



# Strong evidence that empathy is important for forgiveness

A recommendation by [Chris Chambers](#) <sup>ORCID</sup> based on peer reviews by [James Bartlett](#) and [Saleh Shuqair](#) <sup>ORCID</sup> of the STAGE 2 REPORT:

Chan Chi Fung, Gilad Feldman (2023) The link between Empathy and Forgiveness: Replication and extensions Registered Report of McCullough et al. (1997)'s Study 1. OSF, ver. 4, peer-reviewed and recommended by Peer Community in Registered Reports.

<https://doi.org/10.17605/OSF.IO/FMUV2>

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Forgiveness is a core feature of human psychology in which a person makes a deliberate decision to cease negative emotions or attitudes toward an offender who has done them harm. The concept of interpersonal forgiveness is deeply embedded across societies, but much remains to be understood about how it actually works. What are its key ingredients and why does it occur in the first place? Research in social psychology has demonstrated a range of personal and social benefits of forgiveness, giving rise to two dominant mechanistic accounts – one that positions empathy as the driving factor and another that centres motivated reasoning (Donovan & Priester, 2017). In the current study, Chan and Feldman (2023) sought to replicate a formative study by McCullough et al (1997) that led to the so-called Empathy Model of forgiveness. According to this theory, forgiving is a motivational change facilitated (crucially) by empathy, promoting constructive over destructive behaviour toward the offender. Chan and Feldman replicated Study 1 from McCullough et al., measuring the correlational relationship between apology, forgiving, and empathy for offenders, and exploring whether forgiving is associated with increased conciliation and decreased avoidance motivation. As well as closely replicating the original study, the authors extended it to test the more severe hypothesis that empathy causally influences forgiveness. To achieve this, they experimentally manipulated empathy by adding two groups to the design: one in which participants were asked to recall hurtful past experiences in which they were not empathetic to the offender, and another in which they were highly empathetic. The outcomes constitute a successful replication. Affective empathy was positively associated with perceived apology and forgiveness, and forgiveness was positively associated with conciliation motivation and negatively associated with both avoidance motivation and revenge motivation. In addition, the results of the experimental extension revealed a reliable causal effect of empathy on forgiveness and perceived apology. Overall, the findings

provide robust support for the Empathy Model of forgiveness. The Stage 2 manuscript was evaluated over one round of in-depth review. Based on responses to the comments, the recommender judged that the manuscript met the Stage 2 criteria and therefore awarded a positive recommendation. **URL to the preregistered Stage 1 protocol:** <https://osf.io/q78fs>

**Level of bias control achieved:** Level 6. *No part of the data or evidence that was used to answer the research question was generated until after IPA.* **List of eligible PCI RR-friendly journals:**

- [Collabra: Psychology](#)
- [F1000Research](#)
- [Meta-Psychology](#)
- [Peer Community Journal](#)
- [PeerJ](#)
- [Royal Society Open Science](#)
- [Swiss Psychology Open](#)

#### **References:**

1. Donovan, L. A. N., & Priester, J. R. (2017). Exploring the psychological processes underlying interpersonal forgiveness: The superiority of motivated reasoning over empathy. *Journal of Experimental Social Psychology*, 71, 16-30. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jesp.2017.02.005>
2. McCullough, M. E., Worthington, E. L., & Rachal, K. C. (1997). Interpersonal Forgiving in Close Relationships. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 73, 321-336. <https://doi.org/10.1037/0022-3514.73.2.321>
3. Chan, C. F. & Feldman, G. (2023). The link between Empathy and Forgiveness: Replication and extensions of McCullough et al. (1997)'s Study 1, acceptance of Version 4 by Peer Community in Registered Reports. <https://osf.io/956fa>

## **Reviews**

### **Evaluation round #1**

DOI or URL of the preprint: <https://osf.io/rnx8d>

Version of the preprint: 3

### **Authors' reply, 27 July 2023**

Revised manuscript: <https://osf.io/956fa>

All revised materials uploaded to: <https://osf.io/fmuv2/> , updated manuscript under sub-directory "PCIRR Stage 2\PCI-RR submission following R&R"

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**Decision by [Chris Chambers](#) , posted 19 May 2023, validated 20 May 2023**

**Minor Revision**

Thank you for your Stage 2 submission, which was evaluated by two of the reviewers from Stage 1. Both are positive about the completed study. In James Bartlett's review you will find a range of constructive comments and suggestions for clarifying specific points, ensuring consistent reporting style, and reporting additional robustness checks (which he has already taken a look at, thanks to your open data). I hope you will find these comments helpful and look forward to receiving a final revision and response in due course.

[Download the review](#)

**Reviewed by [Saleh Shuqair](#) , 01 May 2023**

Thanks for inviting me to review a replication of McCullough et al 1997 original study. This article provides a replication of the original study, with similar effect sizes. By doing so, this article not increases the reliability of prior research but goes beyond prior research by manipulating empathy attribution to examine the causality. Overall, I would like to thank the authors for their efforts  
Best of luck in your research