Not So Innocent: Does Seeing One's Own Capability for Wrongdoing Predict Forgiveness?

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People are more forgiving toward transgressors if they see themselves as capable of committing similar offenses, as demonstrated in 7 studies. Methods included hypothetical scenarios, actual recalled offenses, individual and group processes, and correlational and experimental designs. Three factors mediated the link between personal capability and forgiveness: seeing the other's offense as less severe, greater empathic understanding, and perceiving oneself as similar to the transgressor. In terms of predicting forgiveness, it was important that people's own offenses were similar to the target offense in terms of both severity and type. The personal capability effect was independent of other established predictors of forgiveness and was more pronounced among men than women.

Keywords: forgiveness, vengefulness, humility, empathy, gender

Forgiveness can be a powerful means to heal emotions and relationships after a transgression (see Worthington, 2005a, for a review), and it may also promote physical health (e.g., Lawler et al., 2003; Witvliet, 2001, 2005; Witvliet & McCullough, 2007; Worthington & Scherer, 2004). In spite of its potential benefits, however, forgiving can be costly in terms of pride and immediate self-interest (Exline & Baumeister, 2000). Forgiveness requires that people forego bitter feelings and desires for vengeance (Enright & Fitzgibbons, 2000), perhaps even replacing them with positive emotions (Worthington, 2005b). The process of forgiving can be a strenuous one, especially in cases of deep hurt.

People are most likely to forgive when certain conditions are met: when offenses are minor (Boon & Sulsky, 1997; Zechmeister & Romero, 2002); when offended parties cultivate empathic feelings toward their offenders (Fincham, Paleari, & Regalia, 2002; McCullough et al., 1998; McCullough, Worthington, & Rachal, 1997); and when offenses occur within close, committed relationships (Finkel, Rusbult, Kumashiro, & Hannon, 2002; Karremans, Van Lange, Ouwerkerk, & Kluwer, 2003). One means of facilitating these positive perceptions and feelings might be to focus on one's own potential for a similar misdeed. Our central hypothesis was that people would show greater forgiveness to the extent that they could recall or envision themselves committing similar offenses. This article presents seven studies to test this hypothesis.

Self-Enhancement as a Response to Transgression

When faced with violations of social rules, one common response is to make judgments, asking the following: How serious is this offense? Should the offender be punished? Is forgiveness conceivable? Unfortunately, objective and dispassionate appraisals of transgressions may be relatively rare and difficult. Cognitive judgments are often clouded by emotion (Haidt, 2001), and emotion can be intense in the wake of transgression. As described by Goffman (1955), people who offend others push them down in symbolic terms, treating them with disrespect. To combat their feelings of rage and shame, victims typically feel a need to reestablish a position of strength and safety, and they often want to punish wrongdoers as well (Darley & Pittman, 2003; Tripp, Bies, & Aquino, 2002).

In cognitive terms, one way to accomplish both goals might be to see oneself as righteous and innocent while viewing the offending party as morally inferior: "I would never do anything so horrible!" Downward comparison, which involves comparing oneself to others who are faring worse, is a recognized method of bolstering the self (Wills, 1981; Wood, Taylor, & Lichtman,

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1985). Particularly when feeling threatened, people may derogate others to turn them into targets of downward comparison (Gibbons & Gerrard, 1991). By focusing on the contrast between one's own qualities (or actions) and those of the offending party, the evaluator can enjoy the comforts of self-enhancement while creating a safe sense of moral distance from the offender.

How might self-enhancing comparisons affect attitudes toward an offender? One likely consequence is that the offender's misdeeds will seem to grow in size. When people adopt a victim's perspective, they often exaggerate the severity of the offense (Baumeister, Stillwell, & Wotman, 1990). Such biases can be so strong that people may be unable to override them even if given strong incentives, such as monetary compensation (Stillwell & Baumeister, 1997). Adopting a victim stance might also promote the demonization of offenders (Ellard, Miller, Baumle, & Olson, 2002), whose acts are viewed as monstrous and inexplicable. People often understand transgressions on the basis of what Baumeister (1997) termed the *myth of pure evil*, a belief that those who commit serious offenses are rotten to the core—and fundamentally different from good people such as oneself.

Self-enhancing strategies may benefit offended parties by helping them to feel safe, strong, and morally good. But if people create a sense of moral distance between themselves and their offenders, how might such a stance affect decisions about forgiveness? If people demonize their offenders and see their actions as being rooted in pure evil, it seems likely that their responses will center on self-protection or retribution rather than forgiveness.

Reflecting on One's Personal Capability for Similar Offenses

To understand how people move from grudge holding to forgiveness, we believe that it is crucial to identify alternatives to the processes of demonization and distancing that commonly occur in response to an offense. One possibility is that people might reflect on their own capability for committing similar offenses—a perception that we term *personal capability* throughout this article. Our main hypothesis is that personal capability will prove to be a robust predictor of forgiveness. Why? We propose three possible mechanisms.

Reduced Perceptions of Severity

If people can see themselves as capable of committing a particular offense, the offense may seem to shrink, becoming less severe. People tend to perceive and recall their own offenses in a mitigated manner, downplaying their severity and consequences (Baumeister, 1997; Baumeister et al., 1990; Stillwell & Baumeister, 1997). With a perspective that says, "If I'm capable of doing it, it must not be that bad," victims may be more likely to forgive.

Enhanced Empathic Understanding

Victims often see the actions of perpetrators as inexplicable or rooted in sheer malice (Baumeister et al., 1990), a stance that hardly seems conducive to forgiveness. But if people can relate the offense to their own behavior, doing so may facilitate understanding. As victims reflect on their own similar transgressions, they may notice sensible and perhaps justifiable reasons for their behavior. They may, in turn, extend that understanding to the present perpetrators—thereby making the offense seem more forgivable.

Enhanced Sense of Similarity

Identifying with an offender, even in a minimal way, should help to break down psychological barriers that people erect to distance themselves. Focusing on themes of common humanity can facilitate forgiveness (Wohl & Branscombe, 2005). Seeing the similarities between oneself and an offender is also likely to be humbling, and humility should work against a self-righteous, judgmental mindset that distances the perpetrator from the victim (Exline, Campbell, et al., 2004; Tangney, 2000, 2002).

Relevant Findings From Prior Research: Forgiveness and Empathy

As described above, we proposed that personal capability would predict forgiveness through several distinct pathways. Two of these pathways—deepened understanding of the other's offense and a sense of similarity to the offender—involve processes related to empathy. Many studies have revealed positive associations between empathy and forgiveness (e.g., Brown, 2003; Fincham et al., 2002; Konstam, Chernoff, & Deveney, 2001; Macaskill, Maltby, & Day, 2002; McCullough et al., 1997, 1998; Toussaint & Webb, 2005; Zechmeister & Romero, 2002). Treatment models of forgiveness by Enright and Fitzgibbons (2000) and Worthington (1998) also include a focus on one's own offenses (see also Malcolm, Warwar, & Greenberg, 2005).

Most of the studies in this area have framed empathy as a disposition (Brown, 2003; Konstam et al., 2001; Macaskill et al., 2002; Toussaint & Webb, 2005) or in emotional terms, tapping feelings of warmth or sympathy (Fincham et al., 2002; McCullough et al., 1997, 1998). Researchers have devoted less attention to the cognitive, perspective-taking aspect of empathy that would take place in relation to a specific offense, and it is this more cognitive aspect of empathy that seems most relevant to personal capability.

Several forgiveness researchers note the lack of attention to cognitive facets of empathy (McCullough et al., 1997; Toussaint & Webb, 2005). Although McCullough et al. (1997) did include a cognitive measure, results from that measure were inconclusive, and subsequent studies focused on emotional empathy (McCullough et al., 1998). Brown (2003) found that dispositional forgiveness correlated positively with the cognitive, perspective-taking facet of empathy. However, the perspective-taking measure used was dispositional rather than situation specific.

Witvliet, Ludwig, and Vander Laan (2001) compared the effects of an empathic perspective-taking manipulation with conditions involving forgiveness, rumination, and grudge holding. The empathy condition had a cognitive emphasis, asking participants to focus on the humanity of the offender, factors in the offender's life that may have contributed to the offense, and/or times when the participants themselves had needed to be forgiven. Compared with the rumination and grudge-holding conditions, empathic perspective taking significantly reduced anger, arousal, and negative emotion as well as heart rate, blood pressure, sweat, and brow electromyography. Empathy also increased perceived control, pleasant relaxation, and joy. Yet, in terms of facilitating positive emotion and reducing negative emotion and arousal, the forgiveness manipulation was even more effective than the empathy manipulation.

The closest empirical precedent for our work on personal capability comes from several scenario-based experiments. Takaku

(2001) and Takaku, Weiner, and Ohbuchi (2001) found that perspective taking (asking participants to recall prior offenses of their own) made participants more likely than controls to accept imaginary apologies from hypothetical offenders. Although clearly relevant to our ideas about personal capability, these studies had a circumscribed focus: They emphasized hypothetical situations in which apologies were being offered.

In summary, prior research on empathy and forgiveness provided some empirical backing for the hypothesized connection between personal capability and forgiveness. Our aim here was to perform a much more systematic and intensive examination of the proposed connection, including tests of the three proposed mediators, consideration of potential confounds, and use of both interpersonal and intergroup offenses. The use of experimental designs also allowed us to examine several important boundary conditions, which we describe next.

Possible Pitfalls of Focusing on One's Own Offenses

Even if seeing one's own capability for wrongdoing is associated with forgiveness (in correlational terms), does it follow that prompting people to focus on their own offenses will promote forgiveness? It might, if such self-reflection facilitates the kinds of empathic, humbling, and offense-diminishing processes described earlier. But it also seems possible that being asked to reflect on one's own misdeeds could backfire. First, a person might recall an offense of a very different type (e.g., an academic cheating situation as opposed to an ethnic slur). Any subsequent comparisons may not facilitate understanding of the target offense because the two situations are so different. Second, because of the prevalence of self-enhancement motives (e.g., Sedikides & Strube, 1997), it seems likely that many people would recall offenses that are less severe than the target offense. Seeing one's own offense as less severe could lead to a contrast effect, magnifying the other's offense rather than diminishing it. To facilitate forgiveness, then, it may be important for people to recall offenses that are truly similar to the target in terms of both severity and type. We examined these issues in Studies 5 and 6.

A second problem is that reflecting on one's own offenses could bring up self-focused negative emotions. Earlier studies have shown that asking people to recall humbling situations can prompt feelings of shame and weakness. These self-focused negative emotions, in turn, can make people less generous (Exline & Fisher, 2005) and more aggressive (Exline & Zell, 2006). Simply being in a bad mood could make people harsh in their judgments. If people also feel ashamed and defensive regarding their own offenses, the resulting desire to repair their self-images might increase the tendency to derogate others rather than fostering forgiveness. We examined this possibility in Study 5.

The Potential for Gender Differences

When we launched this line of research, gender was of peripheral interest to us. We tend to err on the side of not focusing on gender differences unless there is some clear conceptual reason for doing so (see Baumeister, 1988). However, some recent findings persuaded us to take a closer look at gender. For example, several studies examined whether recalling humbling events would affect responses to betrayal in a laboratory game (Exline & Zell, 2006). Men were less aggressive in response to the betrayal if they had written about a time when they felt humble (vs. proud or important). Women did not show this pattern. Another recent study found that within married couples, emotional empathy was a stronger predictor of forgiveness by husbands than by wives (Fincham et al., 2002). Likewise, a questionnaire study found that dispositional empathy predicted forgiveness by men but not by women (Toussaint & Webb, 2005).

