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## Cross-Cultural Differences in Interpersonal and Intrapersonal Understandings of Forgiveness

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## **Abstract**

Most theorizing about forgiveness conceptualize forgiveness as an intrapersonal process in which negative feelings are transformed into positive ones, with the goal of inner peace for the forgiver. Forgiveness viewed as an interpersonal process, in contrast, focuses on behaviors, such as reconciliation, that lead to the restoration of social harmony. Several studies have demonstrated that the understanding and practice of forgiveness differs across cultures. We examined the hypothesis that North Americans understand forgiveness as more of an intrapersonal phenomenon and less of an interpersonal phenomenon relative to Asians. A sample of 153 participants recruited through Facebook completed an online survey. Findings generally support the hypothesis: North Americans endorsed intrapersonal over interpersonal understandings of forgiveness, Southeast Asians endorsed interpersonal over intrapersonal understandings, and South Asians were closely split between the two definitions. The current findings suggest that collectivistic forgiveness is not a unitary construct, and that the application of theory and therapy models based on Western conceptions of forgiveness to Asian populations may be inaccurate and even harmful. Future research should examine forgiveness across collectivistic cultures. Additionally, cross-cultural research on forgiveness should use specific affective, cognitive, and behavioral terms when assessing a participant's level of forgiveness; broad questions assessing a participant's general forgiveness may be difficult to interpret and compare cross-culturally.

*Keywords:* Forgiveness, Cross-Cultural Differences, South Asia, Southeast Asia, North America

## **Cross-Cultural Differences in Interpersonal and Intrapersonal Understandings of Forgiveness**

Despite significant attention from researchers on the topic of forgiveness in the past several decades (for reviews, see Fehr, Gelfand, & Nag, 2010; McCullough, Pargament, & Thoresen, 2000), little attention has been given to cultural differences in lay conceptualizations of forgiveness (Hook, Worthington, Utsey, Davis, & Burnette, 2012). The limited research on this topic was briefly summarized by Sandage, Hill, and Vang (2003), who noted “between-group differences in overall levels of forgiveness may not be as significant as ...cultural differences in meanings and motivations for forgiveness” (p. 572). Yet, forgiveness theorists rarely address the context in which forgiveness occurs (Lamb, 2002). This study seeks to address this gap by comparing interpersonal and intrapersonal understandings of forgiveness in North American, Southeast Asian, and South Asian samples.

### **Cultural Differences in the Willingness to Forgive**

As noted by Suwartono, Prawasti, and Mullet (2007), research on cultural differences in the willingness to forgive, or forgivingness as it is also called, is sparse. We discuss three studies here, for illustrative purposes: Kadiangandu, Mullet, and Vinsonneau (2001), with Congolese and French samples; Suwartono, Prawasti, and Mullet (2007), with samples of Indonesian and French; and Paz, Neto, and Mullet (2008) with Chinese and French samples. Having hypothesized across these studies that individuals from the collectivistic cultures (Congolese, Indonesian, and Chinese) would report higher rates of willingness to forgive than those from the individualistic culture (French), the results of these studies were inconsistent. In two of the studies, the samples thought to be more collectivistic (the Congolese and Indonesian samples) reported higher willingness to forgive and lower levels of lasting resentment than the French sample. Yet in the third study, unexpectedly, the overall levels of dispositional forgiveness reported by the Chinese and the French were similar, with the Chinese reporting higher levels of lasting resentment than the French. The authors of the third study (Paz et al., 2008) concluded that the individualism-collectivism dimension may not adequately explain the differences in forgiveness (or lack thereof) observed across cultures, suggesting that other factors, such as religion, may also contribute to differences. Another consideration complicating the interpretation of these findings may be underlying differences in the understanding of forgiveness across these cultures and whether the selected measures of forgiveness captured both cultures' understandings equally well.

