Promoting Forgiveness Among Co-Workers Following a Workplace Transgression: The Effects of Social Motivation Training

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Abstract
Forgiveness is one construct that is beginning to demonstrate promise as a health and relationship promoter within the workplace. The primary aim of this research was to examine the effects of one psychological intervention (social motivational training) that was developed to promote forgiveness among co-workers. In the first of two studies, workers were randomly assigned to one of two intervention conditions (i.e., job satisfaction training, social motivational training). Participants read a vignette in which they were to imagine themselves as victims of a co-worker transgression. Judgments of responsibility and co-worker forgiveness were then measured at two intervals: before and after training. In Study 2, workers recounted an actual critical incident involving a co-worker transgression, completed a pretraining questionnaire measuring judgments of responsibility, self-image, and forgiveness, received either a one-on-one job satisfaction training or social motivational training session, and completed a post-training questionnaire. Results from both studies indicated that social motivational training enhanced participants' forgiveness of a hypothetical and actual co-worker. In addition, Study 2 showed an increase in workers' self-image following social motivational training, suggesting affirmation of the self as a possible mechanism for the effects of social motivational training on forgiveness.

Co-worker relationships are increasingly recognized as one of the most ubiquitous and important interpersonal relationships; however, they are also one of the most neglected by scholars of organizational psychology. Although largely harmonious in nature, relationships among co-workers are sometimes interrupted by interpersonal offenses that can easily escalate into more serious conflicts and violence among workers (Aquino, Gover, Goldman, & Folger, 2003; Bies & Tripp, 1996; Butler & Mullis, 2001; Kim & Smith, 1993). Moreover, a growing body of health researchers has argued that individuals' responses to interpersonal offenses have significant implications for their well-being (Witvliet, Lugwig, & Vander Laan, 2001). One response that is proposed to improve well-being and restore harmony to relation-
ships following an interpersonal offense is the process of forgiveness (Berry & Worthington, 2001; Exline, Yali, & Lobel, 1999; Karremans, Van Lange, Ouwerkerk, & Kluwer, 2003; McCullough, Sandage, & Worthington, 1997; McCullough & Worthington, 1994; Rye & Pargament, 2001; Witvliet et al., 2001); however, little is known about this powerful health promoter and the factors that might influence it (Baumeister, Exline, & Sommer, 1998; Exline, Worthington, Hill, & McCullough, 2003; Fincham, 2000; McCullough, Pargament, & Thoresen, 2000). The purpose of this research was to test the effects of one psychological intervention that we label social motivation training on co-workers' forgiveness following a workplace transgression.

As a motivated decision by victims of an offense to let go of their legitimate anger and resentment toward the offender and to evaluate him or her favourably, forgiveness is believed to be an interpersonal process that is influenced by certain social cognitive factors located within victims, namely, their causal attributions and their inferences of the transgressor's responsibility for the offense (Aquino, Tripp, & Bies, 2001; Baumeister et al., 1998; Bradfield & Aquino, 1999; Fincham, 2000; Heider, 1958; McCullough, Fincham, & Tsang, 2003; McCullough & Hoyt, 2002; Struthers, Miller, Boudens, & Briggs, 2001). However, forgiveness is also distinguished as an interpersonal process that is affected by factors located outside of the victim such as an apology from the transgressor (Boon & Suls, 1997; Darby & Schlenker, 1982; Exline, Yali, & Lobel, 1998; Fitness, 2000; Ohbuchi, Kameda, & Agarie, 1989; Ohbuchi & Sato, 1994; Weiner, Graham, Peter, & Zmuidinas, 1991). Results from both lines of research suggest that individuals are more likely to forgive a transgressor if they avoid holding the transgressor accountable for the offense and if the transgressor is apologetic.

One explanation for these findings is that apologies, which involve personal admissions of responsibility, benevolently transform victims' malignant perceptions of an offender's responsibility. In turn, this transformation influences a victim's impressions of, and willingness to forgive, the transgressor. However, given that forgiveness scholars seem to agree that the decision to forgive must be made without distorting, excusing, or mitigating the perceived effects of the offense (Enright & Coyle, 1998; McCullough et al., 2000; Scobie & Scobie, 1998), because doing so would imply that forgiveness was never needed, this explanation is dubious. In other words, if forgiveness has seemingly been achieved by altering the perceived inference of responsibility, then a change in the need for forgiveness rather than genuine forgiveness (i.e., forgiveness that is needed and has been embraced by the victim) has likely taken place (Baumeister et al., 1998).