Granted, the above findings had only indirect relevance to our work. Our interest was in personal capability, a situation-specific construct with a cognitive emphasis. We were not studying humility, emotional empathy, or dispositional empathy. Nonetheless, the prior findings suggested that gender might moderate the effects of humbling or empathic processing in ways relevant to personal capability. Specifically, they raised the possibility that reflecting on one's own misdeeds might facilitate forgiveness more among men than among women.

The Present Research

In the studies presented here, our goal was not only to see whether a link exists between personal capability and forgiveness but also to examine potential mediators (Study 2) and rule out other third-variable explanations (Studies 2 and 6). We wanted to determine whether the pattern was specific to college students (Study 1) and whether it might generalize to severe intergroup offenses (Study 3). We also used experimental designs (Studies 4–7) to examine the effects of having people focus on their offenses, and we paid particular attention to the possibility of gender differences in those studies.

Study 1: Comparing Forgiveness and Unforgiveness in Two Samples

We started with a simple design to test whether forgiven offenses, relative to unforgiven offenses, would be associated with a higher sense of personal capability. Because generalizability concerns were particularly important to us in this initial study, we used two samples to test our hypothesis: an undergraduate sample and a more diverse Internet-based sample.

Method

Participants

Sample 1: Undergraduates. Participants were 148 introductory psychology students (80 men, 68 women) at a private university in the Midwestern United States. All received partial course credit for completing a survey. The average age was 19 years, and all participants were single. The sample was predominantly Caucasian (71%) and Asian (16%).[1]

Sample 2: Internet. Participants in the Internet sample (25 men, 81 women) took a Web-based version of the survey. We sent a recruitment e-mail to a broad spectrum of individuals, including instructors teaching psychology courses, colleagues, and acquaintances. After assuring them that all information would be kept

[1] Because of space constraints involved in describing seven studies, we list only those ethnic groups that represent at least 10% of the sample.

confidential, we invited them to participate and/or to send the recruitment e-mail to others. The final sample was composed of an approximately equal number of college students ($n = 56$; 49% of sample) and nonstudents ($n = 59$). The mean age was 25.4 ($SD = 8.9$), and the majority (91%) of participants were from the United States. The sample was predominantly Caucasian (85%) and African American (11%).

Procedure

Following established procedures (e.g., Boon & Sulsky, 1997; Darby & Schlenker, 1982; Zechmeister & Romero, 2002), participants were asked to recall two situations in which someone had hurt or offended them: one in which they forgave and another in which they did not forgive. The two conditions were counterbalanced to control for order effects. No specific definition of forgiveness was provided. Instead, participants drew on their own ideas about what forgiveness entailed. After describing the situation, participants completed the following measures.

Measures

Extent of forgiveness. As a manipulation check, participants were asked, "To what extent have you forgiven this person?" (1 = *not at all*, 6 = *totally*).

Capability for similar offense. Participants were asked, "Given the right circumstances, could you see yourself committing a similar offense to what happened to you (i.e., just as wrong or damaging)?" (1 = *no, not at all*, 6 = *yes, definitely*).

Results and Discussion

A manipulation check confirmed that undergraduates reported more forgiveness in the forgiveness condition ($M = 5.4$, $SD = 1.0$) than in the unforgiveness condition ($M = 2.2$, $SD = 1.4$), $t(140) = 23.62$, $p < .01$, $\eta^2 = .80$. Internet participants also reported more forgiveness in the forgiveness condition ($M = 5.0$, $SD = 1.2$) than in the unforgiveness condition ($M = 2.1$, $SD = 1.4$), $t(100) = 18.23$, $p < .01$, $\eta^2 = .77$.

We predicted that when compared with unforgiveness cases, forgiveness cases would be associated with a greater sense of one's own capability for committing a similar offense. This prediction was strongly supported in both the undergraduate sample (forgiveness case, $M = 3.0$, $SD = 1.6$; unforgiveness case, $M = 1.8$, $SD = 1.8$), $t(140) = 6.61$, $p < .01$, $\eta^2 = .24$, and the Internet sample (forgiveness case, $M = 2.4$, $SD = 1.7$; unforgiveness case, $M = 1.5$, $SD = 1.2$), $t(100) = 4.59$, $p < .01$, $\eta^2 = .17$. No significant interactions were found on the basis of age, gender, nationality, ethnicity, or student versus nonstudent status.

We also examined correlations between forgiveness and personal capability within each condition. In both samples, personal capability correlated positively with forgiveness in the unforgiveness case—undergraduate, $r(142) = .23$, $p < .01$, and Internet, $r(103) = .22$, $p < .05$—but not in the forgiveness case—undergraduate, $r(147) = .10$, *ns*, and Internet, $r(110) = .07$, *ns*. The nonsignificant associations in the forgiveness case may have been partly due to ceiling effects. It is also possible that cultivating a sense of personal capability is particularly relevant early in the forgiveness process, when the natural tendency is often to demonize one's offender.

Study 1 offered preliminary evidence for our hypothesis: Relative to cases of unforgiveness, cases of forgiveness involve acts that people see themselves more capable of committing. This association applied to both students and nonstudents. Study 1 also raised the possibility that personal capability predicts forgiveness mainly in cases in which people still harbor considerable anger toward their offenders.

Study 2: A Closer Look at the Capability–Forgiveness Link

Study 1 demonstrated a link between personal capability and forgiveness. Next, we wanted to follow the strategy of a previous article on narcissistic entitlement and forgiveness (Exline, Baumeister, et al., 2004). Specifically, we hypothesized that personal capability would still have unique predictive power when other robust predictors of forgiveness were controlled. First, we examined situational predictors of forgiveness that were discussed in the introduction: relationship commitment and apology. We also examined several individual-difference factors that have been linked with forgiveness in prior research.

Earlier studies have shown that forgiveness levels correlate with the Big Five factors of personality, particularly low Neuroticism and high Agreeableness (e.g., Brown, 2003; McCullough & Hoyt, 2002). Some other forgiveness predictors include high dispositional forgiveness (e.g., Berry, Worthington, O'Connor, Parrott, & Wade, 2005), high self-esteem (e.g., Miller, 2003), low narcissism and entitlement (e.g., Brown, 2004; Exline, Baumeister, et al., 2004), high religiosity (see Worthington, 2005a, for a review), and high social desirability (e.g., Exline, Baumeister, et al., 2004).

We reasoned that several of these factors might correlate with personal capability as well. For example, a willingness to focus on one's flaws would seem unlikely in narcissistic people or those with a high sense of entitlement, because they tend to be defensive about focusing on their faults (e.g., Campbell, Bonacci, Shelton, Exline, & Bushman, 2004). Competing predictions could be made about self-esteem: Given their positive self-views, people with high self-esteem could tend to downplay their potential for wrongdoing, much as narcissists do. However, their basic sense of security and confidence could enable them to admit shortcomings as well. Neurotic individuals might be highly aware of their personal capability for transgression, given their predispositions to focus on negative information (John, Donahue, & Kentle, 1991), whereas conscientious people may carefully monitor their behavior and be quick to notice deviations from social rules. Because many religions emphasize the need to be accountable for transgressions, personal capability might correlate positively with religiosity. Finally, we reasoned that admitting moral flaws would be negatively linked with social desirability. Because any of these personality variables might serve as a confound, we examined whether the link between capability and forgiveness would remain significant when these factors were controlled.

We also evaluated the three potential mediators of the capability–forgiveness association outlined in the introduction: If personal capability is indeed linked with forgiveness, is this because offenses seem smaller when people can relate to them? Or is the link due to empathic understanding or seeing oneself as similar to the offender? We predicted that all three mediation explanations would be supported.

Method

Participants

Participants (106 men, 112 women) were undergraduates in psychology courses at a private research university in Ohio. Ethnicities were predominantly Caucasian (69%) and Asian/Pacific Islander (19%). The mean age was 19.3 years (SD = 3.7). Analyses of dispositional variables used a subset of participants (n = 136; 68 men, 68 women) who had participated in another study that included an in-depth assessment of personality constructs.

Procedure

All participants completed a questionnaire for partial course credit. As part of the questionnaire, they were asked to recall a situation in which another person did something that deeply offended, harmed, or hurt them. After describing the situation, participants completed the measures described below. Participants included in the dispositional analyses participated in a Web-based study called "Emotions, Personality and Attitudes" (Exline & Youngstrom, 2004). They gave written permission to have the results from the personality study linked with their results from this study.

Measures of Unforgiveness and Situational Factors

Unless otherwise indicated, scales ranged from 0 (*not at all*) to 10 (*extremely*). We scored all measures by averaging across items. Measures are listed below in the order in which they appeared in the questionnaire. Descriptive statistics appear in Table 1.

Description of offense. First, participants were asked to provide a brief description of the offense. These responses were coded into various categories as described in the *Results*.

Offense severity. Participants rated the extent to which the offense was severe, harmful, wrong, and intentional.

Preoffense relationship closeness. Participants responded to the items, "How close was your relationship with the other person before the offense occurred?" and "Prior to the offense, to what extent were you committed to having a positive relationship with the other person?"

Apology and amends. Participants rated the extent to which the other person had accepted responsibility for the offense, apologized, and taken action to repair the situation.

Unforgiveness. We used the 18-item Transgression Related Interpersonal Motivations Inventory–Revised (TRIM-18-R; McCullough & Hoyt, 2002) to assess current motivations toward the offender. Participants responded to 18 items on a scale from 1

Table 1
Study 2: Descriptive Statistics and Key Correlations

Descriptive statistic	*M*	*SD*	α	Personal capability	Unforgiveness (TRIM)	Expressed hostility	Expressed positive emotion
Capability and forgiveness							
Personal capability	4.8	3.2	.93	—			
Unforgiveness (TRIM)	2.5	1.0	.88	−.40**	—		
Expressed hostility	1.5	1.4	.87	−.30**	.63**	—	
Expressed positive emotion	0.9	1.2	.89	.22**	−.45**	−.51**	—
Situational variables							
Apology	3.3	3.3	.92	.25**	−.53**	−.35**	.34**
Preoffense closeness	6.9	2.9	.90	.05	−.38**	−.11	.17*
Offense severity	6.7	2.0	.66	−.43**	.57**	.35**	−.27**
Perceived similarity to offender	−1.6	3.4		.56**	−.58**	−.40**	.41**
Empathic understanding	4.1	2.7	.89	.46**	−.51**	−.38**	.31**
Dispositional variables[a]							
Agreeableness	3.7	0.5	.80	−.13	−.24**	−.12	.11
Neuroticism	2.9	0.6	.85	.03	.12	.25**	−.14
Openness	3.5	0.5	.83	−.03	−.13	−.07	.12
Extraversion	3.2	0.8	.91	−.21*	−.01	.03	.19*
Conscientiousness	3.5	0.6	.83	−.12	.03	−.04	.09
Forgiveness (disposition)	3.4	0.7	.84	.03	−.38**	−.20*	.27**
Narcissism	15.0	6.9	.84	−.14†	−.02	.05	.14
Psychological entitlement	1.8	1.5	.89	−.06	−.02	.00	.06
Self-esteem	30.8	5.8	.91	−.04	−.16+	−.12	.11
Religiosity index	0.0	0.9	.81	.04	−.11	−.27**	.14
Social desirability	6.1	2.8	.69	−.15+	−.19*	−.09	.11
Gender (0 = male; 1 = female)				−.10	.02	.05	.12

Note. TRIM = Transgression Related Interpersonal Motivations Inventory.
[a] Dispositional variables come from a subset of participants (n = 136) who completed a personality study.
† $p < .10$. * $p < .05$. ** $p < .01$.

(*strongly disagree*) to 5 (*strongly agree*). We averaged scores for the three subscales (Vengefulness, Avoidance, reverse-scored Benevolence) to compute a TRIM score.