A study of forgiveness from within a single culture (Fu, Watkins, & Hui, 2004) suggests that conceptualizations of forgiveness in China may differ from the motivations for forgiveness typically discussed in the vast body of research on forgiveness, which has been predominantly conducted in the United States by American researchers. In the Chinese sample, forgiveness was more strongly predicted by what the authors termed 'other-oriented

personality variables,' such as a desire for harmony and relationship orientation, compared to more self-oriented personality traits, such as self-esteem and anxiety. The authors therefore concluded that forgiveness is more closely related to preserving social harmony in China than to the individual variables typically studied in relation to forgiveness in the US (e.g., agreeableness and neuroticism; McCullough, Bellah, Kilpatrick, & Johnson, 2001). If motivations for forgiveness have been shown to differ between cultures, it follows that definitions of forgiveness may also differ.

### **Cultural Differences in Definitions of Forgiveness**

Much of the theory regarding cultural differences in the understanding of forgiveness focuses on the cultural value of individualism and collectivism. It has been suggested that Western models of forgiveness adhere closely to values associated with individualism: the self as independent from others and the prioritizing of personal well-being. Consistent with this, forgiveness is thought of as a more intrapersonal process, with the goal of release from negative emotions and the development of a sense of inner peace for the forgiver (Paz et al., 2008). In this context, the process of forgiveness is clearly distinguished from reconciliation with the offender (Sandage & Weins, 2001). In fact, it can even be seen as a way to more completely sever a relationship (Augsburger, 1997): once negative emotions toward the offender are lifted, the final tie to that person is broken. In contrast, collectivists are thought to view forgiveness and reconciliation as inseparable. Forgiveness is considered a social duty with the ultimate goal of preserving social harmony (e.g., Ho, 1993; Sandage & Wiens, 2001; Sandage & Williamson, 2005; Ting-Toomey, 1988). Although much theory has focused on differences between collectivist and individualistic cultures, it should be noted that other factors, such as religion, also likely have a role in explaining cultural differences in understandings of forgiveness (Lamb, 2002), and thus there may be differences *between* collectivistic (and between individualistic) cultures.

### ***Empirical Investigations***

Despite extensive theorizing, empirical investigations of cultural differences in the understanding of forgiveness are sparse. Hook et al. (2012) examined the relationship between collectivistic self-construal and interpersonal/intrapersonal understandings of forgiveness in a sample of American undergraduates. As predicted, those with more collectivistic self-construals viewed forgiveness as more of an interpersonal phenomenon, tied more closely to interpersonal harmony and reconciliation than to fostering inner emotional peace.

In the only cross-cultural comparison of understanding of forgiveness, Kadiangandu, Gauché, Vinsonneau, and Mullet (2007) found, as predicted, that their Congolese sample (thought to be collectivistic) viewed forgiveness and reconciliation as more closely related than did their French sample (thought to be individualistic), who understood it as a more intrapersonal process.

## **The Current Study**

The current study seeks to address the lack of cross-cultural comparisons of the understanding of forgiveness. We examined intrapersonal and interpersonal understandings of forgiveness in a sample of North Americans, South Asians and Southeast Asians, hypothesizing that North Americans would report a more intrapersonal and less interpersonal view than the Asian subsamples. We also conducted exploratory analyses to compare these understandings between the South Asian and Southeast Asian subsamples, but had no justification to hypothesize a particular direction of difference. It is important to note that, although the theoretical literature explains cultural differences in understandings of forgiveness as stemming from cultural differences in the value of individualism and collectivism, we were unable to directly test this hypothesis, as collectivism and individualism were not measured.

## **Methods**

### **Participants**

Participants were recruited in two ways: 1) online through postings on the Facebook accounts of the authors and of those participants who voluntarily agreed to post the link of the survey on their Facebook accounts, and 2) through a university-wide email sent out to all faculty, staff and students of an international women's university in South Asia. Of the 357 participants who began the online survey, 200 (56%) completed it. Those who completed the survey and provided demographic information included 153 women and 29 men. Because all but three of the men were from North America, potentially biasing the results, these participants were omitted from the analyses (however, we should note that the pattern of findings is identical with and without the inclusion of men in the sample). Of the remaining 153 participants, 80 were born in North America and 73 in Asia (44 from South Asia and 29 from Southeast Asia; see Table 1 for a breakdown by country). They ranged in age from 16 to 80 years ( $M = 30.4$ ,  $SD = 11.9$ ).