Our argument is rooted in the following logic. If perceived transgressors are not involved in an offense, did not have control over the cause of an offense, or were not responsible for an offense, there is no need to forgive them. In fact, we further argue that it is specifically following offenses in which the transgressor is perceived to have had control over the cause of the offense and is deemed responsible that forgiveness is needed to interrupt a victim's tendency to think, feel, and behave in a consistent antisocial fashion. Indeed, it is this capacity of forgiveness to shift individuals' emotional and behavioral tendencies from antisocial to prosocial following judgments of responsibility for an offense that makes it such a powerful relationship and health facilitator. Empirical support for this counterintuitive view was recently reported and replicated in two studies conducted by McCullough et al. (2003). They found that individuals who initially held their transgressors accountable for an offense later experienced greater increases in forgiveness.

Although in line with our arguments, these counterintuitive findings raise an important theoretical question that has implications for the development of an intervention to promote forgiveness. What psychological mechanism can account for the positive relationship between judgments of responsibility and the need for forgiveness and can facilitate forgiveness and relationship harmony? We propose that following transgressions, victims will be under threat from multiple sources (e.g., threat from the negative event, uncertainty about their attributions and judgments of responsibility). In turn, these threats are believed to trigger individuals' fundamental self-regulatory tendency to maintain their self-image. The motivation to maintain a positive self-image can be manifest directly by interpreting ambiguous information in a way that satisfies existing beliefs (Kunda, 1987; Lord, Ross, & Lepper, 1979; Liu & Steele, 1986), or indirectly by reflecting on an important value or achieving success in a seemingly unrelated domain to the existing threat (McGregor, Zanna, Holmes, & Spencer, 2001; Steele, 1988). Two external sources of affirmation might also restore or increase self-image and promote forgiveness, namely, repentance from a transgressor and third-party intervention. Repentance from a transgressor, in which the offender acknowledges the negative event, claims responsibility, and apologizes, may validate a victim's initial judgment of the offender. In turn, this act is believed to restore the victim's self-image, facilitating forgive-
Social Motivation Training and Forgiveness

Social motivational training is based on attributional retraining, which involves a set of procedures designed to restructure an individual’s intrapersonal maladaptive explanations for events to more adaptive ones (Försterling, 1985; Weiner, 1988). The rationale underlying attributional retraining is that attributions influence judgments of responsibility and affect, and therefore, restructuring one’s attributions should result in a change in motivation and behaviour (Försterling, 1985; Perry, Hechter, Menec, & Weinberg, 1993). Although attributional retraining procedures have been applied successfully to a variety of personal and interpersonal adjustment problems, including depression (Weiner & Litman-Adizes, 1980), professional relationships (Curtis, 1992), career counseling (Luzzo, James, & Luna, 1996), academic failure (Perry & Penner, 1990; Struthers & Perry, 1996; Wilson & Linville, 1982), family relationships (Al-Mabuk, Dedrick, & Vanderah, 1998), and children’s social skills (Carlyon, 1997), they involve altering victims’ perceptions, which could also result in potential detrimental effects. Whether accurate or not, attributional retraining can signal to individuals that their perceptions are invalid, which could threaten their self-image. Attributional retraining may also suggest that there is no need for forgiveness. For instance, if lack of control rather than control over the cause of an offense is conveyed by a third party, then victims may come to believe that their transgressors were not responsible for the offense, and therefore there is no need to forgive them. One implication of this distortion is that victims may develop a sense of helplessness or uncertainty about the accuracy of their perceptions. Another implication is that bona fide transgressors go unchecked, which sends a signal that they can get away with committing transgressions.

