

# When Work Relationships Matter: Interpersonal Forgiveness and Work Outcomes

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Although the topic of forgiveness has received abundant attention in research on close relationships, little is known about the benefits of forgiveness in work relationships. This is unfortunate because research suggests that forgiveness is associated with numerous beneficial outcomes, such as improved social relationships and psychological well-being. The present research addresses the question whether and when forgiveness is associated with enhanced work outcomes. It was expected that forgiveness is associated with better work outcomes, especially when perceived work relationship quality between victim and offender is strong rather than weak. Study 1 ( $n = 472$  MTurk participants) revealed that trait forgiveness was strongly associated with a broad range of work outcomes. Study 2 ( $n = 216$  Dutch working employees) showed that state forgiveness was negatively associated with burnout. Study 3 ( $n = 370$  Prolific participants) replicated the positive association between forgiveness (both trait and state) and work outcomes (especially well-being-related work outcomes, that is, job satisfaction, work engagement, and less burnout). Moreover, the associations between state forgiveness and work outcomes were stronger when the quality of work relationships (i.e., exchange quality) was high rather than low. Furthermore, only in cases of high exchange quality, the positive association between trait forgiveness and work outcomes could be explained by higher levels of state forgiveness. These findings suggest that levels of work relationship quality are of great importance to better understand forgiveness in the work context. Implications of these findings for the role of interpersonal forgiveness in the work context are discussed.

*Keywords:* forgiveness, work, well-being, performance, interpersonal relationships

Organizations are not only a place where employees earn money by fulfilling their job. Equally important is the fact that a place of work provides employees with opportunities to engage in social and meaningful interactions with others (Peeters et al., 2014, for an overview). Such interactions often yield desirable outcomes, such as companionship, security, and social support, and are therefore perceived as key elements for the well functioning of both employees and the organization (e.g., Carmeli et al., 2009). At the same time, it is inevitable for conflicts to arise when the personalities, interests, and/or agendas of individual workers, departments, or teams within the organization diverge (e.g., Schieman & Reid, 2008). This is in sharp contrast with the notion that social interactions are essential ingredients of a happy and healthy working life. One of the challenges in employees' lives therefore is how they continue to be happy, engaged, and satisfied with their work, in the face of such conflicts (cf. Fincham, 2000).

So far, most attention in organizational psychology has been paid to negative responses to interpersonal conflict at work (e.g., revenge, avoidance). Such studies suggest that initial impulsive responses to retaliate and take revenge likely result in negative outcomes for individuals, relationships, and even organizations (e.g., Bradfield & Aquino, 1999; Greco et al., 2019; Thau & Mitchell, 2010). Without undervaluing the importance of knowing how employees should *not* respond to interpersonal conflicts at work, it is not helpful in addressing the question how employee *should* respond. Inspired by developments in positive psychology (Sheldon & King, 2001), in the past decade researchers started to explore the topic of forgiveness as a way to constructively manage interpersonal conflict at work (see Aquino et al., 2001, 2006; Palanski, 2012). Forgiveness can be defined as a prosocial change of motivation toward an offender, despite the hurt that was done (McCullough et al., 1998). Responding in a forgiving manner is generally associated with higher relationship satisfaction and stability (e.g., Allemand et al., 2007; Palcari et al., 2005), increased psychological well-being, and even improved physical health (e.g., Green et al., 2012; Karremans et al., 2003; Thompson et al., 2005; although with some boundaries; Luchies et al., 2010; McNulty, 2011). Thus, forgiveness can be constructive and may have many beneficial outcomes.

However, most of the research on forgiveness is based on studies in close relationships (i.e., romantic relationships, and (childhood) friendships; e.g., Fincham et al., 2004; Hoyt et al., 2005). Given the many potential benefits of forgiveness for both relationships and personal well-being, it is surprising that the topic has received little attention in work relationships (for exceptions, see Cox, 2011; Radulovic et al., 2019; Stackhouse, 2019). Although close

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This article was published Online First August 12, 2021.

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The authors would like to thank Yonta Haverkamp, Benjamin MacDonald, Micky van Waesberge, and Lize Winkelaar for their efforts in collecting data. They would also like to express their gratitude to the China Scholarship Council for the support of the first author's study at Utrecht University.

There is no change of affiliation since the research was done.

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relationships may differ from work relationships in terms of their communal versus exchange orientation (Day & Leiter, 2014; Sias, 2005), the processes and outcomes of forgiveness are likely to be similar across relationships (Green et al., 2020). That is, and in line with its conceptual definition, when an employee forgives it means that the employee needs to regulate negative feelings, thoughts, and behaviors he or she may have toward an offender, and transform them into more positive feelings, thoughts, and behaviors. Through forgiveness, employees are able to get rid of negativity following from an offense, and to restore and reestablish those relationships that are so crucial for their satisfaction and engagement at work (e.g., Banks et al., 2014; Schermuly & Meyer, 2016).

The major purpose of the present research, therefore, is to examine whether and when employees' forgiveness is associated with better work outcomes. In doing so, we rely on principles of interdependence theory (Kelley & Thibaut, 1978; Rusbult & Van Lange, 1996) and predict that forgiveness is associated with better work outcomes when an employee experiences high work relationship quality with the offender, whereas this association is less pronounced or absent when an employee experiences low relationship quality with the offender.

### Forgiveness as a Transformation of Motivation

Using principles of interdependence theory (Kelley & Thibaut, 1978; for a review, see Rusbult & Van Lange, 1996) and consistent with previous research (Braithwaite et al., 2011; Karremans & Van Lange, 2004), forgiveness can be conceptualized in terms of the transformation of motivation (Karremans & Van Lange, 2004). This means that acting in a forgiving manner is a process that requires people to inhibit their initial self-directed impulses and to respond on the basis of broader considerations, such as the value of the relationship, or one's own well-being (McCullough et al., 1997). In support of this, McCullough et al. (1997) define forgiveness as "a set of motivational changes whereby one becomes decreasingly motivated to retaliate against an offending relationship partner, decreasingly motivated to maintain estrangement from the offender, and increasingly motivated by conciliation and goodwill for the offender, despite the offender's hurtful actions" (McCullough et al., 1997, p. 321–322). Importantly, it should be clear that forgiveness does not simply entail the absence of negative motivations (i.e., avoidance and revenge), but also includes the presence of benevolent motivations, after the offense occurred (Fincham & Beach, 2002; Karremans & Van Lange, 2004; McCullough & Hoyt, 2002). Thus, forgiveness is conceptualized as an intrapersonal motivational change taking place in an interpersonal context.

Furthermore, forgiveness can be seen as a trait and a state (Allemand et al., 2007; Bies et al., 2016; Fernández-capo et al., 2017). Trait forgiveness (also known as "dispositional forgiveness" and "forgivingness") is seen as a person's stable, general disposition or tendency to forgive interpersonal transgressions over time and across situations (Brown, 2003). State forgiveness (also known as "offense-specific forgiveness," "episodic forgiveness," and "situational forgiveness") is an episodic state that occurs in response to a specific offense (Eaton et al., 2006).

Notably, research on trait forgiveness versus state forgiveness has proceeded largely independently, in spite of the fact that they are conceptually related (Allemand et al., 2007). A small but growing number of studies have focused on the relationship between trait

forgiveness and state forgiveness. By synthesizing results across 30 studies, Fehr et al. (2010) revealed a positive moderate correlation between trait forgiveness and state forgiveness. Moreover, Stackhouse (2019) revealed that trait forgiveness is a strong predictor of state forgiveness, which is consistent with the argument that trait forgiveness might be a prerequisite for state forgiveness to take place (cf. Stackhouse, 2019). In the present research, we take into account both trait and state forgiveness in order to be as complete as possible in addressing the basic questions whether and when forgiveness is associated with work outcomes.

### Forgiveness and Work Outcomes

According to the above-mentioned conceptualization of forgiveness as a transformation of motivation, forgiveness reduces negative responses following a conflict, and it increases positive, pro-relationship responses (Fincham, 2000). Based on this, we reasoned that forgiveness might be associated with better work outcomes through on the one hand reducing the negativity accompanied by workplace conflicts, and on the other hand restoring crucial work relationships.

First, facing conflicts at work tends to increase job stress (Cortina, 2008), and negatively affects employees' psychological, and even physical health (e.g., Meier et al., 2013). It is well documented that forgiveness is associated with reduced stress, decreased relationship tension, better psychological well-being and even enhanced physical health (e.g., Karremans et al., 2003; Lawler et al., 2003). Conversely, being unable to forgive an offending other is associated with increased levels of negative affect, stress, and psychological tension (Cox, 2011; Karremans et al., 2003), which in turn increases the chance of developing a burnout (Maslach et al., 2001). Moreover, both trait and state forgiveness are negatively associated with employee's unproductivity, which is mediated by reducing stress related to workplace offenses (Toussaint et al., 2018). Thus, forgiveness may be associated with enhanced work outcomes because when an employee forgives, he or she is able to downregulate negative feelings, thoughts, and behaviors that follow from the offense.