### **Measures**

#### ***Understanding of Forgiveness***

The Forgiveness Understanding Scale (Hook, 2007) has two six-item subscales: the tendency to understand forgiveness within an interpersonal context (e.g., "A person can completely forgive another without telling him or her."), and the tendency to understand forgiveness within an intrapersonal context (e.g., "The purpose of forgiveness is to heal the relationship between two or more people."). Using a Likert scale from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree), participants rated their agreement with each item. Internal consistency in the current sample was good with Cronbach's alphas of .83 for each of the subscales.

Table 1  
Participants' Countries of Origin

North America		South Asia		Southeast Asia	
Country	N	Country	N	Country	N
Canada	8	Bangladesh	21	Cambodia	2
USA	72	Bhutan	2	Malaysia	1
		India	10	Myanmar	2
		Nepal	7	Vietnam	24
		Pakistan	2		
		Sri Lanka	2		
Total	80		44		29

### Procedure

After reading a consent form describing the study procedures and their rights as research participants, participants indicated their consent by pressing a button to enter the survey rather than by signing their names in order to preserve anonymity. Those who did not consent were directed away from the survey. The survey took approximately 15 minutes to complete. Participants were given no remuneration for their participation in the study. We provided our contact information and encouraged participants to contact us to discuss any questions, comments or concerns regarding the survey. At the end of the survey, participants were also requested to post the survey's link in their own Facebook accounts, if they were willing, in order to facilitate snowball sampling. The online survey was active for approximately one month.

## Results

### Sample Characteristics

Table 2 displays the age and occupations of the Asian and North American subsamples. Significant differences existed between the Asian and North American subsamples in age,  $t(95.99) = 10.92, p < .001$ , and occupation,  $\chi^2(3) = 81.81, p < .001$ . Compared to the North American subsample, the Asian subsample was significantly younger and more likely to be a student. There were no significant differences in these variables between the South Asian and Southeast Asian subsamples.

Table 2  
Participant Characteristics

Demographic			North Americans <i>n</i> = 80	Asians <i>n</i> = 73	South Asians <i>n</i> = 44	Southeast Asians <i>n</i> = 29
Occupation						
Employed	<i>n</i>	(%)	64 (80%)	10 (13.7%)	6 (13.6%)	4 (13.8%)
Student	<i>n</i>	(%)	10 (12.5%)	63 (86.3%)	38 (36.4%)	25 (86.2%)
Mother	<i>n</i>	(%)	2 (2.5%)	0	0	0
Retired	<i>n</i> (%)		2 (2.5%)	0	0	0
Age in years	<i>M</i> ( <i>SD</i> )		37.75* (12.05)	22.25* (3.81)	22.41 (3.68)	22.00 (4.05)

Note. The difference between the Asian and North American subsamples in age is significant at  $p < .001$ .

### Main Results

Our hypothesis, that the North American subsample would be more likely to understand forgiveness as an intrapersonal phenomenon and less likely to understand forgiveness as an interpersonal phenomenon compared to the Asian subsample, was supported by the data. The North American subsample scored significantly higher on the Intrapersonal subscale [ $t(151) = 6.46, p < .001$ ] and significantly lower on the Interpersonal subscale of the Forgiveness Understanding Scale [ $t(151) = -8.24, p < .001$ ] than the Asian subsample. There were no differences between the South Asian and Southeast Asian subsamples on the Intrapersonal subscale [ $t(71) = .96, p = .34$ ] or the Interpersonal subscale [ $t(71) = -1.55, p = .13$ ]. Table 3 displays the means and standard deviations of these subscales by subsample.

Table 3  
Means and Standard Deviation of Intrapersonal and Interpersonal Understandings of Forgiveness by Subsample

	North American <i>n</i> = 80 <i>M</i> ( <i>SD</i> )	South Asian <i>n</i> = 44 <i>M</i> ( <i>SD</i> )	Southeast Asian <i>n</i> = 29 <i>M</i> ( <i>SD</i> )	Total Asian Sample <i>n</i> = 73 <i>M</i> ( <i>SD</i> )
Intrapersonal Understanding of Forgiveness	23.78 (4.39)	19.61 (3.88)	18.62 (4.94)	19.22 (4.32)
Interpersonal Understanding of Forgiveness	15.59 (4.22)	20.80 (4.84)	22.48 (4.10)	21.47 (4.61)

Note. Subscales range from 6-30.