Thus, for the purpose of this research, a distinction is made between attributional retraining and social motivational training (SMT) techniques. Whereas attributional retraining involves changing an individual’s perceptions about an event, social motivational training involves an analysis and clarification of the social motivation process applied to interpersonal offenses more broadly. Although a victim’s misperception of causal events is still possible through SMT, we believe that it is less damaging when it comes from the mind of a victim rather than the mind of a therapist. Instead, we believe that perceptual validation and forgiveness are a more likely result of SMT because individuals review their perceptions and are never instructed to change their original perceptions of the event.

Social motivational training is rooted in a family of social cognitive theoretical frameworks that address the automatic and effortful aspect of making attributions (Chaiken & Trope, 1999; Gilbert, Pelham, & Krull, 1988), the metacognitive practice of thinking about how one thinks about the social motivation process (Petty, Brinol, & Tormala, 2002), individuals’ practice of simulating alternative causes and outcomes for events (Taylor & Schneider, 1989), and one’s fundamental tendency to protect one’s self-image (Steele, 1988). One component is concerned with increasing participants’ awareness of people’s tendency to make spontaneous attributions (Heider, 1958; Jones & Davis, 1965; Nisbett & Ross, 1980; Uleman, 1987). This goal is achieved by providing the individuals with an example of this phenomenon (i.e., making spontaneous attributions), after which they are instructed to think about and elaborate on a situation where they had done similarly. This component addresses the automatic, out-of-awareness aspect of making attributions. The remaining components are representative of the conscious and effortful aspect of making attributions.

Another component germane to SMT is metacognition. At this stage, participants are instructed to think about how one makes attributions following positive and negative events and the consequences of these attributions on one’s judgments, affect, and behaviours. By thinking about the attributional process, we believe that an individual’s thoughts, feelings, and behaviours toward a transgressor will become clearer. The metacognitive component is grounded in Weiner’s (1995) theory of social conduct and Fincham and Jaspar’s (1980) theory of responsibility attributions because their theories were specifically developed to explain how individuals evaluate and interact with others following a broad range of interpersonal outcomes. In addition, they provide a fine-grained description of some of the cognitive and affective variables involved in the social conduct of individuals and their interrelationship and temporal sequence.
The next component of social motivational training is mental simulation (Taylor, Pham, Rivkin, & Armor, 1998; Taylor & Schneider, 1989). It refers to the generation of alternative causes for an individual’s behaviour (i.e., process simulation), accompanied by the use of imagination to envisage the effects of each alternative cause on one’s thoughts, emotions, and possible behaviours (i.e., outcome simulation). In this phase, participants are instructed to apply mental simulation in generating alternate causes that are germane to the transgression target and to consider their effects. This aspect of social motivational training is similar to attributional retraining. However, in social motivation training the notion that these alternate causes are only possibilities is emphasized. In addition, there is an emphasis on being aware of how each new cause generates different reactions within the participants rather than an emphasis on changing their reason for an event. Thus, the purpose of social motivation training is to help individuals understand the effects of ascribing a cause to a transgressor’s action on subsequent feelings and behaviours, with the rationale that this awareness could serve as a self-regulating tool by restoring their self-image, facilitating forgiveness, and restoring the relationship following a transgression.

Two studies that incorporated experimental methods were used to test the following hypothesis derived from the literatures on responsibility attributions, forgiveness, and self-affirmation. We predicted that following judgments of responsibility for an interpersonal offense, social motivation training compared to a control training condition incorporating interpersonal work relationships would facilitate greater forgiveness in victims of an offense.

Study 1

The purpose of Study 1 was to examine the effects of social motivation training on workers’ forgiveness of a perceived co-worker who committed an interpersonal offense at work. Senior university students with work experience imagined themselves as victims of a co-worker transgression, completed a pre-training questionnaire, received either job satisfaction training (JST) or social motivation training (SMT), and then completed a post-training questionnaire to examine the following hypothesis. We predicted that pre- and post-training forgiveness would vary as a function of SMT. Specifically, no differences were predicted between pre- and post-JST on forgiveness; however, a significant difference was predicted for SMT.

Method

Participants

The participants were 35 senior university students (24 women, 11 men) with work experience who received course credit in exchange for their participation. On average, they were 24.5 years old and reported approximately 73 months of work experience.