Second, forgiveness as a transformation of motivation also means an increase in benevolent motivations toward an offender. There is abundant evidence showing that forgiveness is an essential aspect of well functioning and lasting social relationships (e.g., Karremans et al., 2003; McCullough et al., 1998). Relatedly, employees' willingness to forgive is associated with enhanced pro-relationship behavior, such as organizational citizenship behavior (OCB; Cox, 2011) and interpersonal citizenship behavior (Thompson & Simkins, 2017). In turn, good work relationships are vital to the lives of employees and the effectiveness of the organization (e.g., Aquino et al., 2003; Chiaburu & Harrison, 2008). For instance, when employees are more satisfied with their coworkers, this positively affects their job and even life satisfaction (Simon et al., 2010). Additionally, being socially well connected with coworkers is negatively associated with employees' intention to leave the organization (e.g., Regts & Molleman, 2013). In contrast, damaged work relationships and the resulting feelings of anger may interfere with individual and organizational performance (Dutton et al., 1997; Fitness, 2000). Thus, forgiveness may be associated with enhanced work outcomes because forgiveness rebuilds relationships that are vital to employees and organizations.

In addition, although initial evidence described above suggests that forgiveness and various work outcomes may be positively associated, this notion has as yet not been tested systematically. To obtain a broad and varied impression of the associations between forgiveness and outcomes, we included six different work outcomes in this research; three outcomes related to employee well-being (job satisfaction, work engagement, and burnout), and two outcomes related to employee performance (in-role performance and OCB). In addition, we took into account turnover intention, as one of the factors directly affecting organizations. As mentioned above, we considered both trait and state levels of forgiveness. We predicted that:

*Hypothesis 1:* Trait forgiveness is positively associated with positive work outcomes (i.e., (a) job satisfaction; (b) work engagement; (c) in-role performance; and (d) OCB; and negatively associated with negative work outcomes: that is, (e) burnout and (f) turnover intention.

*Hypothesis 2:* State forgiveness is positively associated with positive work outcomes (i.e., (a) job satisfaction; (b) work engagement; (c) in-role performance; and (d) OCB); and negatively associated with negative work outcomes: that is, (e) burnout and (f) turnover intention.

## Forgiveness and the Relationship Context

Forgiveness is not by definition associated with better work outcomes. Based on principles from interdependence theory, relationship-relevant features, such as perceived levels of closeness or commitment to the offender, are crucial in determining the degree to which a victim is inclined toward forgiveness as well as influencing the associations between state forgiveness and work outcomes. In line with this, numerous studies have demonstrated that people are more forgiving toward close others (such as friends or romantic partners), than toward distant others (e.g., Karremans & Aarts, 2007; McCullough et al., 1998). Such findings support the notion that forgiveness is an important mechanism by which people maintain good relationships with others, despite the inevitable offenses that occur among them.

How then does the relationship context affect the association between state forgiveness and work outcomes? Previous studies reveal that the benefits of forgiveness only appear in relationships one wishes to continue in the future (e.g., Van der Wal et al., 2016). Specifically, Karremans et al. (2003) demonstrated that forgiveness facilitated psychological well-being only when victims feel strongly committed to their offending others. Similarly, forgiveness in children is associated with better psychological well-being, but only when it concerned forgiveness toward a friend (Van der Wal et al., 2016). One way to explain these findings is that forgiving a close other helps to restore and maintain positive relationships; in turn, good and stable relationships are essential for individual well-being (Baumeister & Leary, 1995). Furthermore, not forgiving close others challenges the stability of the relationship and increases the uncertainty of the future of the relationship, which may cause psychological tension, thus negatively influencing a victim's well-being (e.g., Karremans et al., 2003; Van der Wal et al., 2016).

Taking these findings to the organizational context, this may imply that work relationship quality with an offending colleague

may affect the association between forgiveness and work outcomes, such that forgiving a colleague with whom one tends to have a good work relationship (as opposed to a colleague with whom one is not so much involved) should be associated with better work outcomes. Therefore, the second aim of this article is to examine whether work relationship quality affect the associations between forgiveness and work outcomes. Specifically, we predict that:

*Hypothesis 3:* The associations between state forgiveness and (a) job satisfaction; (b) work engagement; (c) in-role performance; (d) OCB; (e) burnout; and (f) turnover intention are moderated by work relationship quality: The associations are stronger when work relationship quality between victim and offender is high (vs. low).<sup>1</sup>

Finally, we take into account the link between trait and state forgiveness in our model. It is likely that trait forgiveness predicts state forgiveness, which in turn affects work outcomes (cf. Stackhouse, 2019). Thus, we propose that the trait forgiveness-work outcomes association is mediated by state forgiveness, and the state forgiveness-work outcomes association is moderated by relationship quality between victim and offender. Taken them together, we predict that:

*Hypothesis 4:* State forgiveness mediates the association between trait forgiveness and (a) job satisfaction; (b) work engagement; (c) in-role performance; (d) OCB; (e) burnout; and (f) turnover intention.

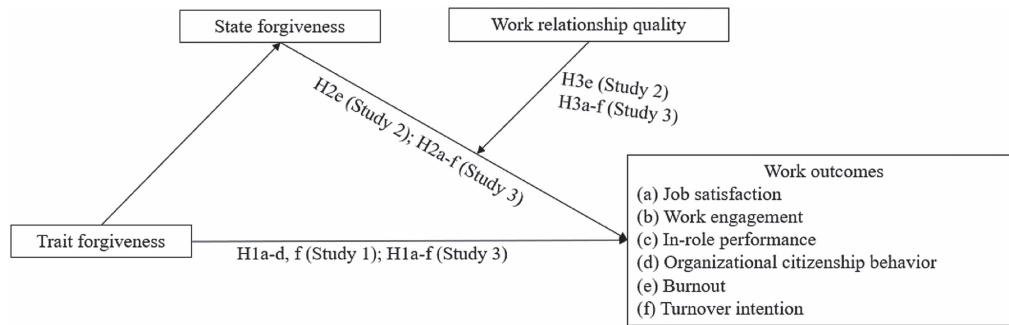
*Hypothesis 5:* The associations between trait forgiveness and (a) job satisfaction; (b) work engagement; (c) in-role performance; (d) OCB; (e) burnout; and (f) turnover intention through state forgiveness are stronger when work relationship quality between victim and offender is high (vs. low).

## Overview of the Present Research

We conducted three studies to address our research questions in various samples of working employees. The research model and hypotheses tested are presented in Figure 1. Specifically, in Study 1, we examined the association between trait forgiveness and five work outcomes (*Hypotheses 1a–f*) except for burnout (*Hypothesis 1e*). In Study 2, we examined the association between state forgiveness and burnout (*Hypothesis 2e*), as well as the moderating role of work relationship quality (indicated by relationship closeness) on the association between state forgiveness and work outcomes (*Hypothesis 3e*). In Study 3, we examined the association between trait forgiveness (*Hypothesis 1*), state forgiveness (*Hypothesis 2*), and various work outcomes (a–f). This study again examined the moderating role of work relationship quality (indicated by (i) relationship closeness and (ii) exchange quality; *Hypotheses 3a–f*). Moreover, we examined the mediating effect of state forgiveness on associations between trait forgiveness and work outcomes (*Hypotheses 4a–f*). Finally, we examined the moderated mediation hypotheses (*Hypotheses 5a–f*). All materials and data

<sup>1</sup> We did not consider the moderating role of work relationship quality on the association between trait forgiveness and work outcomes. Since trait forgiveness does not vary depending on the relationship context, the association between trait forgiveness and work outcomes is likely to remain stable.

**Figure 1**  
Research Model



can be viewed at the Open Science Framework: <https://osf.io/d9zxs>, and all studies were approved by the Ethics Committee of our institution (FETC19-004).

### Study 1

As an initial starting point for our line of research on forgiveness in the workplace, in Study 1 we examined whether trait forgiveness is associated with better work outcomes (i.e., job satisfaction, work engagement, in-role performance, OCB and turnover intention; *Hypotheses 1a–d, f*, except for burnout).

### Method

#### Participants

A convenience sample of 494 individuals participated through Amazon's Mechanical Turk (MTurk) in exchange for \$1.00. MTurk is an online survey program which enables researchers to efficiently obtain quality data from a diverse and representative sample (over 50 different countries and all 50 U.S. states; Buhrmester et al., 2011). Twenty-two participants were excluded from further analysis because they failed an instructional manipulation check (Oppenheimer et al., 2009), or indicated that they actually worked less than 20 hr per week. The final sample consisted of 472 participants (206 females, 43.6%) between the ages of 19 and 71 years old ( $M = 35$ ,  $SD = 10.50$ ), who were mostly of white ethnicity ( $n = 401$ , 85%).<sup>2</sup> One participant had not completed high school; 45 others had completed high school; the remaining participants had attended (but not completed) college ( $n = 156$ ), held a fully or partly completed bachelor's degree ( $n = 202$ ), or held a higher degree (masters or PhD;  $n = 68$ ). A third of the participants ( $n = 158$ ) held a management position. The participants worked in various occupational sectors: accountancy/finance,  $n = 48$ ; business/consulting,  $n = 22$ ; engineering,  $n = 26$ ; healthcare,  $n = 39$ ; information technology,  $n = 63$ ; retail,  $n = 29$ ; sales,  $n = 26$ ; education,  $n = 35$ ; and other (e.g., energy, agriculture),  $n = 184$ . On average, participants worked about  $M = 6.52$  years for the organization ( $SD = 5.90$ ; ranging from 3 months to 40 years).