Capability for similar wrongdoing. After completing several pages of additional questions about the offense (not relevant to this investigation), participants rated responses to four questions from 0 (*no, definitely not*) to 10 (*yes, definitely*): "Given the right circumstances, do you think that you could be capable of doing something just as bad (i.e., just as harmful or wrong) as what the other person did?"; "Can you imagine a situation in which you could do something as bad as what the other person did?"; "Do you think it's possible that you could ever do something as bad as what the other person did?"; and "Thinking back over your entire life, do you think that you have ever done anything as bad as what the other person did?"

Perceived similarity to offender. Participants read the prompt, "Right now, I see myself as being . . ." followed by a scale from −5 (*very different from the other person*) to 5 (*very similar to the other person*).

Empathic understanding. Participants were asked, "To what extent can you . . ." followed by four prompts: "understand why the other person acted as s/he did"; "see the situation from the other person's perspective"; "see his/her behavior as making sense;" and "think of valid reasons why s/he acted as s/he did." Responses were rated from 0 (*not at all*) to 10 (*totally*).

Expressed hostility and positive emotion. As a qualitative measure of emotion, we asked an open-ended question: "If you could say something to the other person now, with no fear of how s/he might respond, what would you like to say?" Two coders rated responses for hostility and positive emotion from 0 (*none*) to 5 (*intense*). Interrater reliability was acceptable (see Table 1), and responses were averaged across coders.

Measures of Individual Differences

As described above, the 136 participants included in the dispositional analyses completed a Web-based study that included a set of dispositional measures. Measures included the Big Five (John et al., 1991), religiosity (Exline, Yali, & Sanderson, 2000), dispositional tendencies to forgive (Berry et al., 2005), psychological entitlement (Campbell et al., 2004), narcissism (40-item Narcissistic Personality Inventory; Raskin & Terry, 1988), self-esteem (Rosenberg, 1965), and social desirability (13-item Marlowe–Crowne; Reynolds, 1982).

Results and Discussion

Descriptive Statistics: Types of Offenses

Before proceeding, we wanted to examine the types of offenses reported by our undergraduate participants. Two trained raters coded offenses into categories, with each offense having the possibility of inclusion in multiple categories (e.g., infidelity and betrayals of trust). Kappas ranged from .80 to 1.0, and differences were resolved by the first author. Offense types commonly reported included betrayals of trust (39%), verbal aggression (29%), social rejection (28%), lying (15%), gossip (15%), selfishness (12%), and infidelity (12%).[2] There were no systematic differences in personal capability or unforgiveness scores on the basis of offense type.

Controlling for Other Robust Predictors of Forgiveness

As predicted, there was a negative correlation between personal capability and unforgiveness (TRIM scores; see Table 1). Our first aim was to see whether this association would remain significant when controlling for apology and relationship closeness, two robust predictors of forgiveness that have been identified in prior research. As shown in Table 1, personal capability correlated positively with apology and did not correlate with relationship closeness. Consistent with prior studies, unforgiveness showed negative correlations with both apology and preoffense relationship closeness. TRIM scores did not differ by gender (see Table 1), nor was there a significant interaction of capability and gender ($\beta = -.05$, *ns*).

Our hypothesis was that the capability variable would account for unique variance in TRIM scores even when we controlled for apology and relationship closeness—two robust predictors of forgiveness that when considered together, accounted for 32% of the variance in TRIM scores. Crucially, capability did continue to explain unique variance in TRIM scores when we controlled for apology, $pr(213) = -.32$, $p < .01$; closeness, $pr(213) = -.41$, $p < .01$; and both apology and closeness together, $pr(212) = -.34$, $p < .01$. In short, the predictive role of personal capability could not be reduced to its link with either of these robust predictors of forgiveness.

Controlling for Dispositional Factors

Next, we tested the hypothesis that personal capability would still predict lower TRIM scores when dispositional predictors of forgiveness were controlled. As described above, these analyses used the subsample of participants ($n = 136$) who completed the personality study. As shown in Table 1, unforgiveness was associated with lower dispositional forgiveness, lower Agreeableness, marginally lower self-esteem, and lower social desirability. Personal capability was linked with lower Extraversion and marginally lower narcissism and social desirability. Contrary to predictions, personal capability was not linked with any of the other Big Five factors, religiosity, or dispositional forgiveness.

Our next step was to examine the partial correlation between personal capability and TRIM scores while controlling for the significant dispositional predictors of TRIMs. Note that social desirability was the only plausible confound, because it correlated with both personal capability and TRIMs. To err on the conservative side, however, we controlled for all dispositional predictors of TRIMs: dispositional forgiveness, Agreeableness, self-esteem, and social desirability. The capability variable still predicted a large amount of variance in TRIMs, $pr(129) = -.52$, $p < .01$. (When we controlled for each dispositional predictor individually, partial correlations between personal capability and TRIMs ranged from −.48 to −.52, *p*s $< .01$.)

[2] These offense types are similar to those observed in other studies of undergraduates. Because of space constraints, this is the only study for which we will describe offense types.

Situational Mediators

As described in the introduction, we proposed three mediators of the link between personal capability and forgiveness: offense severity, perceived similarity to the offender, and empathic understanding. We started by testing each variable as an individual mediator using the method popularized by Baron and Kenny (1986). Baron and Kenny's procedure involves three regression analyses: (a) Does the supposed predictor (or independent variable) *X* actually predict the criterion (or dependent variable) *Y*? (b) Does *X* also predict the supposed mediator *M*? (c) When *X* and *M* are both included in a regression equation predicting *Y*, does *M* continue to predict *Y* while *X*'s contribution drops substantially? If all three criteria are met, and assuming that the proposed model makes conceptual sense, then the results can be said to support the hypothesis of mediation.

Table 2 summarizes the hierarchical regressions used to test for mediation. The data met the first criterion, as shown in Model 1: Personal capability predicted lower TRIM (unforgiveness) scores. Criterion two also found support, as shown in Table 1: Personal capability was linked with lower severity ratings, higher perceived similarity to the offender, and higher empathic understanding. To test the third criterion, we ran three separate hierarchical regressions, as shown in Models 2A–2C in Table 2. In each model, the hypothesized mediator explained unique variance. The magnitude of the personal capability coefficients decreased in each case, although not to 0, suggesting partial mediation. (The coefficient for personal capability did drop to nonsignificance in model 2A, but not to 0.)

To provide a significance test for the question of mediation, we added a final column in Table 2 providing a *z* score. The *z* score came from the product of coefficients strategy, sometimes called the Sobel test (e.g., Sobel, 1982; see Preacher & Hayes, 2007, for a recent review). The strategy compares the indirect effects of *X* on *Y* (through *M*) with the standard error of these indirect effects. The resulting *z* score allows significance tests that evaluate whether the supposed mediator can truly be called a mediator—that is, whether it statistically accounts for a significant part of *X*'s prediction of *Y*. As shown in the final column of Table 2, all three hypothesized mediators met criteria for mediation using the Sobel test.

We had proposed what Preacher and Hayes (2007) described as a multiple mediation model. Our prediction was that severity, empathic understanding, and perceived similarity to the offender would each serve as distinct mediators of the link between personal capability and unforgiveness. In order to test for unique effects, we needed to consider all three mediators simultaneously. The three mediators did correlate highly with each other: severity and similarity, $r(214) = -.39$; severity and empathic understanding, $r(215) = -.39$; and similarity and empathic understanding, $r(215) = .47$, all $ps < .01$. Thus, it was conceivable that one or more of the mediation links would disappear when all three mediators were considered simultaneously.

Part of the mediation question could be addressed through hierarchical regression. In Model 3 of Table 2, we added the three mediators to the equation. As predicted, all three continued to predict unique variance in unforgiveness when considered simultaneously, and the role of personal capability was no longer significant. Although these results were consistent with multiple mediation, we needed to see significance tests of mediation to draw firm conclusions. To address the question of multiple mediation, we turned to an SPSS macro developed by Preacher and Hayes (2004). First, the macro used the product of coefficients strategy to compute a total indirect effect: Did the three proposed mediators, considered as a group, mediate the personal capability–unforgiveness link? The answer was yes, as indicated by the highly significant *z* score in the last column of Table 2. The macro then evaluated each of the proposed mediators, and each one yielded a significant *z* score (see Table 2). Taken together, these data provided strong evidence for the proposed multiple mediation pattern

Table 2
Hierarchical Regressions Predicting Unforgiveness (TRIM Scores) via Three Proposed Mediators: Severity, Similarity to Offender, and Empathic Understanding

Predictor	β	R^2	$R_{change}{}^{2a}$	F (df_{model}, df_{err})	*z* of test for mediation[b]
Model 1		.16**		40.18** (1, 214)	
Personal capability	−.40**				
Model 2A		.35**	.19**	57.07** (2, 212)	
Personal capability	−.11				
Perceived similarity to offender	−.52**				6.14**
Model 2B		.30**	.14**	45.07** (2, 213)	
Personal capability	−.21**				
Empathic understanding	−.42**				4.95**
Model 2C		.36**	.19**	58.97** (2, 212)	
Personal capability	−.20**				
Offense severity	.48**				5.23**
Model 3		.51**	.34**	54.78** (4, 209)	8.38**
Personal capability	.06				
Perceived similarity to offender	−.36**				5.12**
Empathic understanding	−.23**				3.52**
Offense severity	.37**				4.82**

[a] For each model, $R_{change}{}^2$ represents change from Model 1.
[b] *z* scores are based on use of the product of coefficients strategy (Preacher & Hayes, 2007).
** $p < .01$.

involving three distinct mediators: empathic understanding, perceived similarity to the offender, and offense severity.[3]

A More Behavioral Measure: What Would Participants Like To Say to Their Offenders?

Because of the potential for bias in self-report scales, we also examined whether the link between personal capability and forgiveness would emerge using another forgiveness measure, one closer to actual behavior. As described in the *Method* section, we coded participants' open-ended reports of what they would like to say to the other person (assuming that they could speak openly with no fear of the other person's response). The more personal capability people expressed, the less hostility they expressed in these statements, and the more positive emotion they expressed. (See Table 1 for correlations.)

As with the TRIM, we wanted to see whether personal capability would predict unique variance in the behavioral forgiveness measures when other robust predictors of forgiveness were controlled. When we controlled for prerelationship closeness, personal capability continued to predict less expressed hostility, $pr(189) = -.29$, $p < .01$, and more positive emotion, $pr(189) = .20$, $p < .01$. When we controlled for apology, personal capability still predicted less hostility, $pr(188) = -.21$, $p < .01$, and marginally more positive emotion, $pr(189) = .13$, $p < .10$. When we controlled for all dispositional variables that predicted either positive emotion or hostility (Neuroticism, Extraversion, dispositional forgiveness, and religiosity; see Table 1), personal capability continued to predict more expressed positive emotion, $pr(116) = .22$, $p < .05$, and less expressed hostility, $pr(116) = -.28$, $p < .01$. (When we controlled for each disposition individually, partial correlations ranged from $-.29$ to $-.32$, ps $< .01$, for hostility and from .17 to .23, ps $< .07$, for positive emotion.)

Finally, we examined whether perceived similarity, empathic understanding, and severity would mediate the links between personal capability and expressed positive and negative emotion (as they did with TRIMs). For brevity, we report only the z scores relevant to mediation. When we assessed each proposed mediator individually, the hypothesis of mediation was supported for all three proposed mediators when predicting both positive emotion and hostility, with zs ranging from 2.41 ($p < .05$) to 4.58 ($p < .01$). When we considered all three mediators simultaneously in a model predicting positive emotion, perceived similarity met criteria for mediation ($z = 3.57$, $p < .01$). The mediational role of empathic understanding was marginal ($z = 1.82$, $p < .10$), whereas severity did not meet criteria for mediation ($z = 1.36$, *ns*). In the case of negative emotion, all three proposed mediators met criteria for mediation when considered simultaneously (similarity, $z = 2.60$, $p < .01$; empathic understanding, $z = 2.38$, $p < .05$; severity, $z = 2.21$, $p < .05$.)