Materials

Transgression stimuli. Participants were instructed to imagine themselves as employees of an organization. In this organization, they had been working as a team member of a large project in which all team members shared the same rank in the organization. Next, they were to imagine themselves in the following work situation:

It is Thursday afternoon and you are having a meeting with your team members on the state of the Spencer account. It becomes obvious that one of the members, Andrew, will be unable to complete his report for the Monday meeting with the rest of the department. You decide to take it on and spend your entire weekend completing his report. Given that you have your own part of the project to deliver, you both agree that he will be presenting the report at the meeting. However, on Monday afternoon, as Andrew presents the report in the meeting, he does not acknowledge your contribution.

Social motivational training. Participants read and completed a SMT workbook that described aspects of the social motivational process, presented examples of how, following negative work events, individuals observe co-workers, determine the reasons for their actions, infer responsibility, feel certain ways, and finally behave in punishing or helpful ways. Both prosocial and antisocial examples were presented. Next, participants read about how individuals have a tendency to make quick attributions about others. Then participants recalled and wrote about one of their own personal work events in which they had judged a co-worker. Next, the participants were instructed to think about the original scenario and to generate alternate judgments. Then the participants were instructed to reflect on how this made them feel. Finally, the participants were instructed to think about this process and take notice of its influence on their interactions with others.

Job satisfaction training. For a number of reasons, we chose JST as our control training condition. First, job satisfaction is one of the most researched work-related attitudes, which involves workers’ cognitive,
affective, and evaluative reactions to the workplace. Second, two components of job satisfaction involve workers’ interpersonal judgments; namely, about their managers and co-workers. Finally, JST can be delivered using techniques identical to SMT. More specifically, participants read and completed 18 job satisfaction items about their current or last held position of employment. Following this, participants read a two-page description of job satisfaction summarizing a number of its noninterpersonal and interpersonal relationship elements (e.g., reward systems, quality of supervision, power, quality of work, quality of work relationships). Finally, on another separate page, participants were asked to briefly write about their own job and what they liked and disliked about it.

Pretraining questionnaire. Participants’ responsibility attributions and forgiveness were measured using the following items. Three items with 7-point scales were used to measure the transgressor’s responsibility attributions for the offense: the extent to which the cause of the event reflected an aspect of the situation (1) or an aspect of Andrew (7); was uncontrollable (1) or controllable by Andrew (7); and whether Andrew was not at all responsible (1) or extremely responsible (7) for the event. Four items with 7-point scales were used to assess the participants’ forgiveness: how mad they were at Andrew, how much sympathy they had for Andrew, how likely they were to bear a grudge against Andrew, and how likely they were to forgive Andrew.

Post-training questionnaire. The same items used on the pretraining questionnaire were assessed on the post-training questionnaire along with the demographic items.

Procedures
Each participant read and signed an informed consent form. Following this, participants read the vignette in which they were to imagine themselves as a victim of a transgression committed by their co-worker (Andrew), who failed to acknowledge their extensive contribution to a work project. Next, participants completed the pretraining questionnaire measuring the responsibility attribution and forgiveness dependent variables, were randomly assigned to approximately 40 minutes of either the JST or SMT, and then completed the post-training questionnaire measuring the dependent and demographic variables. The participants were thanked for their effort and debriefed verbally and in writing.

Results

Composite Forgiveness Scores
Based on significant positive correlations among the four pretraining forgiveness items, anger (recoded), sympathy, bear a grudge (recoded), and forgive, r(35) range = .37 to .68, ps < .01, and acceptable internal consistency, α = .80, a composite pretraining forgiveness score was created by averaging these four items, M = 3.39, SD = 1.30. The same procedure was used to create a composite post-training forgiveness score, r(35) range = .52 to .79, ps < .01, α = .90, M = 4.04, SD = 1.48.