#### Procedure

The data were collected using Qualtrics software. After giving informed consent, participants were instructed that they would receive several questionnaires tapping into trait forgiveness and

work outcomes. The study was part of a larger project in which we also collected data on bullying, conflict type, forgiveness motivation, and procedural justice. Items within scales were presented randomly. Participants were allowed to quit the survey at any point, but could not return to previous screens to change earlier responses. After completing the survey, participants were provided with opportunities to write comments and the author's contact information was provided for questions (if any). Moreover, they were thoroughly thanked and debriefed in written information at the end of the survey, by reading the rationale and purpose of this study.

### Measures

**Trait Forgiveness.** The Tendency to Forgive scale (TTF; Brown, 2003) was used to measure participants' trait forgiveness. Participants were asked to rate their agreement with four statements ranging from 1 = *strongly disagree* to 7 = *strongly agree*. An example item is "I tend to get over it quickly when someone hurts my feelings."

**Job Satisfaction.** Job satisfaction was measured using a three-item subscale of the Michigan Organizational Assessment Questionnaire (Cammann et al., 1979). An example item is "Usually, I really enjoy my work" (1 = *totally disagree*, 5 = *totally agree*).

**Work Engagement.** The short version of the Utrecht Work Engagement Scale (UWES-short; Schaufeli et al., 2006) was used to assess the two core dimensions of work engagement, namely Vigor (3 items; e.g., "When I get up in the morning, I feel like going to work") and Dedication (3 items; e.g., "I am enthusiastic about my job"). Response alternatives were given on a scale from 0 = *never* to 6 = *always/every day*.

**In-Role Performance.** To measure participants' in-role performance, participants received four statements, including "I complete my work by the time specified" (Bartram & Casimir, 2007; 0 = *strongly disagree*, 4 = *strongly agree*).

**Organizational Citizenship Behavior.** We assessed OCB with Smith et al. (1983) 16-item scale. It consists of two subscales: Altruism (7 items, e.g., "I help others who have heavy workloads") and Generalized Compliance (9 items, e.g., "I do not take extra breaks"; 1 = *not at all*, 5 = *very much*). Consistent with

<sup>2</sup> A post hoc power analysis of Study 1 was conducted to ensure that sample size was adequate. Based on a sample size of 472, an effect size of 0.26 (the absolute average value for the results in Study 1), and an  $\alpha$  level of 0.05, revealed that post hoc 99.99% power was achieved.

Organ and Konovsky (1989), three reversed-scored items were excluded from the analysis.

**Turnover Intention.** Participants' turnover intention was measured using three items (Mitchell et al., 2001). An example item is "Do you intend to leave the organization in the next 12 months?" (1 = *not at all*, 5 = *to a great extent*).

### Data Analysis Strategy

Structural equation modeling (SEM) with latent variables was used in Mplus 8.3 (Muthén and Muthén, 1998–2017). All models except for moderations (i.e., latent variable interactions) were evaluated using the chi-square test, the Tucker–Lewis Index (TLI), the Comparative Fit Index (CFI), The Root-Mean-Square Error of Approximation (RMSEA), and the Standardized Root-Mean-Square Residual (SRMR). As there is no consensus on cut-off values for adequate fit (e.g., Lance et al., 2006), conservative guidelines were followed with fit considered to be acceptable if TLI and CFI are .90 or higher, RMSEA is lower than .08, and SRMR is .08 or lower. The latent variable interactions were examined using the latent moderated structural equations (LMS) method (Klein & Moosbrugger, 2000), which uses the XWITH command in Mplus syntax, together with the numerical integration technique (Sardeshmukh & Vandenberg, 2017). As the LMS method does not report any related fit statistics mentioned above, our analyses used the log-likelihood ratio test (i.e.,  $\Delta$ -2LL) to determine the significance of the latent variable interaction (Maslowsky et al., 2015).

To evaluate the convergent and discriminant validity of our measures, a measurement model using confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) was examined. According to Fornell and Larcker (1981), convergent validity can be established when the factor loading from an item to its latent dimension average variance extracted (AVE) is greater than 0.5. Cronbach's  $\alpha$  and construct reliability (also called composite reliability, CR) were examined to evaluate internal consistency. Values for Cronbach's  $\alpha$  and CR that exceed 0.70 provide evidence of adequate reliability.

As with all self-report data, there is the potential for the occurrence of common method variance. Thus, two tests were conducted to determine the extent of method variance in the current data. First, a Harman one-factor test was conducted (Podsakoff et al., 2003), with all items from all constructs loading on a single factor to check whether one factor emerges or whether this single general factor accounts for a major part of the covariance among the measures (with a commonly accepted threshold of 50%). Second, a single-common-method-factor approach (Podsakoff et al., 2003) was conducted as an additional way to examine the presence of common method bias in this study, by adding a common method factor with all items loading on this factor in the analysis to check whether model fit improved significantly.

### Results

We first conducted CFA to test the construct validity of the studied variables. The results indicated that the six-factor model (trait forgiveness, job satisfaction, work engagement, in-role performance, and turnover intention) provided good model fit ( $\chi^2 = 1291.74$ ,  $df = 478$ ; TLI = .92; CFI = .92; RMSEA = .06; SRMR = .06). Then the CR and AVE were evaluated, focusing on the

standardized factor loadings. As Table 1 shows, all CRs were greater than 0.70 and all AVEs exceeded 0.50, except for OCB (AVE = 0.42). Fornell and Larcker (1981) state that if AVE is lower than 0.5 but the CR is higher than 0.6, the convergent validity of the construct is still adequate, thus the six-factor structure was retained. Further, Table 1 shows that higher levels of trait forgiveness were associated with more positive work outcomes, for example, higher levels of job satisfaction ( $r = .27$ ,  $p < .01$ ), work engagement ( $r = .28$ ,  $p < .01$ ), in-role performance ( $r = .23$ ,  $p < .01$ ), and OCB ( $r = .32$ ,  $p < .01$ ), and lower levels of turnover intention ( $r = -.21$ ,  $p < .01$ ).

To examine the common method variance issue, we first conducted Harman's one-factor test. The results showed that 28.45% (<50%) of the total variance was accounted for by this factor, indicating that common method bias was not a major concern in this study. To confirm these results, additional analyses were performed by adding a single-common-method factor to the six-factor model tested earlier on. This showed that model fit improved significantly,  $\Delta\chi^2$  ( $df = 1$ ) = 6.07, suggesting that common method variance could affect the results of further analyses.

SEM was used to test the study hypotheses. On the basis of the findings reported earlier on, a common method factor with all items loading on this factor was included in our analyses to reduce concerns about common method variance (Podsakoff et al., 2003). Results showed that trait forgiveness was positively related to job satisfaction ( $\beta = .27$ ,  $SE = .05$ ,  $p < .01$ ; *Hypothesis 1a*), work engagement ( $\beta = .29$ ,  $SE = .05$ ,  $p < .01$ ; *Hypothesis 1b*), in-role performance ( $\beta = .25$ ,  $SE = .06$ ,  $p < .01$ ; *Hypothesis 1c*), and OCB ( $\beta = .42$ ,  $SE = .07$ ,  $p < .01$ ; H1d); and negatively related to turnover intention ( $\beta = -.27$ ,  $SE = .05$ ,  $p < .01$ ; *Hypothesis 1f*). These results did not change substantially after excluding this common method factor. In sum, all hypotheses were supported for Study 1, and these results provide initial support for our reasoning that forgiveness is associated with better work outcomes.

**Table 1**  
*Descriptive Statistics and Correlations for Main Study Variables (Study 1)*

Variable	1	2	3	4	5	6
1. Trait forgiveness	(.84)					
2. Job satisfaction	.27**	(.94)				
3. Work engagement	.28**	.83**	(.95)			
4. In-role performance	.23**	.29**	.30**	(.81)		
5. OCB	.30**	.40**	.41**	.54**	(.83)	
6. Turnover intention	-.21**	-.65**	-.57**	-.20**	-.26**	(.96)
CR	.84	.94	.95	.82	.90	.96
AVE	.57	.85	.78	.53	.42	.90
<i>M</i>	4.40	3.67	4.99	4.48	3.79	2.28
<i>SD</i>	1.42	1.05	1.55	0.57	0.62	1.36

*Note.*  $n = 472$ ; alphas are reported on the diagonal. OCB = organizational citizenship behavior; CR = composite reliability; AVE = average variance extracted.

\*\*  $p < .01$  (two-tailed).

## Study 2

Study 2 extends the findings of Study 1 in two important aspects. That is, while in Study 1 we focused on the relationship between *trait* forgiveness and work outcomes, in Study 2 we examined the association between *state* forgiveness and work outcomes, and in particular burnout. We expected that state forgiveness is negatively associated with burnout (*Hypothesis 2e*). Moreover, we tested whether work relationship quality between victim and offender affected the negative association between state forgiveness and burnout, such that the association would be more pronounced when work relationship quality (indicated by levels of perceived relationship closeness) between victim and offender is high rather than low (*Hypothesis 3e*). We controlled for perceived severity of the incident, how long ago the incident took place, and whether the offender was the victim's supervisor, as these factors have been shown to influence state levels of forgiveness (Aquino et al., 2006; Fincham et al., 2005; Tsang et al., 2006).