In summary, all three proposed mediators (similarity, empathic understanding, and severity) did meet criteria for mediation when considered individually. These associations held for both expressed hostility and positive emotion. Multiple mediation analyses revealed that when considered together, all three variables were distinct mediators of the link between personal capability and expressed hostility, just as they were in the case of TRIM scores. In the case of expressed positive emotion, perceived similarity to the offender emerged as a clear mediator, with empathic understanding playing a marginal role and offense severity not being significant.

Summary

As in Study 1, results from Study 2 suggested that people will be more forgiving toward others if they see themselves as capable of a similar wrongdoing. Note that this link was shown not only with a standard self-report measure (the TRIM) but also with written statements of what people would like to say to their offenders. Personal capability continued to predict forgiveness even when we controlled for other robust predictors such as apology, relationship closeness, offense harmfulness, and several major dispositional factors.

Multiple mediation analyses suggest that the link between capability and forgiveness can be explained through at least three proximal factors: First, seeing oneself capable of committing a certain offense may imply that the offense is not seen as very serious in moral terms. Second, seeing oneself as capable of committing a similar misdeed is associated with feeling similar to the offender. Third, personal capability is also linked with seeing the offense as more understandable. All three of these factors, in turn, predict greater forgiveness.

Study 3: From Personal Offenses to Intergroup Atrocities—Responses to the September 11 Attacks

Studies 1 and 2 demonstrated that in terms of everyday offenses, seeing oneself as capable of committing a similar offense is associated with greater forgiveness. Yet, there may be an upper limit to this association. What about cases involving heinous offenses such as the murder of innocent people? Could most people see themselves as capable of committing such an act? The attacks of September 11, 2001, provided an opportunity to examine people's responses to an extremely severe offense. Furthermore, this offense was one that was experienced at the group level, in contrast to the individual offenses in Studies 1 and 2. We reasoned that in the case of the events of 9/11, people's forgiveness-related judgments might reflect group-level thinking more than individual-level thinking. Specifically, we predicted that people would feel more forgiving toward the perpetrators of the 9/11 attacks to the extent that they saw the United States government (rather than the individual self) as capable of a similar offense.

Method

Participants and Procedure

Participants were 186 undergraduates (91 men, 95 women) enrolled in introductory psychology courses at a private university

[3] The Preacher and Hayes (2004) macro performed contrasts between the three mediation paths but revealed no differences in magnitude, with zs ranging from 0.98 to 1.95, *ns*. The macro also provided an additional set of bootstrapping tests. Bootstrapping techniques have been recommended in mediation research because they allow sampling distributions of indirect effects to be estimated empirically (Preacher & Hayes, 2007). The bootstrapping results, based on 1,000 resamples, offered further confirmation of mediation: The 95% confidence intervals produced by bootstrapping did not include 0 for any of the indirect effects, meaning that it was very likely that all three mediation effects were significant.

in the Midwestern United States. All data were collected during the week of October 8, 2001, which was the first week of U.S. strikes against Afghanistan after the September 11 attacks. Participants received partial course credit. The sample was mostly Caucasian (77%) and Asian (12%). Because we wanted to ensure that all participants saw the United States as an ingroup, we deleted 8 participants who were not United States citizens. (All significant results reported below remained significant when these 8 participants were included.)

Measures

All measures were scored by averaging across items. Measures are described in the order in which they appeared in the questionnaire.

Desired actions toward individual perpetrators and nations harboring them. Participants were asked, "To what extent would you currently support each of these actions by the United States, assuming they are logistically feasible?" Responses were rated from −5 (*would strongly oppose*) to 5 (*would strongly support*). Maximum likelihood factor analysis with varimax rotation suggested creation of three factors: The first was labeled Attack (M = 0.0, SD = 2.4, α = .77, eigenvalue = 4.0, 33% of variance). This factor included four items: on-the-spot killing of perpetrators without trial, death penalty (after trial and conviction), military strikes against civilian targets, and military strikes against military targets. The second factor was labeled No Action (M = −4.1, SD = 1.4, α = .63, eigenvalue = 1.3, 11% of variance) and included two items: no action against individual perpetrators and no action against nations harboring them. The third factor, Negotiation (M = −0.8, SD = 2.5, α = .61, eigenvalue = 1.1, 9% of variance), included two items: negotiation with individual perpetrators and negotiation with nations harboring them. We also retained a single item on giving economic aid (M = 1.2, SD = 2.8).

Vengeful and benevolent motivations. Participants completed a measure of situation-specific forgiveness based on the Vengefulness and Benevolence subscales of the TRIM-18-R (McCullough & Hoyt, 2002). Items were rated from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 5 (*strongly agree*). For the first subscale, Vengefulness (M = 3.6, SD = 1.0, α = .89), items included "I want them to suffer," "I want revenge," "I wish that something bad would happen to them," "I hate them," "I feel cold toward them," "I feel bitter toward them," and "I want to see them hurt and miserable." For the second subscale, Benevolence (M = 1.6, SD = 0.7, α = .90), items included "I have good will toward them," "I want to help them," "I feel compassionate toward them," "I wish that something good would happen to them," "I want to see them happy and content," "I feel warm toward them," and "I care about them."

Capability for similar actions by the United States government and by self. Participants responded to four items on a scale from 0 (*no, definitely not*) to 10 (*yes, definitely*). They were informed that in all items, "these individuals" referred to those directly involved in planning and carrying out the incidents at the World Trade Center and Pentagon. Items were as follows: "Do you think that the United States government has ever done something as bad as what these individuals did?"; "Given the right circumstances, could the United States government be capable of doing something as bad as what these individuals did?"; "Can you imagine a situation in which the United States government could do something as bad as what these individuals did?"; and "Do you think it's possible that the United States government could ever do something as bad as what these individuals did?" (M = 6.8, SD = 2.3, α = .80). Participants then answered the same four questions with reference to themselves rather than the government (i.e., "Do you think that you could ever . . ."; M = 1.3, SD = 2.0, α = .82).

Results and Discussion

Descriptive Statistics

Our study was conducted in the Midwestern United States, an area somewhat removed from the areas directly affected by the attacks (New York City, Washington, DC, and the part of Pennsylvania where the fourth plane crashed). Nonetheless, 5% of participants knew someone who had died as a result of the attacks, and 4% knew people that were considered missing. Although only 14% of students had lived in the regions directly affected by the attacks, 98% reported that they had friends or family living in those areas. The majority (86%) had visited one of the three regions directly affected by the attacks. Twenty-three percent had visited the World Trade Center, and 24% had visited the Pentagon. These results suggest a moderate level of psychological closeness to the event. Participants were clearly angry, reporting attitudes that were more vengeful (M = 3.6, SD = 2.0) than benevolent (M = 1.6, SD = 0.7), $t(177) = 17.92$, $p < .01$, $\eta^2 = .64$.

Creation of Forgiveness Index

To simplify our analyses, we conducted a maximum likelihood factor analysis with varimax rotation on the six forgiveness-related measures: benevolence, vengefulness, and desires for attack, no action, negotiation, and aid. The six variables loaded on a common factor (with vengefulness and desires for attack reverse scored). They were standardized and combined to form a single forgiveness index (M = 0.0, SD = 0.7, α = .77).

Seeing One's Government (Rather Than Oneself) as Capable of Heinous Offenses

Participants saw the U.S. government as being much more capable of a similar offense (M = 6.8, SD = 2.3) than they themselves were (M = 1.3, SD = 2.0), $t(177) = 27.23$, $p < .01$, $\eta^2 = .81$. As predicted, seeing one's government as capable of a similar offense was strongly associated with more forgiving motivations, $r(178) = .43$, $p < .01$. However, seeing oneself as capable of a similar offense did not predict forgiveness, $r(178) = .07$, *ns*. (Although we omit individual correlations here to save space, note that correlations with all six forgiveness-related measures were significant in the government case. None were significant in the personal case.) In the event of a heinous offense against one's ingroup, then, it may be more relevant for people to consider their group's capability for a similar offense rather than their own personal capability.

One question that might be raised about these data is whether we were inadvertently tapping people's degree of support for military action. Could the variables in our forgiveness index reflect political loyalties or attitudes about war rather than private emotions about the offense? We ran supplemental analyses to address these potential problems. Specifically, we controlled for participants'

degree of support for strikes against military targets—a variable likely to reflect general attitudes about war and the decisions of government officials. Yet, even when general support for military action was controlled, seeing the U.S. government as capable of a similar offense still predicted more forgiving attitudes on all of the other variables: less vengeful attitudes, $pr(175) = -.27$, $p < .01$; more benevolent attitudes, $pr(175) = .19$, $p < .05$; less desire to see perpetrators killed on the spot, $pr(175) = -.21$, $p < .01$; less support for the death penalty for perpetrators, $pr(175) = -.18$, $p < .05$; more desire to avoid taking action, $pr(175) = .18$, $p < .05$; more support of negotiation, $pr(175) = .19$, $p = .01$; more support for economic aid, $pr(175) = .17$, $p < .05$; and less support for strikes against civilian targets, $pr(175) = -.23$, $p < .01$.

Summary

Study 3 extended the concepts from Studies 1 and 2 to the level of intergroup offenses. Undergraduates were asked to reflect on the 9/11 attacks, a situation that tested the limits of empathy. People had great difficulty seeing themselves as capable of committing an act as heinous as this one, and their personal sense of capability did not predict forgiving attitudes. As predicted, however, participants reported more forgiving attitudes to the extent that they saw their own government as capable of a similar offense. These associations remained significant after we controlled for participants' level of support for military action.

Studies 4–7: Experimental Designs—Does Reflecting on One's Own Offenses Promote Forgiving Attitudes?

Studies 1–3 confirmed the link between personal capability and forgiveness in both interpersonal and intergroup contexts. Our next aim was to shift to an experimental approach: Is it possible to facilitate forgiving attitudes by prompting people to consider their own misdeeds?

Our strategy was to ask people to focus on similar offenses of their own. We chose this technique for two reasons. First, there was an empirical precedent for this procedure in several apology–forgiveness studies (Takaku, 2001; Takaku et al., 2001). Second, pilot studies suggested that reflection on past offenses was more potent and engaging than techniques such as imagining hypothetical future offenses, listing reasons why one might commit a similar offense, or recalling situations involving temptation but no misdeed. Our primary aim was to evaluate whether recalling a similar offense would facilitate forgiving attitudes. We began with scenario methods (Studies 4 and 5) before turning to real-life offenses (Study 6).

As described in the introduction, we also considered two potential moderator variables in these experiments. In Studies 5 and 6, we considered whether it would be important to recall a truly similar offense of one's own. In all four experiments (4–7), we examined the role of gender. Our prediction was that in terms of facilitating forgiveness (or reducing vengefulness), the similar offense technique would be more effective for men than for women.

Study 4: Responses to a Standardized, Hypothetical Offense

The aim of Study 4 was to see whether asking people to recall a similar offense of their own would make them less harsh in their judgments of another's offense. We chose to start with a standardized, hypothetical offense in which participants were not personally victimized, and we did so for two reasons. First, a scenario design provided considerable experimental control through use of a standardized situation. Second, we wanted to see whether reflecting on personal offenses could affect the "cold" cognitive judgments that people make as outside observers—that is, when they read or hear about other people's offenses but do not suffer harm themselves. In line with several recent studies (Cohen, Malka, Rozin, & Cherfas, 2006; Farrow & Woodruff, 2005; Wohl & Branscombe, 2005), we asked participants to rate the extent to which they saw the offense as forgivable.[4]

Method

Participants

Participants (65 men, 52 women, and 1 participant who did not list gender)[5] were enrolled in an introductory psychology course at a private research university in Ohio. Ethnicities were predominantly Caucasian (81%) and Asian/Pacific Islander (12%). The mean age was 18.7 years ($SD = 1.1$).