Main Analyses
Responsibility attributions analysis. To examine the effects of training and time on responsibility attributions, a training (SMT, JST) by time (pre-, post-training) by responsibility attribution (locus, control, responsibility) 2 x 2 x 3 mixed model MANOVA was conducted with time and responsibility judgment as the repeated factors. The pre- and post-training responsibility items were all positively correlated, pretraining r(35) range = .24 to .57, post-training r(35) range = .39 to .85. As expected, an internal (M = 5.29), controllable (M = 6.05), and responsible (M = 5.54) judgment pattern was initially perceived and maintained throughout the study by the participants; no training by time by responsibility effect was found, Pillai’s Trace, F(2, 32) = 1.53, p = .23. Next, the effects of training and time were examined on the participants’ forgiveness of the offender.

Forgiveness analysis. As predicted, a significant training by time effect was found for forgiveness, Pillai’s Trace, F(1, 33) = 4.88, p < .05, η² = .08. In order to unpack this interaction, we examined the simple main effect of time (i.e., pre-post forgiveness) at each level of training. No difference was detected between pre- and postforgiveness following JST; however, a
significant difference was detected between pre- and post-forgiveness following SMT, \( F(1, 21) = 32.87, MSE = 0.23, p < .01, \eta^2 = .60, Ms = 3.39 \) versus 4.22, respectively (see Table 1). In addition, we found that the benefit of SMT was significantly superior to JST, \( t(30) = 2.20, p < .05 \).

In sum, SMT was predicted to promote forgiveness of a co-worker who was responsible for a work transgression. These predictions were supported, suggesting that forgiveness can be promoted following responsibility judgments of the offender that typically lead to antisocial motivation. Although these effects were encouraging, they were based on a written vignette about a hypothetical co-worker relationship and the use of a paper-and-pencil training session. In addition, because we did not measure the participants’ self-image, it was not clear if SMT improved participants’ self-image. Thus in a second study, we decided to improve the ecological validity and strengthen the effects by using a critical incident technique whereby workers recalled an offense committed by one of their own co-workers and received face-to-face training. In addition, we measured participants’ self-image.

**Study 2**

**Method**

Thirty-two co-workers were recruited on a university campus. The average participant was 23 years old and had approximately 57 months of work experience. All participants were currently employed in one of the following jobs: health, education, professional, clerical, labour, technical, and sales and service.

**Materials**

**Critical incidents.** Participants were instructed to think about a time within the last six months at the company where they currently worked in which a negative event happened that involved a co-worker. The participants were informed that the target had to be someone who they perceived themselves to be working with rather than someone they worked for or who worked for them. The event could have been due to something that the co-worker did or failed to do, it may have had a small or large impact, and it may have involved a special project or their everyday work. The important consideration was that the event was negative and that it involved a co-worker. Then on a piece of paper the participants were to provide a brief description of the event and the impact that it had on them and their work. In order to maintain anonymity of themselves and their co-worker’s participants were instructed not to provide any names or other personally identifying information.

**Job satisfaction and social motivation training.** The training in Study 2 was identical to Study 1 with one exception. Both JST and SMT were delivered face-to-face and one-on-one with each participant. In the sessions, the trainer worked through the material with each participant, monitoring his/her progress and understanding of the material. The trainer also addressed questions that participants asked about the material.

**Measures.** The same causal dimension and forgiveness measures used in Study 1 were used in Study 2 with one exception. An additional 7-point scale item was added to the forgiveness scale to address participants’ willingness to restore the relationship (i.e., willingness to work again with their co-worker). As well, a measure of self-image was taken to assess the impact of the training on participants’ self-image. Participants were asked about the extent to which they perceived themselves as able to do things as well as most other people. Finally, the same dependent variables that were measured in Study 1 were measured before and after the training.

**Procedures**

Each participant was randomly assigned to either JST or SMT. The participants completed the critical incident stimuli, the pretraining questionnaire, and then received approximately one hour of either JST or SMT delivered to them individually by the same trainer. After the training, the participants completed the post-training questionnaire and demographic items, and were debriefed.

**Results**

**Composite Forgiveness Scores**

Using the same analysis as Study 1, a composite post-training forgiveness score was created by averaging the five pretraining items, \( r(32) \) range = .28 to .67, \( \alpha = .84, M = 3.54, SD = 1.46 \). The same procedure was used to create a composite post-training forgiveness score, \( r(32) \) range = .05 to .76, \( \alpha = .75, M = 4.04, SD = 1.31 \).