## Method

### Participants

A total of 228 Dutch workers were recruited in Study 2 using a snowballing technique. Assuming an  $\alpha$  level of 0.05 and 80% power, at least 90 participants were required to detect a medium effect size of  $r = .26$  for the association between forgiveness and burnout (based on Study 1). As we also aimed to explore the interaction effect of relationship closeness and state forgiveness, we transferred  $r = .26$  into  $f = .27$  (Lenhard & Lenhard, 2016), thus to detect an effect size of  $f^2 = .07$  with an  $\alpha$  level of 0.05 and 80% power, at least 155 participants were required. We therefore decided to combine the data of two existing cohorts (Cohort 1 collected in 2017,  $n = 115$ ; and Cohort 2 collected in 2019,  $n = 113$ ). Ten participants were excluded from further analysis because they were younger than 18 years old or actually worked less than 20 hr per week, and two participants were excluded because they worked more than an obviously impossible 300 hr per week. Independent sample  $t$ -tests revealed no differences in state forgiveness and burnout between the two cohorts. In the total sample ( $n = 216$ ), 139 were female (64.4%). The age of the employees ranged from 18 to 65 years ( $M = 38$ ,  $SD = 13.05$ ). Seventeen participants (7.9%) had completed high school; the remaining participants had completed secondary vocational education ( $n = 12$ , 5.6%), higher professional education ( $n = 64$ , 29.6%), or had completed college ( $n = 122$ , 56.5%) or other ( $n = 1$ , 0.5%). More than half of the participants held a temporary contract ( $n = 130$ , 60.2%). The average number of working years in their current positions was 5.96 years ( $SD = 8.25$ ).

### Procedure

Data were collected using the Qualtrics software. After giving informed consent, participants were instructed to answer several questionnaires relating to state forgiveness and burnout, and the items within scales were presented randomly. This study was part of a larger project in which we also collected data on rumination, justice climate, and social cohesion. A recall method was used, asking participants to recall and describe an incident in which they felt hurt by a coworker or supervisor (e.g., van der Wal et al., 2014).

An example of a description provided by a participant was, "My colleagues excluded me from joint meals." Participants then received several questions about the incident. Next, state forgiveness and burnout were measured. Participants were allowed to quit the survey at any point, but could not return to previous screens to change earlier responses. After completing the survey, participants were provided with opportunities to write comments and the author's contact information was provided for questions (if any). Moreover, they were thoroughly thanked and debriefed in written information at the end of the survey, by reading the rationale and purpose of this study.

## Measures

**Incident-Related Questions.** After recalling the incident, participants were asked to indicate (a) relationship closeness; a single-item measure was selected in line with previous research (cf. Brown & Phillips, 2005; Strelan et al., 2013; van der Wal et al., 2014), specifically, "how good was the relationship with the person who hurt you at the moment of the incident," on a scale from 1 (*not good at all*) to 7 (*very good*); (b) perceived severity; how severe they thought the incident was, using three items for example, "The incident was severe," from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 7 (*strongly agree*; van der Wal et al., 2014); (c) time; "how long ago did the incident take place (in months)"; and (d) offender; whether it was their supervisor who had offended them (offended by supervisor; 44%).

**State Forgiveness.** The Dutch version of the Transgression-Related Interpersonal Motivations Inventory (TRIM; McCullough et al., 1998) was used to measure state forgiveness. This 12-item scale consists of three dimensions: benevolence toward the offender (e.g., "Despite the incident, I want to have a positive relationship"), revenge (e.g., "When I think about the incident, I wish that something bad would happen to him/her"), and avoidance (e.g., "When I think about the incident, I would rather avoid him/her"), with answering categories ranging from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 7 (*strongly agree*). After reversing the revenge and avoidance items, we used the average of all items as a measure of state forgiveness, such that a higher score indicated more state forgiveness.

**Burnout.** Burnout was assessed using the five-item emotional exhaustion subscale of the Maslach Burnout Inventory-General Survey (Maslach et al., 1986). An example is "I feel used up at the end of the work day" (0 = *never*, 6 = *always/very day*).

### Data Analysis Strategy

The data analysis strategy was consistent with Study 1.

## Results

First, CFA was conducted to test the construct validity of the studied variables. The results indicated that the expected two-factor model (state forgiveness and burnout) had the best fit to the data ( $\chi^2 = 152.32$ ,  $df = 115$ ; TLI = .98; CFI = .98; RMSEA = .04; SRMR = .04). As all study variables were self-reported by the participants, the observed relationships could be biased by common method variance effects. Similar to Study 1, we tested common method bias in two ways: (a) Harman's one-factor test showed that 34.24% (<50%) of the total variance was explained by this overall

factor; (b) we then specified a second model in which all indicators loaded on a latent method factor, yielding a small and insignificant increase of fit,  $\Delta\chi^2(df=1) = 2.15$ . This indicates that the model that included the common method factor did not significantly improve upon the model without this factor. Thus, common method variance is unlikely to be of serious concern here.

Table 2 presents descriptive information for the study variables. The convergent validity and construct reliability were confirmed in Table 2 (Fornell & Larcker, 1981). In line with previous studies (Fehr et al., 2010; McCullough et al., 1998), state forgiveness was significantly positively associated with relationship closeness ( $r = .35, p < .01$ ), and significantly negatively associated with perceived offense severity ( $r = -.41, p < .01$ ) and time since the incident took place ( $r = -.26, p < .01$ ), but not to whether the offender was one's supervisor or not. Most importantly, higher levels of state forgiveness were associated with lower levels of burnout ( $r = -.19, p < .01$ ).

**Hypotheses Testing.** A latent moderated SEM analysis was run in Mplus 8.3 (Muthén & Muthén, 1998–2017) in which burnout was regressed on the centered measure of state forgiveness, relationship closeness, and the interaction between state forgiveness and relationship closeness, while controlling for perceived severity, time and being offended by supervisor or not. The analysis revealed that none of the three control variables displayed a significant effect on burnout. The main effect of state forgiveness on burnout was significant,  $\beta = -.24, SE = .10, p < .05$ , indicating that higher levels of state forgiveness were associated with lower levels of burnout, thus *Hypothesis 3e* was supported. There was no significant effect of relationship closeness ( $p = .473$ ), nor a significant interaction effect between state forgiveness and relationship closeness ( $p = .361$ ) on burnout (*Hypothesis 5e* not supported).

In addition, Study 2 revealed that state forgiveness is negatively associated with levels of burnout. Contrary to our expectation, this association did not depend on work relationship quality (as indicated by relationship closeness) between victim and offender.

### Study 3

In Study 3, we sought to replicate and extend Studies 1 and 2 in several respects. First, we examined the relationship between

**Table 2**  
*Descriptive Statistics and Correlations for Main Study Variables (Study 2)*

Variable	1	2	3	4	5	6
1. Relationship closeness						
2. Severity	.09	(.88)				
3. Time	.02	.30**				
4. Offender	-.01	-.10	.10			
5. State forgiveness	.35**	-.41**	-.26**	-.01	(.90)	
6. Burnout	-.16*	.05	-.07	-.04	-.19**	(.91)
CR			.89		.87	.91
AVE			.73		.69	.66
<i>M</i>	4.61	4.24	5.40		4.89	3.14
<i>SD</i>	1.29	1.44	9.15		1.17	1.27

*Note.*  $n = 216$ ; alphas are reported on the diagonal. Offender = Offended by supervisor = 1, offended-by-coworker = 2; CR = composite reliability; AVE = average variance extracted.

\*  $p < .05$ . \*\*  $p < .01$  (two-tailed).

forgiveness (both trait forgiveness and state forgiveness) and six separate work outcomes (*Hypotheses 1a–f; Hypotheses 2a–f*). Second, we again examined the moderating role of work relationship quality between state forgiveness and work outcomes, as indicated by relationship closeness. Yet, this time we additionally measured work relationship quality by means of exchange quality (Graen & Uhl-bien, 1995). One reason for the nonsignificant moderation effect of work relationship quality in Study 2, might be that relationship closeness is mostly an indicator of relationship quality of communal-based relationships (Clark & Mills, 1979). Yet, work relationships are often more exchange based, and are usually defined in terms of mutual respect, trust, and obligation between a supervisor and a coworker (known as leader–member exchange, Graen & Uhl-bien, 1995), or between two coworkers (known as coworker exchange or member–member exchange, Sherony & Green, 2002). Thus, when addressing the role of work relationship quality in the association between forgiveness and work outcomes, one should perhaps better look at perceived levels of exchange quality. We thus examined both moderating roles of relationship closeness and exchange quality as indicators of work relationship quality:

*Hypothesis 3:* The associations between state forgiveness and (a) job satisfaction; (b) work engagement; (c) in-role performance; (d) OCB; (e) burnout; and (f) turnover intention are moderated by work relationship quality (indicated by (i) relationship closeness; (ii) exchange quality): The associations are stronger when work relationship quality between victim and offender is high (vs. low).