Procedure

Participants read a scenario about a hypothetical offense by a fellow college student. We chose an offense that was likely to be common in college life. Participants were asked to imagine both people in the scenario as being of their own gender. The scenario read as follows:

> Lee & Chris are roommates at [the same university as participants]. One night they are talking, getting to know each other better, and Lee confides in Chris about some very painful and embarrassing childhood memories. Suddenly feeling ashamed and afraid of the word getting out, Lee swears Chris to secrecy. Chris agrees, reassuring Lee that the secret is safe. A few weeks later, Chris is talking with some other friends. The conversation eventually turns to gossip about fellow students. One friend makes a joking reference to something that Lee did, and the gossip starts to center on Lee. A few of the friends turn to Chris and say, "Well, you're Lee's roommate. What dirt have you picked up?" Chris then blurts out Lee's secret, and everyone laughs. Word eventually gets back to Lee that Chris revealed this sensitive information.

Participants were randomly assigned to one of two conditions. Participants in the *morally similar* condition read these instructions: "Please recall a social situation in which you revealed some negative, private information about someone else. Note: This should NOT be a situation in which you revealed the information in order to protect or help the other person." They were then asked to briefly describe the recalled situation before answering questions about the offense. In the control condition, participants

[4] Pilot studies have clarified that labeling an offense as forgivable does not imply that it is seen as trivial. Rather, the construct of forgivability seems to capture beliefs about whether it would be morally appropriate to forgive the offense, regardless of its severity.

[5] Studies 4–7 were not originally designed to focus on gender differences. As such, most of them have unbalanced cell sizes containing more men than women, reflecting the gender composition of the university.

simply read the scenario and answered questions about the offense. (Although the Study 4 control condition was straightforward, it did not involve the same level of cognitive processing or elapsed time as the similar offense condition.[6] We remedied this potential problem in Study 6.) Participants rated how forgivable Chris's offense was on an 11-point scale (0 = *not at all*, 10 = *extremely*).

Results and Discussion

Results appear in Table 3. Although the main effect of experimental condition was not significant, an interaction with gender emerged clearly. In the control condition, men and women did not differ in their forgivability ratings. In the similar offense condition, men's forgivability ratings were higher than those of women. Men rated the offense as more forgivable in the experimental condition than in the control condition, suggesting that the prompt to consider their own misdeeds made them less harsh toward the hypothetical offender. Women gave equivalent forgivability ratings in both conditions.

These results supported the hypothesis that reflecting on one's own offenses can indeed soften judgments of hypothetical offenses, but only for men. Men, but not women, gave higher forgivability ratings if they were primed to consider a similar offense of their own.

Study 5: Multiple Scenarios

Study 5 built on the scenario methods of Study 4, with a primary prediction being that the Study 4 gender interaction would replicate across a wider set of situations. Study 5 also included new items that enabled closer inspection of underlying processes. Participants in the similar offense condition were asked to directly compare their offense with the target offense in terms of severity and type. They also reflected on whether writing about their own offense seemed to affect the forgivability, understandability, and size of the target offense. By tracing participant reports of what they had experienced, we could evaluate whether the underlying psychological processes fit with the mediational findings from Study 2. Participants also answered questions about the emotions that they experienced while reflecting on their own offenses. On the basis of prior research suggesting that negative emotion inhibits its generosity (e.g., Exline & Fisher, 2005), we predicted that negative feelings about one's own offense (e.g., shame, guilt, embarrassment) would be linked with lower forgivability judgments.

Pilot Study

Before conducting Study 5, we did a pilot study. We asked 87 undergraduates to rate the forgivability of five hypothetical offenses: a slightly revised version of the Study 4 gossip offense (described below) plus four offenses from the Transgression Narrative Test of Forgivingness (TNTF; Berry, Worthington, Parrott, O'Connor, & Wade, 2001). Scenarios were presented in random order. The pilot study strongly supported the correlational prediction that was the focus of Studies 1–3: A sense of personal capability was linked with higher forgivability ratings, $r(87) = .42$, $p < .01$. On the basis of the results of the pilot study, we selected three scenarios to use for Study 5: All were seen as being nontrivial offenses with significant negative consequences, but they were not so severe that participants could not relate to them.

Method

Participants

Participants (94 men, 110 women, and 1 participant who did not indicate gender) were enrolled in an introductory psychology course at a private research university in Ohio. Ethnicities were predominantly European American or Caucasian (75%) and Asian/Pacific Islander (17%). The mean age was 19.1 years ($SD = 0.8$).

Procedure and Measures

Participants were randomly assigned to read one of three scenarios chosen from the pilot study. One was the Study 4 gossip scenario, modified so that the offender was not sworn to secrecy. The other two scenarios were from the TNTF (Berry et al., 2001). The second scenario, involving carelessness by a babysitter, led to the serious consequence of a child drinking cleaning fluid. The third scenario involved failing to drop off an urgent, job-related letter for a friend at the post office. Participants were asked to imagine both characters as being of their own gender.

Each participant was randomly assigned to read one of the three scenarios just described. As in Study 4, participants were randomly assigned to one of two conditions: a similar offense condition or a control condition in which they gave forgivability ratings immediately after reading the scenario. Many of our hypotheses were specific to the similar offense condition. To ensure adequate power to test these hypotheses, we deliberately assigned more participants to the similar offense condition ($n = 160$) than the control condition ($n = 45$).

Forgivability. We used the measure from Study 4 ($M = 5.0$, $SD = 2.5$), which appeared immediately after the experimental manipulation.

Personal capability. The measure from Study 2 was used ($M = 6.0$, $SD = 2.5$, $\alpha = .87$).

Manipulation checks. On a scale from 0 (*not at all*) to 10 (*extremely*), participants rated the harmfulness ($M = 6.8$, $SD = 2.5$) and intentionality ($M = 2.9$, $SD = 2.9$) of the target offense.

Similarity of offenses. Similar offense condition participants rated the similarity of their offense to the target (in terms of offense type) on a scale from 0 (*not at all*) to 10 (*extremely*; $M = 5.4$, $SD = 2.8$). They also rated the severity of their offense relative to the target from −2 (*much less severe*) to 2 (*much more severe*; $M = -1.2$, $SD = 1.0$). (Stated differently, most participants [$n = 128$; 81%] recalled offenses that they rated less severe than the target offense. This is consistent with the idea of self-serving bias.)

Emotions associated with recalling an offense. Participants in the similar offense condition read the prompt, "When I was recalling and writing about my own offense, I felt . . ." followed by

[6] In pilot tests we did include other conditions that were similar to the similar offense condition in terms of elapsed time and processing requirements (e.g., writing lists, describing hypothetical offenses). In terms of forgivability ratings, these conditions did not differ from a control condition in which people gave immediate judgments.

Table 3
Differences in Forgiveness by Experiment, Condition, and Gender for Studies 4–7

Dependent variable	Men	Women	$t(\eta^2)$	$F(\eta^2)$ Model	Gender	Condition	Interaction
Study 4: Gossip scenario							
Forgivability				4.71**(.11)	3.58+(.03)	1.41(.01)	7.80**(.06)
Control			0.58(.01)				
M	4.1	4.4					
SD	2.2	2.2					
n	30	27					
Similar offense			3.66**(.19)				
M	5.6	3.8					
SD	2.0	1.6					
n	35	25					
$t(\eta^2)$	2.86**(.12)	1.14(.03)					
Study 5: Multiple scenarios							
Forgivability				2.54+(.04)	0.99(.00)	4.88*(.02)	4.50*(.02)
Control			1.74+(.07)				
M	3.5	4.9					
SD	2.1	2.6					
n	14	31					
Similar offense			1.27(.01)				
M	5.4	4.9					
SD	2.5	2.4					
n	79	78					
$t(\eta^2)$	2.68**(.07)	0.08(.00)					
Study 6: Real-life offenses							
TRIM				4.65**(.13)	10.91**(.10)	1.38(.01)	4.81*(.05)
Control			4.00*(.36)				
M	2.9	2.0					
SD	0.5	0.7					
n	17.0	13					
Similar offense			0.94(.01)				
M	2.3	2.2					
SD	0.8	0.8					
n	46	25					
$t(\eta^2)$	2.71*(.11)	0.63(.01)					
Vengefulness				2.96*(.08)	5.06*(.05)	0.41(.00)	5.79*(.06)
Control			2.57*(.19)				
M	2.0	1.4					
SD	0.8	0.6					
n	17	13					
Similar offense			0.14(.00)				
M	1.6	1.6					
SD	0.6	0.7					
n	46	25					
$t(\eta^2)$	2.46*(.09)	1.09(.03)					
Study 7: A more subtle priming manipulation							
TRIM				2.28+(.04)	0.18(.00)	2.34(.02)	3.72+(.02)
Control			1.61(.06)				
M	3.0	2.6					
SD	0.8	0.7					
n	25	20					
Capability-empathy questions			1.33(.02)				
M	2.5	2.7					
SD	0.9	1.0					
N	58	52					
$t(\eta^2)$	2.64*(.08)	0.26(.00)					
Vengefulness				3.88**(.07)	5.14*(.03)	0.52(.00)	9.40**(.06)
Control			3.11**(.18)				
M	2.6	1.6					
SD	1.1	0.8					
N	25	20					

Table 3 (*continued*)

Dependent variable	Men	Women	$t(\eta^2)$	$F(\eta^2)$ Model	Gender	Condition	Interaction
Capability-empathy questions			0.75(.00)				
M	1.9	2.0					
SD	0.8	1.0					
n	58	52					
$t(\eta^2)$	2.92^{**}(.10)	1.52(.03)					

Note. TRIM = Transgression Related Interpersonal Motivations Inventory.
$^{+}p < .10$. $^{*}p < .05$. $^{**}p < .01$.

12 adjectives rated from 0 (*not at all*) to 10 (*extremely*). Maximum likelihood factor analysis with varimax rotation suggested creation of two factors, one for negative emotion (*humbled*, *ashamed*, *sad*, *upset*, *embarrassed*, *guilty*; $M = 4.4$, $SD = 2.5$, αs ranging from .89 to .92 across scenarios) and one for positive emotion (*happy*, *positive feelings*, *peaceful*, *good*; $M = 2.0$, $SD = 2.0$, αs ranging from .80 to .88).

Subjective changes in perception. Similar offense condition participants rated whether having to write about their own offense made the target offense seem less versus more forgivable (−2 = *much less*, 2 = *much more*; $M = 0.1$, $SD = 0.8$), harder versus easier to understand (−2 = *much harder*, 2 = *much easier*; $M = 0.5$, $SD = 0.7$), and smaller versus larger (−2 = *much smaller*, 2 = *much larger*; $M = 0.3$, $SD = 0.9$).

Results

Collapsing Across Scenario Type

One reason for using multiple scenarios was to see whether the Study 4 results would replicate across a broader range of offense types. Manipulation checks confirmed that participants did distinguish between the offenses in meaningful ways.[7] We were not interested in making fine-grained comparisons between the scenarios as part of Study 4; this had already been done in the pilot study. There were no differences in the baseline forgivability ratings of the three scenarios (gossip, $M = 5.3$, $SD = 2.4$; babysitter, $M = 4.9$, $SD = 2.5$; post office, $M = 4.8$, $SD = 2.5$), omnibus $F(2, 201) = 0.79$, *ns*, $\eta^2 = .01$. Scenario type did not interact with priming condition to predict forgivability, $F(2, 198) = 0.67$, *ns*, $\eta^2 = .01$, nor was there a significant interaction between gender and scenario type, $F(2, 196) = 0.36$, *ns*, $\eta^2 = .00$. On the basis of these null findings, we collapsed across scenario type and do not discuss this variable further.