**Main Analysis**

**Responsibility attribution analysis.** To examine the effects of training (JST, SMT) and time (pre-, post-training) on the locus, control, and responsibility attributions, a 2 x 2 x 3 mixed model MANOVA was conducted with time and responsibility attribution as the repeated factors. The pre- and post-training
TABLE 2
Forgiveness Means and Standard Deviations as a Function of Time and Training (Study 2)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Pre-Training</th>
<th>Post-Training</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>JST</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>3.56</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>SD</td>
<td>1.49</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>n</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SMT</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>3.52</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>SD</td>
<td>1.48</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>n</td>
<td>17</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note. Means with similar subscripts indicate significant differences. p < .01; JST = Job Satisfaction Training; SMT = Social Motivation Training.

responsibility items were all positively correlated, pretraining $r(32)$ range = .31 to .60, post-training $r(32)$ range = .27 to .80. Our predictions were unchanged from Study 1. Participants initially perceived the cause of the offense to be internal to ($M = 5.63$), controllable by ($M = 6.28$), and the responsibility of ($M = 5.78$) the offender, which was maintained over the course of the study. No training by time by responsibility effect was found, $F(2, 29) = 0.54$, $p = .59$.

Self-image analysis. To examine the extent to which SMT promoted one’s self-image, the effects of different training were examined on the self-image dependent variable. As predicted, a significant simple main effect for SMT on self-image was found, $F(1, 16) = 4.92$, $p = .04$, $\eta^2 = .24$, pre-SMT $M = 5.71$ versus post-SMT $M = 5.94$. Thus, it seems that participants’ self-image improved following SMT. Next the effects of training and time were examined on the participants’ forgiveness of the offender.

Forgiveness analysis. A significant training by time effect was found for forgiveness, $F(1, 30) = 4.22$, $p < .05$, $\eta^2 = .12$, $MSE = 0.39$. To probe this interaction, we examined the simple main effect of time at each level of training. No difference was detected between pre- and postforgiveness following JST; however, a significant difference was detected between pre- and postforgiveness following SMT, $F(1, 16) = 9.03$, $p < .01$, $\eta^2 = .36$, $MSE = 0.60$, $Ms = 3.52$ versus $4.32$, respectively (see Table 2). We further probed this interaction by examining whether the benefit of SMT was superior to JST. A marginally significant difference was found between the different training conditions on changes in pre-post training forgiveness, $t(25) = 1.98$, $p = .059$. Thus, consistent with Study 1, SMT was more likely to facilitate forgiveness compared to JST.

Consistent with Study 1, Study 2 supported our hypothesis that compared to JST, SMT facilitates co-worker forgiveness and a willingness to restore the relationship following judgments of responsibility for an interpersonal offense at work. Study 2 also replicates and extends the findings of Study 2 by demonstrating this effect following an actual co-worker transgression and using a face-to-face and one-on-one intervention. This study further extends the findings of Study 1 and the forgiveness literature by supporting the idea that SMT also has an impact on the self-image of victims of a transgression.

Discussion

Co-worker relationships are increasingly recognized as one of the most meaningful interpersonal relationships and yet they are one of the least understood. Although largely harmonious, relationships among co-workers are sometimes damaged by interpersonal offenses. Forgiveness is one construct that is beginning to demonstrate promise as a facilitator of well-being and prosocial relationships interrupted by interpersonal offenses (Aquino et al., 2003). The primary aim of this research was to examine the effects of one psychological intervention, which we label social motivation training, on co-worker forgiveness. Two studies were conducted to examine and systematically replicate the effects of social motivation training on co-worker forgiveness following an interpersonal transgression. Results from both studies supported our primary hypothesis that SMT is an effective intervention for promoting forgiveness among co-workers.