Furthermore, we examined the mediating role of state forgiveness on the association between trait forgiveness and work outcomes (*Hypothesis 4a–f*). Finally, we examined the moderated mediation hypothesis that the positive association between trait forgiveness and work outcomes via state forgiveness would be more pronounced for higher levels of work relationship quality, indicated by (i) relationship closeness; (ii) exchange quality. That is:

*Hypothesis 5:* The associations between trait forgiveness and (a) job satisfaction; (b) work engagement; (c) in-role performance; (d) OCB; (e) burnout; and (f) turnover intention through state forgiveness are stronger when work relationship quality, indicated by (i) relationship closeness; (ii) exchange quality, between victim and offender is high (vs. low).

## Method

### Participants

To detect associations between our variables at least 296 participants were required (based on an effect size of  $f^2 = .04$  (cf. Study 2, by transforming  $r = -.19$  into  $f = -.19$ ), an  $\alpha$  level of 0.05, and 80% power). For other purposes, we manipulated whether participants recalled a hurtful incident by their supervisor or coworker in this study, and controlled for this factor in our design. Finally, 389 participants who actually worked at least 20 hr per week were recruited through Prolific Academic (an online platform for subject recruitment which explicitly caters to researchers; Palan & Schitter, 2018). Nineteen participants were excluded from further analyses because they indicated that they could not recall any hurtful incident.

Analyses were conducted on the remaining 370 participants (186 females, 50.30%) working in various industries. Participants were on average 33 years old ( $SD = 9.30$ ) and working 41.86 hr per week ( $SD = 20.17$ ). Most participants held a college or higher degree ( $n = 274, 74.1\%$ ) and were of Caucasian/European descent ( $n = 301, 81.4\%$ ). When asked to indicate at which level they were working in the organization (1 = *the lowest level*, 10 = *the highest level*), 48.1% of participants indicated to be working in a higher position (higher than 5) in the current organization. Participants received £2.26 for their participation.

### Procedure

After giving informed consent, participants completed a survey consisting of several parts, which were presented to participants in random order and the items within their scales were also randomized. Part 1 consisted of incident-related questions: Participants were asked to recall and describe a hurtful incident by their supervisor (offended-by-supervisor;  $n = 185$ ) or coworker (offended-by-coworker;  $n = 185$ ). The instructions were as follows:

Imperfect interactions are part and parcel of our working life. Indeed, every now and then, it is inevitable that people feel offended or hurt in the workplace. For instance, you may have been excluded, gossiped about, or even bullied. Also other forms of undesirable social behavior, such as name-calling, false allegations, or work interferences often take place. Now, please think about the most recent incident by your supervisor (vs. coworker)—you felt, or still feel, hurt by him/her (with supervisor we mean your immediate supervisor, leader or manager who is responsible for your functioning in the workplace).

Examples of descriptions given by the participants were: “My supervisor accused me of doing something that was the duty of another employee.” (offended-by-supervisor example) and “My coworker made a joke about something that I told him that made me feel sad” (offended-by-coworker example). Then participants received questions about the incident, after which state forgiveness and corresponding exchange quality were measured. Part 2 consisted of trait forgiveness. Part 3 consisted of work outcomes (job satisfaction, work engagement, burnout, in-role performance, OCB, and turnover intention). The study was part of a larger project in which we also collected data on leadership style, forgiveness motivation, and team–member exchange. Participants were allowed to quit the survey at any point, but could not return to previous screens to change earlier responses. After completing the survey, participants were provided with opportunities to write comments and the author’s contact information was provided for questions (if any). Moreover, they were thoroughly thanked and debriefed in written information at the end of the survey, by reading the rationale and purpose of this study.

### Measures

**Trait Forgiveness.** We measured trait forgiveness using the same four-item TTF scale as in Study 1 (TTF; Brown, 2003).

**Incident-Related Questions.** After recalling and describing the incident, participants received a series of questions related to the incident as in Study 2. They were asked about (a) relationship closeness; to what extent did they like the supervisor/coworker before the incident (1 = *not at all*, 7 = *very much*); (b) perceived severity; how severe they thought the incident was (3 items, e.g., “The incident was severe”; 1 = *strongly disagree*, 7 = *strongly*

*agree*); and (c) time; how long ago did the incident take place (in months).

**State Forgiveness.** We assessed state forgiveness using the same 12-item TRIM scale as in Study 2 (TRIM; McCullough et al., 1998).

**Exchange Quality.** Exchange quality specifically targeted the relationship between victim and offender (thus supervisor–coworker exchange when participants recalled a hurtful incident by a supervisor, and coworker–coworker exchange when participants recalled a hurtful incident by a coworker). Perceived exchange quality was measured with a modified version of Graen and Uhlbien’s (1995) seven-item leader–member exchange questionnaire. A typical item is “My working relationship with my supervisor/coworker is effective” (1 = *strongly disagree*, 7 = *strongly agree*).

**Work Outcomes.** Six work outcomes, that is, (a) job satisfaction, (b) work engagement, (c) in-role performance, (d) OCB, (e) burnout, and (f) turnover intention, were assessed, using the same scales as in the first two studies.

### Data Analysis Strategy

The data analysis strategy was consistent with Study 1 and Study 2.

### Results

Before testing hypotheses, the factor structure of a theoretical nine-factor structure (trait forgiveness, state forgiveness, exchange quality, job satisfaction, work engagement, burnout, in-role performance, OCB, and turnover) was examined using CFA within Mplus 8.3. Results of the proposed model demonstrate the best fit with the data ( $\chi^2 = 2647.37$ ,  $df = 1,498$ ; TLI = .92; CFI = .91; RMSEA = .05; SRMR = .06), which was better than alternative models.

Table 3 reports descriptive statistics, correlations, Cronbach’s  $\alpha$ , AVE and CR, which confirmed the scale validity and reliability for all variables. Replicating the findings of Study 1, trait forgiveness was significantly positively correlated with job satisfaction ( $r = .29$ ,  $p < .01$ ), work engagement ( $r = .26$ ,  $p < .01$ ), and significantly negatively with burnout ( $r = -.31$ ,  $p < .01$ ). However, this time trait forgiveness was unrelated to in-role performance, OCB or turnover intention ( $ps > .05$ ). Similar to the results of Study 2, state forgiveness was significantly positively correlated with job satisfaction ( $r = .31$ ,  $p < .01$ ), work engagement ( $r = .20$ ,  $p < .01$ ), and significantly negatively with burnout ( $r = -.27$ ,  $p < .01$ ) and turnover intention ( $r = -.19$ ,  $p < .01$ ). State forgiveness was unrelated to in-role performance or OCB ( $ps > .05$ ). Again, state forgiveness was significantly associated with incident-related factors, with relationship closeness:  $r = .42$ ,  $p < .01$ , severity:  $r = -.51$ ,  $p < .01$ , and time:  $r = -.10$ ,  $p < .05$ . State forgiveness was unrelated to being offended-by-supervisor or offended-by-coworker ( $p > .05$ ). Moreover, there was a positive association between trait forgiveness and state forgiveness,  $r = .35$ ,  $p < .01$ .

Consistent with Study 1 and Study 2, we tested common method bias in two ways. First, Harman’s one-factor test showed that 32.46% (<50%) of the total variance was explained by a single common factor. Second, adding a single-common-method-factor to the model did not improve model fit significantly,  $\Delta\chi^2(df = 1) = 0.43$ ,  $p > 0.05$ . Thus, common method bias is unlikely to be a serious concern in this study.



**Table 3**  
Descriptive Statistics and Correlations for Main Study Variables (Study 3)

Variable	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	13
1. Trait forgiveness	(.77)												
2. Relationship closeness	.03	(.79)											
3. Severity	-.18**	-.09	(.79)										
4. Time	-.06	-.03	.17**	(.92)									
5. Offender	.03	-.09	-.01	-.02	(.92)								
6. Exchange quality	.22**	.49**	-.29**	-.10*	-.14*	(.92)							
7. State forgiveness	.35**	.42**	-.51**	-.10*	-.06	.65**	(.93)						
8. Job satisfaction	.29**	.26**	-.12*	-.14*	.03	.33**	.31**	(.92)					
9. Work engagement	.26**	.17**	.00	-.01	.01	.27**	.20**	.78**	(.92)				
10. Burnout	-.31**	-.15**	.14**	.07	-.13*	-.17**	-.27**	-.62**	-.60**	(.88)			
11. In-role performance	.08	.10	.14**	.07	.02	.02	-.00	.14**	.31**	-.15**	(.82)		
12. OCB	.08	.11*	.07	.08	.00	.10	.09	.26**	.41**	-.22**	.59**	(.76)	
13. Turnover intention	-.08	-.19**	.03	.05	-.03	-.22**	-.19**	-.62**	-.49**	.44**	-.10*	-.22**	(.97)
CR	.78					.92	.89	.92	.92	.89	.82	.60	.97
AVE	.47					.58	.73	.79	.67	.61	.54	.43	.91
M	3.73	4.82	4.35	7.82		4.16	4.63	4.88	3.32	2.84	5.78	5.06	3.70
SD	1.13	1.60	1.39	16.65		1.37	1.27	1.51	1.29	1.38	0.85	0.73	2.10

Note.  $n = 370$ ; alphas are reported on the diagonal. Offender: Offended by supervisor = 1, offended-by-coworker = 2; OCB = organizational citizenship behavior; CR = composite reliability; AVE = average variance extracted.  
\*  $p < .05$ . \*\*  $p < .01$  (two-tailed).

