detailed explanations, see Meredith, 1993; van de Vijver & Leung, 1997).

Results

To detect whether closeness was related to the general inclination to forgive others, paired *t* tests were performed in each sample on the close others and nonclose others indexes of the GIF. As Table 1 shows, in each country, participants were significantly more strongly inclined to forgive close than non-close others.

Table 1. Comparison Across Countries Between Inclinations to Forgive Close Versus Nonclose Others

Country	Forgiving Close Other		Forgiving Nonclose Other		Mean Difference	t Test	d
	M	SD	M	SD			
Netherlands	5.11	0.88	3.17	1.03	1.93b	23.68**	1.76
Italy	4.78	1.19	2.92	1.16	1.86b	14.17**	1.34
Turkey	4.73	1.44	2.53	0.99	2.20b	17.59**	1.48
China	4.93	1.14	3.86	1.30	1.07a	8.80**	0.76
Japan	4.38	0.99	3.11	1.12	1.27a	13.69**	1.09
United States	5.30	1.05	3.38	1.10	1.92b	27.18**	1.51

** < .001. Significantly different mean differences are reported in different letters.

Table 2. Correlations Between Interpersonal Forgiveness, Closeness, Severity, Time Since Offense (Time), and Repair Strategies

Country		Forgiveness	Closeness	Severity	Time	Repair Strategies
Netherlands	Forgiveness	—	.49**	-.39**	-.26**	.56**
	Closeness		—	.02	-.08	.51**
	Severity			—	.21**	-.01
	Time				—	-.06
	Repair strategies					—
Italy	Forgiveness	—	.64**	-.42**	-.18	.47**
	Closeness		—	-.19*	-.17	.59**
	Severity			—	.16	-.21*
	Time				—	-.06
	Repair strategies					—
Turkey	Forgiveness	—	.53**	-.19*	.15	.39**
	Closeness		—	-.11	-.06	.47**
	Severity			—	.12	.02
	Time				—	.06
	Repair strategies					—
China	Forgiveness	—	.30**	-.20*	-.08	.41**
	Closeness		—	-.08	-.17	.25**
	Severity			—	.02	-.04
	Time				—	-.03
	Repair strategies					—
Japan	Forgiveness	—	.19*	-.38**	-.01	.28**
	Closeness		—	.09	-.06	.25**
	Severity			—	.19*	.04
	Time				—	.06
	Repair strategies					—
United States	Forgiveness	—	.45**	-.40**	-.08	.45**
	Closeness		—	-.08	.01	.53**
	Severity			—	.14*	.06
	Time				—	.12*
	Repair strategies					—

An ANOVA on the difference scores between forgiving close versus nonclose others was subsequently performed to explore cultural differences in the magnitude of the difference between forgiving close others versus nonclose others. Findings showed a significant effect of country on difference scores, $F(5, 1,401) = 36.94, p < .001$. According to the Sidak post hoc test, Japanese and Chinese samples' scores did not differ, but their difference scores were significantly lower than those obtained for Dutch, Italian, Turkish, and American participants. Thus, even though all participants were more likely to forgive close others than

nonclose others, this effect was weaker among Japanese and Chinese participants.

We next tested the association between closeness and forgiveness for a specific offense. Correlations (Table 2) show that, across countries, forgiveness was associated with closeness, severity of offense, and repair strategies. As expected, higher levels of forgiveness were associated with more closeness (and with less severity and with more perceived repair attempts by the offender). Interestingly, and consistent with the relatively low differences between the general inclinations to forgive close versus nonclose others in China and Japan, the

lowest closeness-forgiveness correlations were found in these Eastern countries, with correlations of .19 and .30, respectively. In contrast, the correlations ranged from .45 (U.S.) to .64 (Italy) in the other countries. A Fisher test showed that these differences in the correlations between Eastern samples and Dutch, Italian, Turkish, and American samples were significant (respectively, $F = 3.12, p < .001, \text{Cohen's } q = .34$; $F = 4.61, p < .001, \text{Cohen's } q = .57$; $F = 3.39, p < .001, \text{Cohen's } q = .40$; $F = 2.99, p < .001, \text{Cohen's } q = .29$, for the Japanese sample; $F = 1.97, p < .05, \text{Cohen's } q = .23$; $F = 3.53, p < .001, \text{Cohen's } q = .45$; $F = 2.31, p < .05, \text{Cohen's } q = .28$; $F = 1.70, p < .05, \text{Cohen's } q = .18$, for the Chinese sample), while there was no significant difference in the correlations between Chinese and Japanese participants ($F = .99, ns$). Importantly, the association between closeness and forgiveness remained significant in all cultural contexts after controlling for severity of offense, time since offense, and repair strategies. Notably, as in several previous studies (e.g., Cukur et al., 2004; Uskul et al., 2004), Turkey's participants responded in line with traditionally individualistic countries.

Discussion

Results from six countries, including both individualistic and collectivistic societies, provide support for the notion that the level of closeness between victim and offender is, cross-culturally, associated with forgiveness. When they reported their general inclination to forgive, in all countries participants reported higher inclinations to forgive close others as compared to nonclose others. In addition, when recalling a specific hurtful incident, level of closeness with the offender was significantly positively correlated with forgiveness in each country, even after controlling for other variables that have been shown to be strongly related to forgiveness (i.e., severity, apologies, and time since the offense). Nevertheless, there was some variability in the strength of this relationship, with the two collectivistic countries (China, Japan) yielding weaker associations between closeness and forgiveness on both measures of forgiveness.