Replication of Gender Interaction

Our first aim was to determine whether the gender interaction from Study 4 would replicate in Study 5. As shown in Table 3, results revealed a main effect of priming condition as well as the predicted interaction between priming condition and gender. In the control condition, women gave marginally higher forgivability ratings than did men. As in Study 4, recalling a similar offense did not affect women's forgivability ratings. But once again, men gave gentler judgments when asked to recall a similar offense. We return to the gender differences later in the section.

Underlying Mechanisms in the Similar Offense Condition: A Path Analysis

The remaining analyses focused on the similar offense condition only—in particular, the items in which participants reflected on the process of describing their offenses. Setting aside the gender interaction for the moment, we focused on another question: Under what conditions would recalling a similar offense of one's own make a target offense seem more forgivable? We made the following predictions, which are summarized in the Figure 1 path diagram.[8]

Study 2 revealed that the link between personal capability and forgiveness was partly mediated by empathic understanding and offense severity. In Study 5, we asked participants directly about whether writing about their own offenses led to changes in understanding and offense size (a proxy for severity). If recalling one's own offense is indeed linked with increased understanding and a sense that the target offense seems smaller, we reasoned that both shifts in perception would predict reports that the target offense seemed more forgivable.

In order to set these empathic and offense-shrinking processes in motion, a person might need to recall an offense that is truly similar to the target. We predicted that two domains of similarity would be important: First, to the extent that people recall an offense that is similar in *type* (e.g., gossip; betrayal), they should report that reflecting on their offense made the target offense seem more understandable. Second, to the extent that people recall an offense that is similar in *severity*, they should report that focusing on their own offense made the target offense seem to shrink. As reported earlier (see the *Method* section), most people recalled offenses that were less severe than the target. Recalling a lesser

[7] Specifically, the scenario in which the babysitter's error allowed the child to drink cleaning fluid was seen as more harmful ($M = 7.9$, $SD = 2.4$) than the gossip scenario ($M = 6.1$, $SD = 2.4$) or the post office scenario ($M = 6.6$, $SD = 2.3$), omnibus $F(2, 300) = 10.24$, $p < .01$, $\eta^2 = .09$ (for contrasts, $p < .01$, with Bonferroni correction). The gossip offense was seen as more intentional ($M = 5.0$, $SD = 2.9$) than the post office offense ($M = 2.9$, $SD = 2.4$), which in turn was seen as more intentional than the babysitter offense ($M = 0.7$, $SD = 1.3$), omnibus $F(2, 201) = 60.09$, $p < .01$, $\eta^2 = .37$ (both comparisons significant at $p < .01$ with Bonferroni correction).

[8] In Studies 5 and 6, the chain of proposed connections was more complex than in Study 2. This is why we used path analysis rather than the multiple mediation procedures outlined in Study 2.

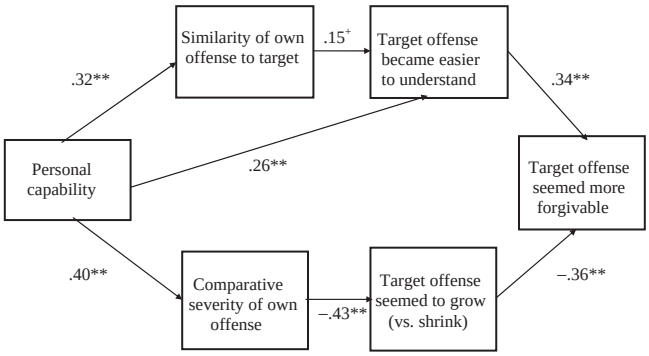

Figure 1. Study 5: Mechanisms linking personal capability and forgivability shifts in similar offense condition. $\chi^2(8, N = 160) = 7.83$, $p = .45$; $\chi^2/df = 0.98$, normed fit index = .99, comparative fit index = 1.0, root-mean-square error of approximation = .00. $^{+}p < .10$; $^{**}p < .01$.

offense of one's own could lead to contrast effects, making the target offense seem to grow rather than shrink. We expected certain people to be more likely to recall offenses that were truly similar in severity and type: people who reported high levels of personal capability for committing a similar offense.

The proposed pattern of associations met with strong support, as shown in the path diagram in Figure 1. We used AMOS (Version 4; Arbuckle, 1999). Although we tested several alternate models, we show only the best-fitting model for simplicity: $\chi^2(8, N = 160) = 7.83$, $p = .45$; $\chi^2/df = 0.98$, normed fit index (NFI) = .99, comparative fit index (CFI) = 1.0, root-mean-square error of approximation (RMSEA) = .00. As predicted, personal capability predicted greater odds of recalling offenses that were similar to the target in terms of both severity and type. Similarity in type predicted marginally ($p < .07$) greater understanding (see note below), whereas similar severity predicted a perception that the target offense had shrunk. Both increased understanding and decreased offense size predicted a sense that the target offense seemed more forgivable. These associations were generally consistent with the hypotheses.

To optimize model fit, we included one path in the model that was not originally proposed: a direct link between personal capability and increased understanding. Without this path, several indices suggested a mediocre fit: $\chi^2(9, N = 160) = 17.76$, $p = .04$; $\chi^2/df = 1.97$, NFI = .98, CFI = .99, RMSEA = .08. However, it is worth noting that when this nonhypothesized path was deleted, the link between similar type and increased understanding was highly significant ($\beta = .25$, $p < .01$) rather than marginal ($\beta = .15$, $p < .07$).

Gender and Perceived Shifts in Offense Size

Women were more likely than men to report a contrast effect in which the target offense seemed to grow in size (women, $M = 0.4$, $SD = 0.9$; men, $M = 0.1$, $SD = 0.9$), $t(154) = 2.17$, $p < .05$, $\eta^2 = .03$. There were no gender differences on any of the other variables shown in Figure 1.

The Role of Negative Emotion

As predicted, the more negative emotion that participants associated with the memory of their misdeed, the lower their forgivability ratings of the target offense, $r(158) = -.17$, $p < .05$. There was no interaction between negative emotion and gender ($\beta = -.08$, *ns*). However, women did report marginally more negative emotion about their offenses ($M = 4.8$, $SD = 2.5$) than men ($M = 4.1$, $SD = 2.4$), $t(156) = 1.74$, $p < .10$, $\eta^2 = .02$. Negative emotion was not associated with any of the other variables shown in Figure 1 (*r*s ranged from .00 to .14, *p*s > .05).

Summary

Study 5 showed that when people recalled their own offenses, it was important that they chose offenses that were similar in severity and type to the target offense. Recalling an offense that was similar in type was linked with reports of increased understanding, whereas recalling an offense that was similar in severity was linked with reports that the target offense seemed to shrink. People high in personal capability were more likely to recall offenses that were truly similar to the target in terms of severity and type. Complementing the results of Study 3, these findings suggest that there may be an upper limit on the use of the similar-offense technique for many people. If people do not recall similar offenses of their own (and many people in this study did not), the resulting contrast effects could make the target offense seem even larger.

Study 5 replicated the gender differences of Study 4. For men, drawing attention to their own offenses led to higher forgivability ratings of a target offense. Reflecting on an offense of one's own did not affect forgivability ratings for women. Women were more likely than men to report that focusing on their own offense made the target offense seem to grow in size. Also, when asked how it felt to focus on their own offenses, women reported marginally more self-focused negative emotion than men. Negative emotion, in turn, predicted harsher judgments.

Study 6: A Return to Real-Life Offenses

Study 6 was designed to see whether the main findings of Study 5 (gender interaction; path model in Figure 1) would replicate in cases involving actual offenses. In several important respects, Study 6 presented a much tougher test of our hypotheses than the scenario studies: First, use of real-life situations would provide a broad range of offense types, features, and consequences, all of which would increase extraneous variance. Second, because the offenses occurred in the past, people might have already decided whether they wanted to forgive. Third, whereas the scenario studies had focused on "cold," cognitively based judgments about forgivability, the next set of studies emphasized "hot," emotionally charged motivations related to forgiveness and vengefulness. Furthermore, the offenses examined in Studies 6 and 7 were ones in which people were personally engaged. All of these factors would make it harder for a brief manipulation to influence forgiveness ratings, thus providing a challenging testing ground for our hypotheses.

A secondary aim was to build on Study 2, in which we examined whether various dispositional factors might explain the association between forgiveness and personal capability. Although Study 2 addressed many dispositional variables, two potentially important ones were omitted: empathy and humility. Because humility focuses on acceptance of personal limitations (Exline, Campbell, et al., 2004), it could be linked with personal capability. The humble

person's ability to transcend self-interest might also predict greater forgiveness. Envisioning oneself performing wrongful actions might also involve empathic processing, and there is evidence that dispositional empathy predicts greater forgiveness (e.g., Brown, 2003; Konstam et al., 2001; Macaskill et al., 2002; Toussaint & Webb, 2005). In Study 6, then, we examined whether dispositional humility or empathy might subsume the capability–forgiveness link.

Method

Participants

Participants (63 men, 38 women) were enrolled in an introductory psychology course at a private research university in Ohio. The sample was predominantly Caucasian (70%) and Asian/Pacific Islander (25%). The mean age was 19.9 years ($SD = 3.2$).

Procedure

After being seated in the laboratory, participants gave informed consent and completed a measure of individual differences. The second questionnaire prompted them to recall a time in which they had been deeply offended, harmed, or hurt by another person and still had some anger or resentment about the experience. After describing the offense, participants were randomly assigned to either a similar offense condition or a control condition. In the similar offense condition, participants were asked to spend the next 10 min writing about a time in which they seriously hurt or offended someone else. They were asked to focus, if possible, on an offense that was similar to the one committed against them. If they could not think of anything similar, they were asked to describe another situation in which they seriously hurt or offended another person. In the control condition, participants were asked to spend the next 10 min writing about what a typical week was like for them 1 year before they participated in the study. They were asked to remember details such as their class schedule, where they lived, when they typically worked and socialized, and so on. After writing their essays, participants completed the TRIM (unforgiveness) scale along with some additional questions about the offense.

Measures

We assessed humility using a 56-item measure under development by Hill and colleagues (Hill, Welton, & Seybold, 2003). Items were rated from 1 (*I do not at all identify with this item*) to 5 (*I fully identify with this item*; $M = 3.5$, $SD = 0.3$, $\alpha = .78$). We assessed empathy using two subscales of Davis's (1983) measure, which rated items from 1 (*does not describe me well*) to 5 (*describes me very well*). The two subscales were Empathic Concern ($M = 2.8$, $SD = 0.6$, $\alpha = .78$) and Perspective Taking ($M = 2.5$, $SD = 07$, $\alpha = .80$). The measures from Study 2 were used to assess perceived similarity to the offender ($M = -2.2$, $SD = 2.9$), and personal capability ($M = 4.3$, $SD = 3.0$, $\alpha = .88$). We again used the TRIM-18-R (McCullough & Hoyt, 2002; whole TRIM, $M = 2.3$, $SD = 0.8$, $\alpha = .75$; Vengefulness, $M = 1.7$, $SD = 0.7$, $\alpha = .82$; Avoidance, $M = 2.7$, $SD = 1.2$, $\alpha = .91$; Benevolence, $M = 3.4$, $SD = 0.9$, $\alpha = .88$). As in Study 5, similar-offense participants rated the similarity of their offenses to the target in severity ($M = -0.8$, $SD = 1.1$) and type ($M = 5.4$, $SD = 2.8$). They also rated whether describing their own offenses made the other's offense seem less versus more forgivable ($-2 =$ *much less*, $2 =$ *much more*; $M = 0.3$, $SD = 0.9$), smaller versus larger ($-2 =$ *much smaller*, $2 =$ *much larger*; $M = 0.0$, $SD = 0.9$), and harder versus easier to understand ($-2 =$ *much harder*, 2 *much easier*; $M = 0.2$, $SD = 0.8$).