**Hypotheses Testing.** First, we examined the main effects of *trait forgiveness* on six work outcomes (*Hypotheses 1a-f*) by regressing the six separate work outcomes on trait forgiveness, using SEM in Mplus 8.3. Results revealed that trait forgiveness was significantly positively correlated with job satisfaction ( $\beta = .36, p < .01$ ; *Hypothesis 1a* supported), work engagement ( $\beta = .31, p < .01$ ; *Hypothesis 1b* supported), and significantly negatively with burnout ( $\beta = -.34, p < .01$ ; *Hypothesis 1e* supported). Interestingly, trait forgiveness was unrelated to in-role performance, OCB, and turnover intention ( $ps > .05$ , *Hypotheses 1c-d, f* not supported).

Then we tested the main effects of *state forgiveness* on six work outcomes (*Hypotheses 2a-f*). A regression analysis was run in which the six work outcomes were regressed on state forgiveness, controlling for perceived severity of the incident (severity), time since the incident took place (time), and whether the victim was offended by their supervisor or coworker (offender). The results suggested that state forgiveness was significantly positively correlated with job satisfaction ( $\beta = .43, p < .01$ ; *Hypothesis 2a* supported), work engagement ( $\beta = .36, p < .01$ ; *Hypothesis 2b* supported), and significantly negatively with burnout ( $\beta = -.34, p < .01$ ; *Hypothesis 2e* supported) and turnover intention ( $\beta = -.30, p < .01$ ; *Hypothesis 2f* supported). State forgiveness was unrelated to in-role performance and OCB ( $ps > .05$ ). Thus, hypotheses *Hypotheses 2c-d* were not supported.

**Moderation Analyses.** We then tested the moderating role of work relationship quality, measured by (i) relationship closeness and (ii) exchange quality; *Hypotheses 3a-f*. Latent moderated SEM analyses were run in which six work outcomes were regressed on the centered measures of state forgiveness, relationship closeness/exchange quality, and the interaction between state forgiveness and relationship closeness/exchange quality, controlling for perceived severity of the incident (severity), time since the incident took place (time), and whether the victim was offended by their supervisor or coworker (offender).

As in Study 2, when measured work relationship quality in term of relationship closeness, the interaction effects between work relationship quality and state forgiveness were not significant on work outcomes, that is, (a) job satisfaction, (b) work engagement; (c) in-role performance; (e) burnout; (f) turnover intention, except for OCB ( $\beta = -.20, SE = .07, p < .05$ ) after controlling for severity, time, and offender. However, when measured in term of exchange quality, the interactions of state forgiveness and work relationship quality were significant for job satisfaction ( $\beta = .12, SE = .06, p < .05$ ); OCB ( $\beta = .23, SE = .09, p < .01$ ); and turnover intention ( $\beta = -.12, SE = .05, p < .01$ ; see *Table 4*). These interactions were marginally significant for burnout ( $\beta = -.11, SE = .06, p = .06$ ) and in-role performance ( $\beta = .11, SE = .06, p = .06$ ). However, this interaction effect was not significant for work engagement ( $\beta = .08, SE = .06, p = .16$ ). Results of this proposed model provided significantly better fit to the null model, which did not contain the latent interaction effect ( $\Delta-2LL(6) = 14.05, p < .05$ ). We plotted the significant moderation effects in *Figure 2*. These plots show that when exchange quality between the victim and offender is high, the positive effects of state forgiveness on job satisfaction, in-role performance, OCB and the negative effects on burnout and turnover intention were stronger.

**Mediation Analyses.** Using an SEM analysis with a bootstrapping procedure (1,000 bootstraps), we then examined the mediating effect of state forgiveness on the association between trait forgiveness and different work outcomes while controlling for severity, time, and offender on work outcomes (*Hypotheses 4a-f*). The results (see *Table 5*) revealed significant indirect effects of trait forgiveness on job satisfaction ( $\beta = .14, SE = .04, p < .01$ ) and work engagement ( $\beta = .10, SE = .04, p < .01$ ) through state forgiveness, with the 95% CI excluding zero. Similar findings were also found for burnout ( $\beta = -.09, SE = .04, p < .05$ ) and turnover intention ( $\beta = -.12, SE = .04, p < .01$ ). These findings indicate that state forgiveness mediated the association between trait forgiveness and (a) job satisfaction; (b) work engagement; (e) burnout; and (f) turnover intention. However, the indirect effects of state forgiveness on the association between

**Table 4**  
Moderation Path Analyses (Study 3)

Predictors	(a) Job satisfaction			(b) Work engagement			(c) In-role performance		
	$\beta$	<i>SE</i>	<i>p</i>	$\beta$	<i>SE</i>	<i>p</i>	$\beta$	<i>SE</i>	<i>p</i>
Severity	.13	.07	.06	.19	.07	.01	.18	.08	.02
Time	-.11	.04	.01	-.01	.04	.81	.06	.04	.19
Offender	.08	.05	.11	.06	.05	.24	.04	.06	.49
State forgiveness	.26	.10	.01	.19	.10	.06	.03	.12	.79
Exchange quality	.27	.09	.00	.24	.08	.00	.07	.10	.43
State forgiveness $\times$ Exchange quality	.12	.06	.03	.08	.06	.16	.11	.06	.06

Predictors	(d) OCB			(e) Burnout			(f) Turnover intention		
	$\beta$	<i>SE</i>	<i>p</i>	$\beta$	<i>SE</i>	<i>p</i>	$\beta$	<i>SE</i>	<i>p</i>
Severity	.17	.11	.13	-.07	.08	.36	-.13	.07	.06
Time	.11	.05	.03	.08	.04	.04	.04	.04	.40
Offender	.04	.08	.59	-.14	.05	.01	-.08	.05	.13
State forgiveness	.15	.16	.32	-.37	.09	.00	-.16	.09	.08
Exchange quality	.12	.13	.36	.01	.09	.94	-.21	.08	.01
State forgiveness $\times$ Exchange quality	.23	.09	.01	-.11	.06	.06	-.12	.05	.01

Note. OCB = organizational citizenship behavior.

trait forgiveness and (c) in-role performance and (d) OCB were not significant ( $ps > .05$ ). Thus, *Hypotheses 4a–b, e–f* were supported, while *Hypotheses 4c–d* were not supported.

**Moderated-Mediation Analyses.** Finally, we used SEM to test whether the associations between trait forgiveness and six work outcomes through state forgiveness were moderated by work relationship quality (indicated by exchange quality<sup>3</sup>) while controlling for severity, time, and offender (*Hypotheses 5a–f*). As can be seen in Table 6, the analysis revealed a significant interaction between state forgiveness and exchange quality on OCB ( $\beta = .21, SE = .09, p < .05$ ), and turnover intention ( $\beta = -.12, SE = .05, p < .05$ ). Specifically, the conditional indirect effect of trait forgiveness on OCB via state forgiveness was only significant when exchange quality was relatively high ( $B = .07, SE = .04, p < .05$ ), but not when it was relatively low ( $B = -.02, SE = .03, p > .05$ ). The indirect effect of trait forgiveness on turnover intention via state forgiveness was only significant when exchange quality was relatively high ( $B = -.24, SE = .10, p < .05$ ), but not when it was relatively low ( $B = .01, SE = .09, p > .05$ ). Similarly, marginally significant interaction effects between state forgiveness and exchange quality were found for job satisfaction ( $\beta = .10, SE = .05, p = .06$ ) and burnout ( $\beta = -.10, SE = .06, p = .07$ ). The indirect effect of trait forgiveness on job satisfaction via state forgiveness was only significant when exchange quality was relatively high ( $B = .14, SE = .05, p < .05$ ), but not when it was relatively low ( $B = -.00, SE = .07, p > .05$ ). Further, the indirect effect between trait forgiveness and burnout through state forgiveness was only significant when exchange quality was relatively high ( $B = -.18, SE = .07, p < .05$ ), but not when it was relatively low ( $B = -.05, SE = .07, p > .05$ ). Finally, for work engagement and in-role performance, the conditional indirect effect was nonsignificant.

## General Discussion

The purpose of the present research was to address the basic but important question whether and when responding forgivingly toward interpersonal offenses is related to enhanced work outcomes. Using

principles of interdependence theory, we argued that forgiveness, which we conceptualized as a transformation of motivation, is associated with better work outcomes. Three studies revealed consistent evidence in support of the hypothesis that both trait and state levels of forgiveness are positively associated with work outcomes, and in particular better well-being-related work outcomes (i.e., job satisfaction, work engagement, and [less] burnout). Moreover, Study 3 revealed that state levels of forgiveness were mostly associated with better work outcomes when work relationship quality (in terms of exchange quality) between victim and offender was high rather than low. Finally, we found that the positive association between trait forgiveness and work outcomes could be explained by higher levels of state forgiveness, but only in cases of high exchange quality. We summarized the results in Table 7. Taken together, these findings illuminate the ways in which employees constructively manage interpersonal conflict at work, and provide initial empirical evidence in support of the idea that forgiveness in high-quality work relationships is associated with better work outcomes.