Given the significant age differences between the North American and Asian subsamples, it was important to rule out age as a potential confound. We performed two ANCOVAs with interpersonal forgiveness and intrapersonal forgiveness as the dependent variables, age as the covariate and region (North America, Asia) as the between-subjects factor. In both cases, age was not a significant predictor [intrapersonal:  $F(1,150) = 0.12$ ,  $\eta_p^2 < .001$ ,  $p = 0.73$ ; interpersonal:  $F(1,150) = 2.85$ ,  $\eta_p^2 = 0.02$ ,  $p = 0.09$ ], while region remained a highly significant predictor [intrapersonal:  $F(1,150) = 21.80$ ,  $\eta_p^2 = 0.13$ ,  $p < .001$ ; interpersonal:  $F(1,150) = 54.67$ ,  $\eta_p^2 = 0.27$ ,  $p < .001$ ].

To circumvent possible reference-group effects and cultural differences in response to Likert scales that can undermine the validity of cross-cultural comparisons, we also compared endorsement of interpersonal versus intrapersonal understandings of forgiveness within each subsample. We found that North Americans endorsed an intrapersonal understanding of forgiveness significantly more strongly than an interpersonal understanding of forgiveness [ $t(79) = 9.66$ ,  $p < .001$ ]. South Asians did not more strongly endorse an interpersonal or intrapersonal understanding of forgiveness [ $t(43) = -1.20$ ,  $p < .24$ ]. Southeast Asians more strongly endorsed an interpersonal understanding of forgiveness than an intrapersonal understanding [ $t(28) = -2.56$ ,  $p = .016$ ].

## Discussion

As predicted, the North American subsample endorsed more intrapersonal understanding and less interpersonal understanding of forgiveness compared to the Asian subsample. There were no differences in understanding of forgiveness between the South and Southeast Asian subsamples. Examining differences within groups, the North Americans endorsed a more intrapersonal understanding than interpersonal understanding of forgiveness, the Southeast Asians endorsed a more interpersonal understanding than intrapersonal understanding, while the South Asians seemed to view forgiveness as an interpersonal and an intrapersonal construct about equally. We should note that all three subgroups endorsed both interpersonal and intrapersonal understandings of forgiveness. Differences were only by a matter of degree.

### Cross-Cultural Differences in Understanding of Forgiveness

Collectivism and individualism were not measured in the current study. However, given previous research that identifies the USA and Canada as individualistic and some countries in South Asia and Southeast Asia as collectivistic/less individualistic (Hofstede, Hofstede, & Minkov, 2010), the current findings are consistent with theory that suggests that individuals from collectivistic cultures may consider forgiveness as more of an interpersonal phenomenon and less of an intrapersonal phenomenon relative to those from individualistic cultures. For those in the Southeast Asian subsample, like the Congolese in the Kadiangandu et al. (2007) study, forgiveness was more closely tied to reconciliation with the goal of social harmony. For those in the North American sample, like the French in the



Kadiangandu et al. (2007) study, forgiveness was somewhat more divorced from reconciliation; forgiveness could simply be a change of internal feeling toward the offender.

However, the findings also suggest some diversity in collectivistic understandings of forgiveness. While the Southeast Asian participants more strongly viewed forgiveness in interpersonal terms, the South Asian participants seemed to view forgiveness in interpersonal and intrapersonal terms equally. This finding highlights the need to look beyond the individualism/collectivism dimension when thinking about forgiveness. As stated by Hook, Worthington, and Utsey (2009), although there had been, at the time of their writing, no studies comparing forgiveness across collectivistic cultures, there is reason to believe that collectivistic forgiveness is not a unitary construct. Again, it should be noted that, although previous research has identified most of the countries from which our Asian subsample came as primarily collectivistic, we did not measure this dimension in the current study. Therefore, it is unclear if differences in collectivism can account for the different findings between the South Asian and Southeast Asian subsamples. Alternatively, as originally suggested by Paz, Neto, and Mullet (2008), religion may also be relevant: differences in the dominant religious traditions of the South Asian (Muslim and Hindu) and Southeast Asian (Buddhism, Confucianism, and Taoism) countries represented here could underpin the Asian subgroup differences in understandings of forgiveness.