Results

Gender Interaction

Replicating Studies 4 and 5, results revealed a significant interaction between gender and condition, this time using unforgiveness (TRIM) as the dependent variable. (See Table 3.) In the control condition, men reported much higher TRIMs than women. But men who recalled a similar offense showed substantially lower TRIMs than men in the control condition. In fact, their TRIM scores were indistinguishable from those of the women.

We also examined the TRIM subscales to see whether similar gender–condition interactions would emerge for each one. Vengefulness was the only subscale to show a significant interaction, and we report those results in Table 3. For Avoidance, $F(1, 97) = 2.40$, *ns*, $\eta^2 = .02$, and for Benevolence, $F(1, 97) = 2.76$, $p = .10$, $\eta^2 = .03$. It seems that for men, the dramatic effects of reflecting on a similar offense were largely due to reduced vengefulness.

Mechanisms Within the Similar-Offense Condition

As in Study 5, we used a path diagram (see Figure 2) to examine links between personal capability, forgiveness, and participant reflections on the process of recalling their own offenses. To assess forgiveness, we included not only shifts in perceived forgivability (Study 5) but also TRIM scores. In addition to the other mediators from Study 5, we were also able to add the third major mediator identified in Study 2: perceived similarity to the offender. Figure 2 shows the model: $\chi^2(18, N = 71) = 22.34$, $p = .22$; $\chi^2/df = 1.24$, NFI = .97, CFI = .99, RMSEA = .05.

The top part of Figure 2 focuses on the prediction of unforgiveness (TRIM scores). Personal capability was linked with a greater sense of similarity to the offender, which in turn predicted increased understanding (marginal) and lower TRIMs. Increased understanding also directly predicted lower TRIMs. Contrary to hypotheses, however, shifts in perceived offense size were unrelated to TRIMs. (When the model did include a path from offense size to TRIM, the coefficient was $-.04$, *ns*.)

The bottom part of Figure 2 examines people's reflections about whether recalling their own offenses made the other's offense seem more forgivable. Results largely replicated those from Study 5. The higher that people scored on personal capability, the more likely they were to recall offenses seen as similar in type and severity to the other's offense. Similarity in type predicted increased understanding, whereas similar severity predicted a sense that the other person's offense had shrunk (or at least not grown). Seeing the other's offense as both smaller and more understandable, in turn, predicted a greater sense of forgivability ($p < .05$; because these analyses were designed to replicate Study 5, we used one-tailed probabilities).

Gender and Perceived Shifts in Offense Size

As in Study 5, women were more likely than men to report a contrast effect in which the target offense seemed to grow in size

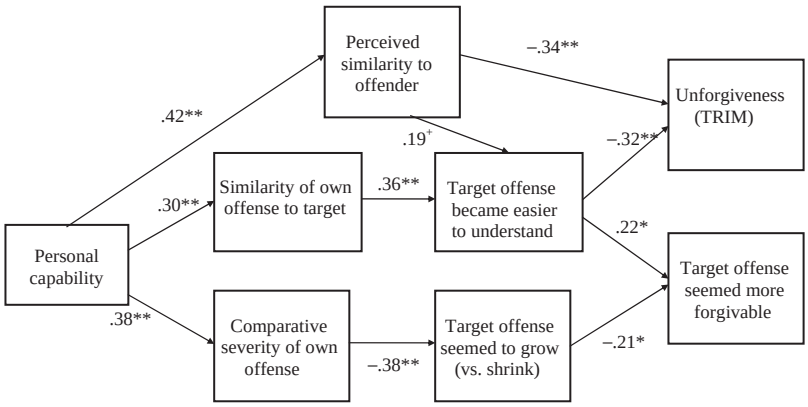

Figure 2. Study 6: Mechanisms linking personal capability, unforgiveness, and forgivability shifts in similar offense condition. $\chi^2(18, N = 71) = 22.34$, $p = .22$; $\chi^2/df = 1.24$, normed fit index = .97, comparative fit index = .99, root-mean-square error of approximation = .05. $^{+}p < .10$; $^{*}p < .05$; $^{**}p < .01$. TRIM = Transgression Related Interpersonal Motivations Inventory.

(women, $M = 0.4$, $SD = 1.0$; men, $M = -0.2$, $SD = 0.8$), $t(69) = 1.64$, $p < .05$, $\eta^2 = .09$. There were no other gender differences on any of the other mediators reported in Figure 2.

Does Dispositional Humility or Empathy Account for the Capability–Forgiveness Link?

The final aim was to examine two dispositional variables that were not addressed in Study 2: humility and empathy. As predicted, humility correlated negatively with TRIMs, $r(101) = -.27$, $p < .01$, and positively with personal capability, $r(101) = .21$, $p < .05$. In a regression with capability and humility as predictors, both variables explained unique variance in TRIMs (capability, $\beta = -.22$, $p < .05$; humility, $\beta = -.22$, $p < .05$; $R^2 = .12$, $p < .01$). Empathic perspective taking was not associated with TRIMs, $r(101) = -.11$, *ns*, or with capability, $r(101) = -.08$, *ns*. Empathic concern correlated negatively with TRIMs, $r(101) = -.27$, $p < .01$, but it was not linked with capability, $r(101) = .01$, *ns*. In a regression with capability and empathic concern as predictors, both variables explained unique variance (for capability, $\beta = -.22$, $p < .01$; for empathic concern, $\beta = -.25$, $p < .01$; $R^2 = .14$, $p < .01$).[9] In summary, although humility and empathic concern did predict forgiveness, neither subsumed the role of personal capability.

Summary

By using experimental methods with real-life offenses, Study 6 provided a rigorous test of our hypotheses. Study 6 replicated the key gender interaction from Studies 4 and 5, using both the full TRIM and its Vengefulness subscale. In the control condition, men showed much more vengeful, unforgiving attitudes than women. However, men who recalled a similar offense showed substantially less vengefulness and grudge holding, dropping to levels similar to those of women. Women's TRIM and Vengefulness scores were not affected by the manipulation.

As shown in Figure 2, all three mediators of the capability–forgiveness link that were identified in Study 2 emerged once again as important mechanisms. To the extent that people saw themselves capable of committing similar offenses, they recalled offenses that were truly similar in severity and type. Recalling truly similar offenses, in turn, was linked with the increased understanding and offense shrinking that predicted higher forgivability ratings. Personal capability was also linked with a greater sense of similarity to the offender. This sense of similarity, combined with increased understanding, predicted lower TRIM scores.

Finally, Study 6 ruled out two potential dispositional confounds that Study 2 did not address: empathy and humility. The link between personal capability and forgiveness was not subsumed by the roles of dispositional humility or empathic concern, although personal capability was positively associated with a humble disposition.

Study 7: Could a Subtle Empathy–Capability Manipulation Reduce Men's Vengefulness?

Study 7 built on the gender interaction findings from Studies 4–6. The personal capability manipulations from those studies represented overt, conscious primes. In Study 7, we examined whether a more subtle manipulation could be effective. Rather than going through the conscious step of writing about one's own offense or envisioning the other person's perspective, could it be useful to simply answer questions involving personal capability and empathic understanding? We predicted that it would.

We saw an opportunity to test this hypothesis in an existing data set. As in Study 6, this study used real-life offenses, but it also included counterbalancing of questionnaires. The study included questions about personal capability and empathic understanding. The survey was structured so that some participants answered the capability and empathy questions just before they completed the vengefulness measure, whereas others did not answer them until after the vengefulness measure. Our purpose in Study 7 was to see whether simply being asked to reflect on these questions would be enough to reduce vengefulness scores—at least for men.

[9] In both regressions, all key associations remained significant when condition, gender, and their interaction term were added to the equation.

Method

Participants

Participants (83 men, 72 women) were taking an introductory psychology course at a private research university in Ohio. They completed a survey for course credit. Ethnicities were primarily Caucasian (79%) and Asian/Pacific Islander (16%). The mean age was 18.9 ($SD = 1.3$).

Procedure

As in Studies 2 and 6, participants recalled an offense that was committed against them. On the basis of counterbalancing procedures,[10] some participants completed the capability–empathy questions before the vengefulness questions, whereas others completed them afterward.

Measures

Unforgiveness. We again used the TRIM-18-R (McCullough & Hoyt, 2002; whole TRIM, $M = 2.7$, $SD = 0.9$, $\alpha = .85$; Vengefulness, $M = 2.0$, $SD = 1.0$, $\alpha = .90$; Avoidance, $M = 3.0$, $SD = 1.1$; $\alpha = .92$; Benevolence, $M = 3.0$, $SD = 1.0$, $\alpha = .91$).

Personal capability and empathy. The page assessing personal capability and empathy (which was used as the experimental manipulation here) contained three measures, the first two of which were counterbalanced. The four items from Study 2 assessed personal capability for committing an offense similar in severity ($M = 4.7$, $SD = 3.1$, $\alpha = .95$). Another set of personal capability questions was modified to emphasize similarity in offense type rather than severity (e.g., "Given the right circumstances, could you be capable of doing something similar in *type* to what the other person did?"; $M = 4.6$, $SD = 3.1$, $\alpha = .94$). The two sets of capability questions were highly correlated, $r(155) = .66$, $p < .01$, and were thus combined into a single measure ($M = 4.7$, $SD = 2.8$). After the personal capability questions, the page included the four empathic understanding items from Study 2 ($M = 3.8$, $SD = 2.6$, $\alpha = .89$).

Results

As in the prior studies, we conducted a two-way analysis of variance with gender and experimental condition (in this case, placement of the capability–empathy items) as predictors of unforgiveness. As Table 3 shows, results revealed a marginally significant interaction predicting TRIMs. As in Study 6, however, the interaction was significant for vengefulness. The pattern was now familiar: When not primed with capability–empathy items, men reported more vengefulness than women. But when capability–empathy items preceded the TRIM, men's Vengefulness scores were significantly reduced, becoming equal to those of women. (As in Study 6, interactions predicting benevolence and avoidance were not significant, $ps > .24$, $\eta^2 = .01$.)

There were no gender differences in personal capability, $t(153) = 0.44$, *ns*, or empathic understanding, $t(153) = 0.47$, *ns* (in both cases, $\eta^2 = .00$). When the capability–empathy items preceded the TRIM, vengefulness correlated negatively with personal capability, $r(110) = -.20$, $p < .05$, and empathic understanding, $r(110) = -.41$, $p < .01$. When vengefulness came first, vengefulness also correlated negatively with personal capability, $r(45) = -.36$, $p < .01$, and empathic understanding, $r(45) = -.44$, $p < .01$.

Summary

This was the fourth study in the series to demonstrate a gender difference in how people respond to reflecting on their own potential for similar offenses. Unlike the similar offense manipulation from Studies 4–6, the one used here was much more subtle—a mere reordering of questionnaires. For men, vengefulness was reduced simply by answering questions about their capability for similar wrongdoing and their ability to see the situation from the other person's perspective.

General Discussion

Seven studies tested the hypothesis that reflecting on one's own capability for similar offenses would predict more forgiving attitudes toward others. Three correlational studies (1–3) showed consistent support for the hypothesis, ruled out several alternative explanations, and identified three mediating processes. Four experimental studies (4–7) offered additional confirmation of the proposed mediators and also identified some important boundary conditions related to offense similarity and gender.