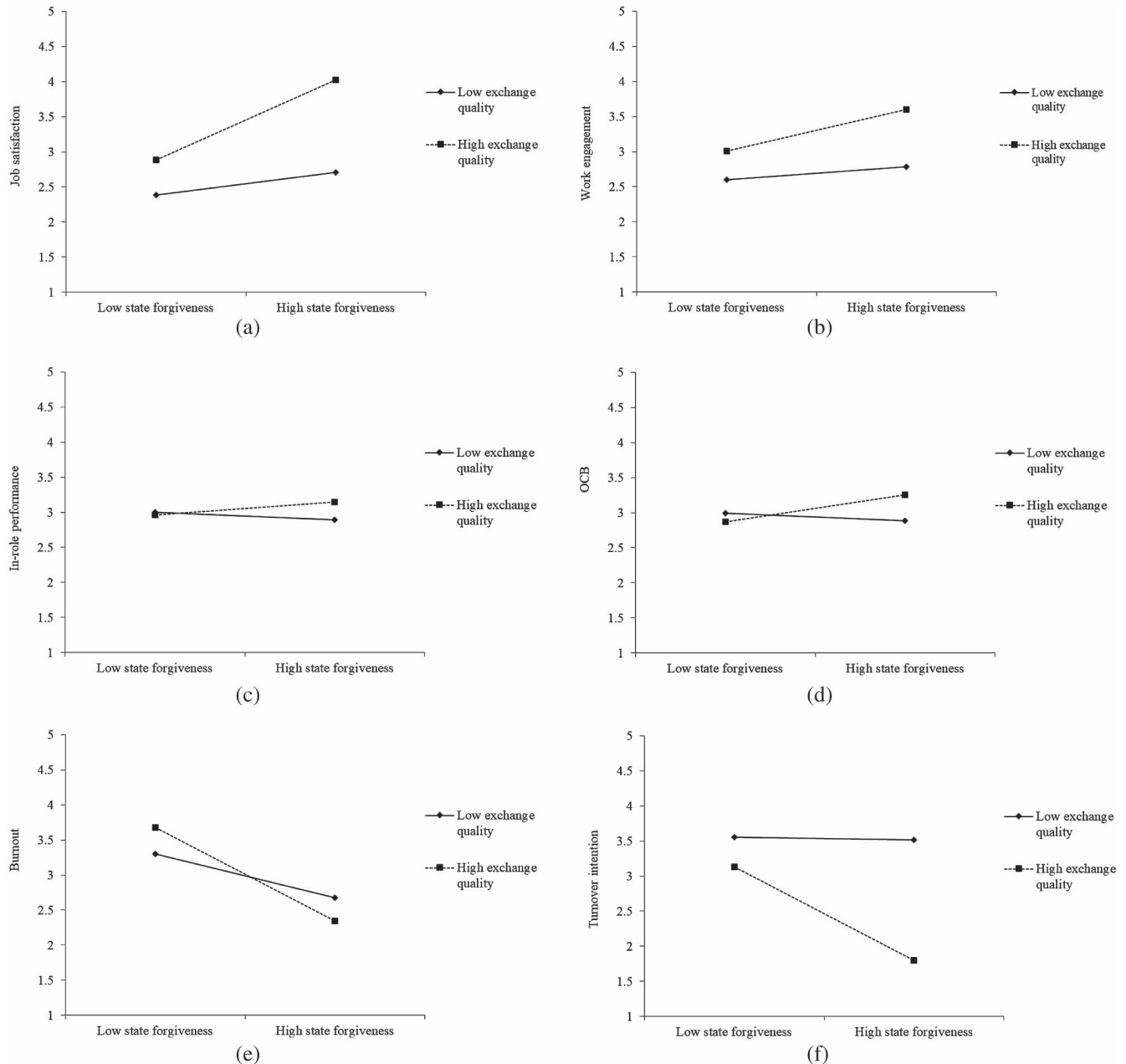
First of all, our findings revealed that forgiveness is positively associated with beneficial outcomes (e.g., job satisfaction) and negatively with adverse outcomes (e.g., burnout). This is in line with our conceptualization of forgiveness as a transformation of motivation, which means not only getting rid of negativity following from an offense, but also restoring and reestablishing good work relationships that are crucial for employees' well-being. Directly testing such underlying mechanisms in which forgiveness increases psychological well-being (or reduces psychological distress) as well as increases interpersonal well-being, which in turn promote work outcomes, would help to better understand why forgiveness is a constructive response to workplace offenses.

Importantly, the findings of Studies 2 and 3 revealed that the association between state forgiveness and work outcomes did not depend on levels of relationship closeness (as was the case in previous

<sup>3</sup> We did not examine the moderated-mediation hypotheses for work relationship quality indicated by relationship closeness (*Hypothesis 5i*) because we did not find support for the moderation hypothesis (*Hypothesis 3i*).

**Figure 2**

The Interaction Effect Between Exchange Quality and State Forgiveness on (a) Job Satisfaction; (b) Work Engagement; (c) in-Role Performance; (d) OCB; (e) Burnout and (f) Turnover Intention (Study 3)



Note. OCB = organizational citizenship behavior.

studies by Karremans et al., 2003, and Van der Wal et al., 2016), but it did depend for most associations on exchange quality. As noted before, an explanation for this might be that exchange quality better reflects the relationship context in which forgiveness is taking place at work than relationship closeness, in terms of mutual respect, trust, and obligation between a supervisor and a coworker (Graen & Uhl-bien, 1995). As such, the present research underscores the importance of not only considering relationship-related features when addressing

the outcomes of forgiveness in the workplace, but also paying attention to the appropriate indicators of these relationship-related features, in this case exchange quality.

Relatedly, the present research makes an important contribution to emerging literature on forgiveness at work. So far, research on forgiveness has focused mainly on romantic relationships (e.g., Fincham et al., 2004, 2005), family relationships (e.g., Hoyt et al., 2005; McNulty, 2008), or childhood peer relationships

**Table 5**  
*Mediation Path Analyses (Study 3)*

Predictors	State Forgiveness								
	(a) Job satisfaction			(b) Work engagement			(c) In-role performance		
	$\beta$	<i>SE</i>	<i>p</i>	$\beta$	<i>SE</i>	<i>p</i>	$\beta$	<i>SE</i>	<i>p</i>
Trait forgiveness	.48				.06				.00
	(d) OCB			(e) Burnout			(f) Turnover intention		
	$\beta$	<i>SE</i>	<i>p</i>	$\beta$	<i>SE</i>	<i>p</i>	$\beta$	<i>SE</i>	<i>p</i>
Trait Forgiveness	.24	.07	.00	.25	.07	.00	.11	.08	.16
Severity	.11	.06	.05	.18	.06	.00	.19	.07	.00
Time	-.11	.07	.12	-.01	.05	.82	.06	.04	.17
Offender	.04	.05	.38	.03	.05	.62	.03	.06	.61
State forgiveness	.29	.07	.00	.20	.07	.00	.02	.08	.83
Indirect effects	.14	.04	.00	.10	.04	.01	.01	.04	.83
	(d) OCB			(e) Burnout			(f) Turnover intention		
	$\beta$	<i>SE</i>	<i>p</i>	$\beta$	<i>SE</i>	<i>p</i>	$\beta$	<i>SE</i>	<i>p</i>
Trait forgiveness	.04	.11	.68	-.26	.08	.00	-.02	.07	.77
Severity	.15	.10	.13	-.02	.06	.74	-.11	.06	.07
Time	.12	.06	.03	.07	.04	.08	.04	.06	.51
Offender	.03	.08	.73	-.13	.05	.02	-.06	.05	.29
State forgiveness	.16	.10	.11	-.18	.08	.03	-.25	.07	.00
Indirect effects	.08	.05	.13	-.09	.04	.04	-.12	.04	.00

*Note.* OCB = organizational citizenship behavior.

(e.g., Denham et al., 2005; van der Wal et al., 2016), whereas forgiveness in work relationships has received little empirical attention in the scientific literature (but see Cox, 2011; Stackhouse, 2019). Although the nature of transgressions differs across contexts, the current research reveals that similar underlying processes may influence employees' forgiveness toward the offender. Specifically, previous studies among graduate students, heterosexual couples, and childhood peer relations found comparable patterns of results for the moderating role of relationship context on the association between forgiveness and several aspects of general well-being (e.g., Karremans et al., 2003; van der Wal et al., 2016). Nevertheless, what is general or unique regarding forgiveness in work relationships is an important direction for future research.

Finally, we found consistent and positive associations between forgiveness and well-being-related work outcomes (i.e., job satisfaction and burnout), and less consistent associations between forgiveness and performance-related work outcomes (i.e., in-role performance and OCB) and turnover intention (which were significantly associated with trait forgiveness in Study 1, but not with state forgiveness in Study 3). In other words, forgiveness seems to be more strongly associated with how employees feel about their work than the actual work they are doing. A likely explanation for this is that forgiveness might be more indirectly associated with performance-related work outcomes through enhanced well-being (e.g., Taris & Schaufeli, 2015). Another explanation is that the association between forgiveness and outcomes depends on one's occupation and level of job complexity. Indeed, job satisfaction and performance are found to be moderately related in sectors like salespersons, managers, and clerical workers–secretaries, but are relatively weakly correlated among nurse practitioners and sometimes even uncorrelated in sectors like accountancy (Judge et al., 2001). More research is needed to further clarify the associations between forgiveness and various work outcomes.