The present findings also extend the literature on forgiveness and co-worker relationships. Previous research has shown that forgiveness increases as responsibility attributions for an offense decrease (Darby & Schlenker, 1982; Fincham, 2000; Fincham, Paleari, & Regalia, 2002; Struthers et al., 2001; Weiner et al., 1991). In this article, however, we argue that forgiveness is more likely following judgments of responsibility for an offense. We hold that if perceived transgressors are not involved in offenses, do not have control over offenses, or are not responsible for offenses, then there is no need to forgive them. Indeed, we further argue that it is particularly following offenses in which transgressors are deemed responsible that forgiveness is needed to interrupt victims’ tendencies to think, feel, and behave in an antisocial fashion. In our research, we showed that initial attribution of responsibility for an offense at work was unaffected by time and training, whereas forgiveness was positively affected by SMT, supporting our logic and McCullough et al.’s (2003) findings.

We believe this finding and distinction is important for at least two reasons. First, if victims of an
offense decide to forgive a transgressor because they believe that they have distorted or misperceived the event or the offender’s involvement, a potential threat to the victims’ self-image may arise. This also has collateral implications for third-party intervention and genuine repentance. In other words, a third party may think that he or she can facilitate forgiveness and relationship harmony in a victim of an interpersonal offense by promoting changes in perceptions of the offense. What are potentially gained, however, are hollow or hypocritical forgiveness (i.e., forgiveness that is communicated but not embraced by the victim), superficial harmony, and the diminishing of the victim’s self-image.

A second implication of this finding is theoretical. Specifically, it is important to more accurately describe the intrapersonal and interpersonal antecedents of forgiveness and the potential mechanisms that might account for the discrepancy in rational and empirical findings. If not via changes in perceptions of the offense, then through what mechanism is forgiveness facilitated by third-party sources? We posit that third-party sources can validate victims’ perceptions of, and responses to, the offense, thereby affirming their self-image, reducing their self-regulatory tendency to defend their self-image, and restore the relationship. Our Study 2 results suggest that self-image is improved following SMT.

Additional implications of this research include the extent to which trained HR personnel or managers might be able to practically and effectively deliver SMT to workers. Although seemingly straightforward in its delivery, SMT is rooted in a family of interconnected social cognitive theories that explain antisocial and prosocial psychological phenomena, and therefore we recommend future research on the practical delivery of this intervention. Also, we believe that future research should include a longitudinal design, measures of quality of co-worker relationships, and the consideration of potentially detrimental aspects of forgiveness, including repeat and nonrepentant offenders.

Given that our research is intervention based, it is important to address the notion of demand characteristics as a possible explanation for our findings. In other words, did our participants forgive their perceived or actual transgressors because of subtle or not so subtle cues potentially evident in our intervention? For at least four reasons, we believe they did not. First, both our JST and SMT interventions had participants consider positive and negative aspects of their work. Therefore, the participants’ responses could have been affected both positively and negatively by both interventions. In addition, within SMT, participants were also instructed to think about positive and negative work events involving a co-worker, to consider alternate causes for these different events, and to reflect on how this might affect their emotional and behavioural responses. Thus, their responses could have been further affected in either direction (i.e., positively or negatively). Second, the participants were never instructed to consider forgiveness in our intervention, and therefore, if the participants were only responding to cues from our training, we would not expect changes in forgiveness. Third, in SMT, the participants were instructed to consider responsibility attributions, perhaps the most telegraphic cue evident in our intervention, and yet, responsibility attributions were unaffected by the training. Thus, given our procedure, if demand characteristics were at play, one would expect to find changes in responsibility attributions as a function of training and no effect for training on forgiveness. In contrast, we found no effect for our training on responsibility attributions and an effect for SMT on forgiveness. Finally, we systematically replicated our findings using a different sample, methodology, and procedure in Study 2.

In sum, although mainly concordant in nature, co-worker relationships are sometimes punctuated by a range of interpersonal offenses that can escalate into more serious damage to, and intractable conflict in, the relationship. Research has shown that this type of conflict can have serious health implications for employees (e.g., Witvliet et al., 2001). Forgiveness is one process beginning to show promise as a promoter of interpersonal relationships and well-being at work. Our research extends this research by showing that workers can be encouraged to forgive such conflicts following third-party interventions developed to facilitate forgiveness. By helping workers overcome the potentially debilitating reactions that can arise from conflict with their coworkers, SMT can be influential in repairing damaged relationships at work and assisting in building a healthy workplace.

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