Forgiveness and Personal Capability: Correlational Studies

Our correlational studies revealed a clear, consistent association: Forgiveness was greater to the extent that people could see themselves as capable of a similar wrongdoing. Personal capability distinguished between forgiven and unforgiven offenses (Study 1), predicted unforgiveness of actual transgressions (Study 2), and predicted greater forgivability ratings of hypothetical offenses (pilot study before Study 4). The association between personal capability and forgiveness was robust across procedures and samples. First, the association extended beyond college students (Study 1). Second, the link remained strong when we controlled for other robust predictors of forgiveness: relationship closeness and apology (Study 2). Third, the association was found not only on self-report rating scales but also on a more behavioral measure: people's written statements of what they would like to say to the other person (Study 2). Last, the association could not be reduced to individual-difference factors such as the Big Five, narcissism, entitlement, religiosity, or social desirability. Humility and empathy were also ruled out as dispositional confounds (Study 6).

At least three pathways mediate the link between personal capability and forgiveness (Studies 2, 5, and 6). First, people can more easily see themselves committing minor offenses compared with major ones, and minor offenses are easier to forgive. In fact, another's offense may seem to shrink in size when evaluators recall truly similar offenses of their own (Studies 5 and 6). The logic seems to be, "If I could do it, then it can't be that serious."

[10] Because of multiple types of counterbalancing and various hypotheses in the original study, there were unequal cell sizes in the data set. The condition with capability–empathy measures first had 110 participants, and the condition with the TRIM first had 45 participants.

The other two mediators focus on empathic connection: If people see themselves as capable of a similar wrongdoing, this belief is linked with greater empathic understanding and a sense of being similar to the offender. Both of these perceptions, in turn, predict greater forgiveness.

The association between personal capability and forgiveness also applies at an intergroup level, as shown in Study 3's assessment of responses to the September 11 attacks. When faced with a heinous offense against one's ingroup, seeing oneself as capable of a similar offense did not predict forgiveness. There may have been a floor effect here, because most people simply could not envision themselves doing something so horrible. However, seeing members of one's ingroup (in this case, the U.S. government) as capable of a similar wrongdoing predicted more forgiving attitudes. Notably, this sense of ingroup capability predicted not only forgiving attitudes but also less support for specific aggressive actions, including strikes against civilian targets, the death penalty for perpetrators, and perpetrators being shot on sight. It is important to note that these associations remained when we controlled for support for strikes against military targets, which could be seen as a proxy for general military attitudes, attitudes toward the current administration, or support of the decision to go to war.

Reflecting on One's Own Capability for Offenses: Experimental Studies

Having established a correlational link between personal capability and forgiveness, we turned to experimental designs. Most of these studies (4–6) focused on having people recall a similar offense of their own. Results suggested that having people recall a similar offense may indeed facilitate forgiveness; however, offense similarity and gender are important moderators.

Offense Similarity

In order to influence forgivability judgments, it was important that participants regarded their own offenses as similar in both severity and type to the target offense (Studies 5 and 6). In terms of making offenses easier to understand, it was especially important to recall an offense that was similar in type. But in terms of making offenses seem smaller, it was important to recall an offense of one's own that was just as severe as the target offense. It was common for people to recall offenses that were less severe than that of the target, consistent with the notion of self-enhancement (e.g., Sedikides & Strube, 1997).

These results, combined with those of the September 11 study (Study 3), suggest a practical upper limit on the use of the similar offense technique: If people cannot recall an offense that is similar in type, the comparison may fail to facilitate understanding because it will seem irrelevant. And if people cannot recall an offense that is similar in severity, the other person's offense may seem to grow in size. In cases of heinous or unusual offenses, it may be useful to focus on the personal capability of ingroup members (Study 3), perhaps extending one's ingroup to include all of humanity (Wohl & Branscombe, 2005).

Gender Effects

Across our experimental studies, one consistent finding was that men gave gentler judgments (Studies 4 and 5) and showed less vengefulness (Studies 6 and 7) after reflecting on their own actual or potential misdeeds. Study 7 revealed that even a very subtle manipulation was effective: Men reported less vengefulness if they were first asked to answer questions about personal capability and empathic understanding. The experimental manipulations used in our studies did not influence forgiveness-related responses among women, who tended to be less vengeful than men in the control conditions (Studies 6 and 7).

In terms of facilitating forgiveness, why might personal capability prompts be especially effective for men? One possibility might be a basic gender difference in motivational orientation. Baron-Cohen (2002) and others have argued that male brains are oriented toward systems—that is, they strive to analyze rules that govern behavior (or other systems, such as mechanical ones), with an ultimate goal of prediction or control. Female brains, in contrast, are proposed to assign higher priority to empathic concern for individuals. If so, then the primary male concern in response to another's offense would involve justice, whereas females would be more concerned with relationship repair.

In support of this reasoning, a recent study by Singer et al. (2006) using brain imaging techniques suggested that women and men responded differently to the punishment of a transgressor. Participants witnessed the punishment of a person who had played selfishly in a group resource game. Men showed activity in the reward centers of their brains, suggesting that they found pleasure or satisfaction in the punishment of the transgressor, whereas female brains showed activation in emotional and empathic sections, indicating concern for the individual's suffering. To the extent that a personal capability prime would shift men out of a predominant "systems mode," instead facilitating relational or empathic thinking, it could lead to sharp decreases in punitive behavior. Among women, personal capability primes might have little or no effect because they do not represent much of a shift from the predominant relational mode.

A complementary explanation centers on the distinction between agency and communion, with agency usually seen as masculine and communion as feminine (Bakan, 1966; Spence & Helmreich, 1978). The assumption of gender differences along those lines may be especially relevant when the choice is between seeking revenge and forgiving. Forgiveness would support a communal concern with maintaining social bonds, whereas agency would be linked to revenge seeking, which is a highly active form of unforgiveness. Our findings complement prior work showing that males favor revenge more strongly than females do (e.g., Stuckless & Goranson, 1992), which may reflect their concerns with justice and agency, respectively. Among males, then, reflecting on one's own offenses (or capability) might weaken vengeful motives by fostering a more reflective, communal stance. Women's low levels of vengefulness may have led to a floor effect.

Another possible explanation received indirect support in Study 5: Focusing on one's own offenses opens the door for self-focused negative thoughts and emotions, which tend to inhibit prosocial responses (Exline & Fisher, 2005). Women did report marginally more negative emotion than men regarding their offenses. Self-focused rumination has been linked with shame and personal distress (Joireman, 2004), and women tend to ruminate on negative thoughts more than men (Nolen-Hoeksema, Larson, & Grayson, 1999). Women were also more likely than men to report that focusing on their own offense made the target offense seem to grow in size (Studies 5 and

6). If the goal is to facilitate forgiving attitudes, then, it may be counterproductive to break women's predominant relational stance by encouraging them to focus on their flaws.

It is noteworthy that gender differences emerged only in the experimental studies—those in which some people were primed to focus on personal capability. The correlational link between personal capability and forgiveness was not moderated by gender (Study 2). Both men and women were more forgiving to the extent that they saw themselves as capable of similar offenses. These findings contrast with prior work on empathy, which suggested that the magnitude of empathy–forgiveness correlations might differ for men and women (Fincham et al., 2002; Toussaint & Webb, 2005). However, those studies focused on emotional empathy (Fincham et al., 2002) and dispositional empathy (Toussaint & Webb, 2005), variables with only indirect relevance to the situation-specific, cognitive factor of personal capability.

Predictors of Personal Capability

Given the role of personal capability in predicting forgiveness, it seems important to pinpoint variables that predict personal capability. As shown in Study 2, personal capability correlated positively with the extent of apologies received. In terms of dispositional predictors, personal capability was linked with introversion as well as marginally lower narcissism and social desirability. Perhaps surprisingly, personal capability did not correlate with any of the other Big Five factors, religiosity, or dispositional forgiveness. Study 6 demonstrated that humility predicted personal capability but that dispositional empathy did not.

Forgiveness Versus Minimization of Offenses: Ethical Implications

Our studies have considered personal capability and empathy as potential facilitators of forgiveness. Before we conclude, it seems important to clarify that we are not suggesting any type of value judgment about whether forgiveness is morally appropriate. To use an extreme example, one murderer might reflect on the actions of another murderer and think, "Oh, murder isn't so serious. After all, I've done it." Such minimization of the offense could indeed facilitate a forgiving attitude. But it could also serve as justification for one's own future crimes, and it could work against justice by leading people to condone serious offenses. In the case of everyday offenses, a softening of one's attitude toward an offender may bring a sense of peace and help to heal damaged relationships. But in an abusive or exploitative situation, a premature softening of attitudes might contribute to a decision to stay in a dangerous situation.

When dealing with these sorts of examples, forgiveness theorists are quick to point out that true forgiveness is not the same thing as condoning, minimizing, or excusing offenses (e.g., Enright & Fitzgibbons, 2000). We definitely agree. But, as some have pointed out (Belicki, Rourke, & McCarthy, 2007), the empathic thinking that often accompanies forgiveness can also lead people in the direction of minimizing offenses. Our own data also support the potential for minimizing: Reflecting on a similar offense of one's own often did promote softer judgments of the other party's offense. Clearly, there are situations in which demands for justice and safety might not be served if people are too quick to shrink the offenses of others. Our aim here was to consider whether reflecting on one's own dark side can facilitate more forgiving attitudes—regardless of whether such attitudes are seen as an asset or a liability.

Limitations and Future Directions

Although we have tried to be thorough, the work presented here has some clear limitations. Most of our data were based on student samples (except Study 1) and self-report instruments. Study 2 revealed that the findings did extend to a quasi-behavioral measure—a statement of what participants would like to say to the other person. Future studies will ideally include more behavioral measures.

Our research revealed some evidence that the link between capability and forgiveness may apply at an intergroup level. Clearly, however, our work has only scratched the surface in terms of intergroup processes. In future work, it will be important to consider ways of facilitating empathy in cases of severe intergroup offenses—cases in which people may find it difficult to empathize. Looking at one's own ingroup may be one useful technique, as Study 3 suggested. But there are likely to be many cases in which people cannot envision their ingroup members committing certain offenses. One good alternative may be to create a highly inclusive ingroup, such as humanity (Wohl & Branscombe, 2005). By focusing on their connections with others, people may experience not only more prosocial attitudes but also a greater sense of humility.

When we started this research, our conceptualization of humility was based on the idea that people need to come to terms with their dark sides—their personal limitations, offenses, and failings. Yet, our data suggest that asking people to focus on their transgressions may be risky if it fosters negative emotion or defensiveness. These risks may be especially salient for women, given their tendencies toward negative rumination (Nolen-Hoeksema et al., 1999). In fact, recent theorizing suggests that the open, nondefensive stance associated with humility may require a secure, stable basis of self-worth along with a positive emotional tone (Exline, Campbell, et al., 2004). If people lack these foundations, directing them to focus on their limitations might merely stimulate shame, which tends to prompt defensive reactions (e.g., Tangney & Dearing, 2002). Future forgiveness work should examine techniques to help people face their limitations in constructive ways. In addition to humility, topics such as self-affirmation (Steele, 1999) and self-compassion (Neff, 2003) seem highly relevant to this effort.

Conclusion

This research suggests that when people evaluate the offenses of others, their attitudes are more forgiving when they see themselves as capable of committing similar offenses. A sense of personal capability can make another's offense seem less severe, and it is also linked with empathic understanding and a sense of similarity to the offender. As shown in Studies 4–6, asking people to recall similar offenses of their own may facilitate forgiveness—but primarily for men. Across all four experimental studies, men became more forgiving when prompted to reflect on their personal capability for similar offenses. Women did not show this effect. In fact, there was some evidence that for women, focusing on their own offenses prompted negative emotion and actually made the other person's offense seem to grow in size. To deepen our understanding of humility and forgiveness, future studies might

incorporate positive features such as security, connectedness, and positive emotion. People may need to have these resources available before they can face their limitations and offenses in constructive ways.

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