### Strengths, Limitations, and Future Research Directions

To our knowledge, the present research is among the first that examined associations between forgiveness and various work outcomes, both well-being related and performance related, while taking into account the relationship context. Another strength of this research is the use of multiple samples from various sampling strategies (the international participants from MTurk (Study 1) and Prolific (Study 3), and Dutch participants (Study 2), making our findings more representative. Moreover, we included gender-balanced samples with a large age range, working at least 20 hr per week. Last, we asked participants to recall a hurtful incident that actually occurred in the workplace, thereby increasing the ecological validity of the studies.

At the same time, we must acknowledge several limitations of the present research. First, all three studies employed a cross-sectional design and do not allow for causal inferences. For instance, forgiveness toward an offending colleague may maintain and restore good work relationships, but in turn, good work relationships characterized by high exchange quality (e.g., with high levels of mutual respect, trust, and obligation) may also make it easier to forgive (e.g., Bono et al., 2008; Radulovic et al., 2019). In addition, not only may a stronger forgiving response be related to better work outcomes, but it may very well be that, with better work outcomes, employees may be more capable of forgiving offending others. Indeed, Bono et al. (2008) found that earlier well-being was associated with later increases in forgiveness. Clearly, future longitudinal studies are needed to investigate these bidirectional associations.

Moreover, in spite of its strengths, a recall method has also several disadvantages. First, recall methodologies may lead to enhanced effects for affect (Fehr et al., 2010), such that when participants recalled a hurtful incident from the past, they may have recalled particularly severe events (although we obtained similar findings when we controlled for perceived severity of the incident, or when

**Table 6**  
Moderated-Mediation Path Analyses (Study 3)

Predictors	State forgiveness								
	β			SE			p		
Trait forgiveness	.48			.06			.00		
	(a) Job satisfaction			(b) Work engagement			(c) In-role performance		
	β	SE	p	β	SE	p	β	SE	p
Trait forgiveness	.26	.07	.00	.26	.07	.00	.11	.08	.17
Severity	.11	.06	.06	.17	.06	.00	.19	.07	.00
Time	-.11	.04	.01	-.01	.04	.89	.06	.05	.20
Offender	.07	.05	.15	.05	.05	.31	.04	.06	.53
State forgiveness	.12	.10	.22	.04	.10	.67	.00	.12	1.00
Exchange quality	.26	.09	.00	.24	.09	.01	.06	.09	.55
State forgiveness × Exchange quality	.10	.05	.06	.07	.05	.18	.10	.05	.07
Conditional indirect effect at Exchange quality = M ± 1 SD									
	B	SE	p	B	SE	p	B	SE	p
-1 SD (-1.37)	-.00	.07	.99	-.02	.05	.71	-.03	.03	.38
M (0)	.07	.06	.22	.02	.04	.66	.00	.03	1.00
+1 SD (1.37)	.14	.07	.03	.06	.05	.24	.03	.03	.38
	(d) OCB			(e) Burnout			(f) Turnover intention		
	β	SE	p	β	SE	p	β	SE	p
Trait forgiveness	.03	.10	.76	-.24	.08	.00	-.03	.07	.72
Severity	.16	.10	.10	-.03	.06	.67	-.11	.06	.08
Time	.11	.05	.03	.07	.04	.04	.04	.04	.40
Offender	.04	.08	.60	-.13	.05	.02	-.08	.05	.13
State forgiveness	.16	.14	.27	-.21	.10	.04	-.13	.09	.17
Exchange quality	.09	.13	.46	-.02	.09	.93	-.21	.08	.01
State forgiveness × Exchange quality	.21	.09	.01	-.10	.06	.07	-.12	.05	.02
Conditional indirect effect at Exchange quality = M ± 1 SD									
	B	SE	p	B	SE	p	B	SE	p
-1 SD (-1.37)	-.02	.03	.54	-.05	.07	.53	.01	.09	.90
M (0)	.03	.03	.31	-.12	.06	.06	-.11	.08	.17
+1 SD (1.37)	.07	.04	.04	-.18	.07	.01	-.24	.10	.02

Note. OCB = organizational citizenship behavior.

we did not control for perceived severity of the incident in our analyses). Second, employees' responses to conflicts may be influenced by earlier interactions and experiences. Specifically, employees were asked to recall an hurtful incident by their supervisor or

coworker, and had to indicate levels of general relationship closeness and exchange quality *after* they described the incident. Obviously, the incident itself may have (negatively) affected feelings of perceived relationship closeness or exchange quality. Hence, in

**Table 7**  
Summary of Hypothesis Testing Results

Hypothesis	Study 1			Study 2		Study 3				
	H1	H2	H3(i)	H1	H2	H3(i)	H3(ii)	H4	H5(ii)	
(i) Job satisfaction	✓	—	—	✓	✓	ns	✓	✓	✓	
(ii) Work engagement	✓	—	—	✓	✓	ns	ns	✓	ns	
(iii) In-role performance	✓	—	—	ns	ns	ns	✓	ns	ns	
(iv) OCB	✓	—	—	ns	ns	✓	✓	ns	✓	
(v) Burnout	—	✓	ns	✓	✓	ns	✓	✓	✓	
(vi) Turnover intention	✓	—	—	ns	✓	ns	✓	✓	✓	

Note. ✓ means Supported; ns means Not supported;—means Not applicable; (i) Relationship closeness; (ii) Exchange quality. OCB = organizational citizenship behavior.

future work, such possible feedback loops between relationship closeness, exchange quality, forgiveness, and work outcomes should be addressed in prospective studies.

An additional limitation is that, as mentioned earlier, we exclusively relied on self-reports, which may raise concerns for common method variance. We attempted to reduce the potential effect of method bias through several means (cf. Podsakoff et al., 2003). Despite the intrapersonal attribution of forgiveness, self-reported responses might also introduce informant bias, particularly social desirability bias. Future research should collect data from other sources, for example, perpetrator report and observer report to replicate the findings. Objective measures (e.g., behavioral or implicit measures of forgiveness) might also be helpful for future research to better understand individuals' responses to transgressions (e.g., forgiveness IAT, Goldring & Strelan, 2017). Thus, to gain a more complete and objective understanding of forgiveness in the workplace, it is important for future work to employ an alternative to self-report questionnaires, or combine it with other objective measures.

Finally, given that the work context is a complex environment, an employee's forgiveness level is likely to be related to personal, interpersonal, intergroup, and even organizational factors (Cox, 2011). This raises several interesting future research directions. For example, is there any other work relationship-related feature (e.g., power and status) that influences forgiveness as well as its association with work outcomes? Whether and how does the positive association between forgiveness and work outcomes vary across different occupational sectors? Can a supervisor's behavior affect employees' level of forgiveness as well as influence the associations between forgiveness and work outcomes? Hence, to better understand forgiveness in the workplace, future research should take into account factors from all these levels.

### Practical Implications

The present findings illustrate the power of both trait and state forgiveness to potentially improve work outcomes, providing a way to manage workplace conflicts. From a practical standpoint, our findings offer advice for individuals on how to constructively manage experienced work conflicts as well as for organizations and managers on how to improve forgiveness and achieve the beneficial effects of forgiveness.

First, at the individual level, our findings imply that it is often in the employee's best interests to act forgivingly, at least toward others with whom they experience high exchange quality. Yet, conflicts and disagreement may also arise in work relationships of lower exchange quality, illustrated by less respect or trust. Although speculative at this point, acting forgivingly to such a low exchange quality offender might indirectly also be beneficial. In these cases, forgiveness is not necessary to improve the relationship, but it may at least reduce stress and stop the relationship from getting worse by avoiding escalation of conflict. Indeed, in some experimental contexts, expressing forgiveness protect victims from future offenses (Wallace et al., 2008). Hence, although this remains speculation, forgiving a colleague with low exchange quality may in the end also be beneficial.

Second, given the benefits of forgiveness for work outcomes, it is probably worthwhile to improve an individual's level of forgiveness. One way to do this is by fostering empathy (particularly

perspective taking; McCullough et al., 1997). Forgiveness might also be increased by writing about the benefits of forgiveness (McCullough et al., 2006), and this might also be effective in the organizational context. More recently, there is some research showing that practicing mindfulness benefits forgiveness (e.g., Karremans et al., 2020). Future research can test such interventions in the work context, and see whether it promotes forgiveness in work relationships.

Finally, our findings underscore the importance of having good and stable work relationships in achieving the benefits of forgiveness at work. Organizations and managers should therefore focus on training and interventions that improve employees' capacity to build and maintain good work relationships. For example, by using relational meeting practices to cultivate high-quality relationships (Baker & Dutton, 2006). Moreover, transformational leadership might also be effective in building and sustaining high-quality relationships (Carter et al., 2013). Taken together, there are several important practical paths to be taken based on our findings.

### Conclusion

Research on forgiveness has increased enormously in the past decades, revealing that the ability to forgive is an essential aspect of well functioning and the maintenance of social relationships (e.g., Karremans & Van Lange, 2004). Although it has often been suggested that the ability to forgive may also be crucial in the workplace, the associations between forgiveness and work outcomes have received little empirical attention. Our findings highlight that a forgiving response toward interpersonal offenses by colleagues one has a good work relationship with is associated with better work outcomes and, as such, may be fruitful in cultivating essential work relationships.

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Received May 8, 2020

Revision received June 29, 2021

Accepted July 4, 2021 ■