The differences between the North American and Asian subsamples must be considered only tentatively, given the significant age and occupation differences between the groups. However, previous meta-analytic findings have found negligible relations between age and forgiveness (Fehr et al., 2010), and the current findings were also maintained after controlling for age, suggesting that these comparisons deserve attention, if only to encourage future explorations.

Much of the research on forgiveness takes place in North America and uses an intrapersonal conceptualization of forgiveness. The current findings suggest that this research may not be generalizable to Asian populations. In fact, there is a potential for misunderstanding and even harm if Western conceptions of forgiveness are privileged. For instance, Enright and Fitzgibbon (2000) present a developmental model of motivation for forgiveness with the top stage of the most complex and mature understanding identified as "forgiveness as love," and the second most sophisticated stage of understanding identified as "forgiveness as social harmony." The current findings suggest that this model may not apply equally well across cultures. Consequently, cross-cultural applications of interventions based on this model (or other Western conceptualizations of forgiveness) may be ineffective or even detrimental.

### **Strengths and Limitations**

This sample is notable for its inclusion of Southeast Asian and South Asian participants, when most cross-cultural studies have focused on East Asians in comparison to Westerners. However, several limitations of our study should also be noted.

Firstly, there are limits to the generalizability of our sample. Given there was no remuneration for participation, volunteer bias is likely present. Furthermore, due to low

participation by men, the sample was restricted to women and the findings may not be generalizable to men. Secondly, all participants filled out the surveys in English, possibly resulting in comprehension difficulties in the Asian subsample (although the vast majority were studying at an English-medium university). Furthermore, prior research suggests that responding in English primes independent self-construals (e.g., Trafimow, Silverman, Fan, & Law, 1997). However, it should be noted that this bias would have worked against the research hypothesis, making support of the null hypothesis more likely. Thus, the finding of cross-cultural differences despite this limitation strengthens our confidence in the finding. Thirdly, although it would be difficult to assess participants' understanding of forgiveness without directly asking, self-report data is subject to response biases and limitations of self-knowledge. Additionally, the measure we used to assess understanding of forgiveness has not undergone full peer-review and requires further testing before we can be confident of its reliability and validity (Hook, 2007), as well as equivalence in cross-cultural comparisons. Reference group effects and response biases can also undermine the validity of cross-cultural comparisons. This concern was somewhat abated by including within group comparisons. Finally, as noted above, nationality/culture in this study is confounded with age and occupation.

### **Directions for Future Research**

In light of the noted limitations, replication of this study with a more balanced gender representation among participants would be a useful endeavor. Future research in this area would also benefit from the use of measures translated to participants' native language and validated in the cultures from which the participants are drawn. The current finding further suggests that cross-cultural research on forgiveness should use specific affective, cognitive and behavioral terms when assessing a participant's level of forgiveness; broad questions assessing a participant's general forgiveness may be difficult to interpret and compare cross-culturally. These findings also suggest the need to develop measures of forgiveness based on indigenous understandings of the concept. The use of forgiveness surveys derived in one culture and applied to another culture may not be measuring what we hope to measure.

Another potential fruitful area of research concerns the positive correlation that has been found between forgiveness and emotional and physical health in North American samples (Worthington & Scherer, 2004). It is worth exploring whether these findings, which typically examine intrapersonal forgiveness, are relevant to Asian populations, as well as how behaviors that lead to the restoration of social harmony in a group (i.e., interpersonal forgiveness) are tied to health for this group.

In summary, although replication is necessary, our findings support the supposition that forgiveness is a culture-laden construct (Sandage et al., 2003). Yet, as so eloquently stated by McCullough et al. (2000), "The field [of forgiveness research] still lacks a thorough understanding of the influences of religion, culture, and life situation on people's understandings and experiences of forgiveness. Without addressing religious, cultural, and situational variations, scientific notions of forgiveness are likely to be disconnected from lived

experience” (p. 10). We hope this study will be followed by richer, more nuanced explorations of cultural differences in understanding of forgiveness with attention to explicating the underlying mechanisms for these differences. Efforts to obtain a better understanding stand to make important contributions towards the development of programs targeting the prevention and resolution of conflict as well as the restoration of personal and social well-being following perceived transgressions.

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