Before further discussing these cross-cultural differences, we would like to highlight that the fact that closeness was associated with forgiveness in all countries is strongly in line with an evolutionary functional analysis of forgiveness (McCullough, 2008). Ultimately, forgiveness may have evolved to preserve close relationships—relationships that may provide fitness (i.e., survival and reproductive) benefits. The psychological experience of closeness may act as a cue of fitness opportunities (McCullough, Kurzban, & Tabak, 2009). That is, people generally feel close to their kin and their romantic relationship partner, which has obvious fitness benefits, but also to others with whom they share a history of beneficial interactions (e.g., emotional and/or material support). Such interactions have been vital for survival in our evolutionary past, but also today the psychological *and* health benefits of close and supportive others are pervasive (e.g., Berkman, Glass, Brissette, & Seeman, 2000). As such, experienced closeness with an offender may have become a proximate

driving force for forgiveness, thereby helping people to maintain these important bonds.

In considering our findings, it needs to be borne in mind that the data are cross-sectional, and hence, we cannot be sure whether closeness leads to forgiveness, or vice versa. Based on previous findings, and theoretically, we suggest that the arrow points in both directions. A study by Finkel et al. (2002) demonstrated that experimentally inducing closeness resulted in more forgiveness, while a study by Karremans and Van Lange (2008) showed that experimentally inducing relatively high versus low levels of forgiveness lead to corresponding levels of experienced closeness toward the offender. Probably, the association between closeness and forgiveness in the current study could be explained in terms of both these effects. Note that both causal effects are in line with an evolutionary account of forgiveness. From this perspective, forgiveness is more likely to take place in close rather than nonclose relationships, and closeness should thus predict forgiveness. At the same time, forgiveness should *repair* levels of closeness between two people, and forgiveness should therefore also lead to an increase in closeness.

We suggested that, because collectivistic cultural norms may more strongly dictate forgiveness as a way of maintaining harmony, in collectivistic countries people may distinguish less between forgiving close versus nonclose others, as compared to individualistic individuals. The weaker closeness-forgiveness link in Japan and China may reflect this notion. Given the cross-sectional nature of our findings, it should be noted that the weaker association might also be due to the possibility that collectivists tend to maintain their level of closeness with an offender largely independent of level of forgiveness. We suggest, however, that there are good reasons to believe that the former explanation is more plausible. For example, in a recent study examining prototypical ideas about forgiveness, it was found that Japanese participants focused more on features related to social harmony, while American participants focused more on features of self-enhancement (i.e., “When I forgive, I feel good about myself”; Terzino, Cross, Takada, & Ohbuchi, 2010). This suggests that motives to maintain harmony indeed more strongly underlie forgiving tendencies in collectivistic societies. Accordingly, among collectivists, motives to follow the social harmony norm may partly “overrule” the effects of experienced closeness on forgiveness. However, to provide conclusive evidence for this reasoning, future research may experimentally manipulate closeness to see whether this indeed has a relatively weak effect on forgiveness in collectivistic countries.

Previous findings suggest that in collectivistic societies where forgiveness is an expected cultural norm, individual personality differences (like perceived closeness) may also be less strongly associated with forgiveness than in individualistic societies (see Hook et al., 2009). Interestingly, in a similar vein, a recent study demonstrated that within families, the association between personality traits and forgiveness was weaker for parents' forgiveness of their children, than for parents' forgiving of each other, or child's forgiveness of the parent,

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suggesting the almost obligatory nature of child forgiveness (Maio et al., 2008). Together with the current findings, such findings may suggest that in any instance in which forgiveness is perceived, normative (be it a cultural or relationship norm) characteristics of the victim (e.g., personality traits or subjective feelings of closeness with the offender) may play a relatively weak role in forgiveness.

Despite the fact that we found a robust closeness-forgiveness link in all countries, an important question remaining is whether the forgiveness ratings reflect similar underlying processes across cultures. A study by Huang and Enright (2000) examined physical indicators of negative affect (e.g., blood pressure, masked smile), while Taiwanese (collectivistic) participants talked about a past offense. Participants who indicated that they forgave because of cultural demands for group harmony, compared to those who forgave for empathic other-oriented motives, displayed more signs of negative affect. Put differently, although they reported high levels of forgiveness, they showed emotional signs of unforgiveness. In line with this, it is possible that our participants in collectivistic countries report forgiveness because it is expected from them, rather than because they actually *experience* forgiveness in an emotional sense—perhaps less so than participants in individualistic countries. This issue could not be addressed in the present study but is an interesting topic for further investigation.

To conclude, the current study is one of the first studies to examine forgiveness across a number of different societies that differ in their level of individualism versus collectivism. We found that closeness was robustly (but not invariably) associated with forgiveness in all countries. These findings are in line with the notion that forgiveness is an evolved mechanism for maintaining and protecting close relationships from the inevitable interpersonal hurts that may occur in them. Without the ability to forgive, it is unlikely that relationships could maintain for a long period of time—not in Western countries, not in Eastern countries.

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Note

1. For details concerning the factor loadings for the scale items for all measures, please contact the first author.

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