

THE ROLE OF FORGIVENESS AND PERSONALITY ON OUTCOMES OF CHILDHOOD  
MALTREATMENT

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## ABSTRACT

### THE ROLE OF FORGIVENESS AND PERSONALITY ON OUTCOMES OF CHILDHOOD MALTREATMENT

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Research indicates that there are a number of negative outcomes associated with childhood maltreatment including both mental and physical health consequences (National Children's Alliance, 2015; Mennen & Trickett, 2017; Arata, Langhinrichsen-Rohling, Bowers, & O'Farrill-Swails, 2005; Sulutvedt, & Melinder, 2018). Given the long-term issues associated with childhood maltreatment, research has begun studying forgiveness as a way to potentially reduce negative outcomes (e.g., forgiveness therapy; Freedman & Zarifkar, 2016; Rahman et al., 2018). Additionally, forgiveness and five-factor model of personality research indicates that Neuroticism is associated with less forgiveness and Agreeableness is associated with higher forgiveness (Brose et al., 2005). The current study inquired if forgiveness predicts severity of general emotional distress (e.g., depression, anxiety, stress) in survivors of childhood maltreatment above and beyond personality characteristics (i.e., Extraversion, Agreeableness, Conscientiousness, Neuroticism, Openness to Experience), and gender. This study used a hierarchical linear regression to analyze the role forgiveness has on adult general distress in survivors of childhood maltreatment while controlling for personality characteristics, maltreatment frequency, and gender. Independent variables included personality traits (e.g. Openness to Experience, Contentiousness, Extraversion, Agreeableness, and Neuroticism),

childhood maltreatment types (e.g. physical abuse, emotional abuse, sexual abuse, physical neglect, emotional neglect), and gender in a sample of individuals with child maltreatment history. Pearson's correlation coefficients were used to test hypotheses regarding the relationships between personality traits and forgiveness. Additionally, Steiger's Z-test was implemented to test if the presence of positive feelings toward a transgressor (Forgiveness PP) would be more negatively associated with average maltreatment, which measures frequency of maltreatment, than the absence of negative feelings toward a transgressor (Forgiveness AN). Results indicated that forgiveness predicts lower general emotional distress while controlling for type of abuse, personality, and gender. Pearson's correlations indicated that M5-50's Extraversion and Agreeableness were significantly and positively associated with Forgiveness AN and Forgiveness PP. M5-50's Conscientiousness was only positively and significantly associated with Forgiveness AN. Additionally, the M5-50's Neuroticism was negatively and significantly associated with both Forgiveness AN and Forgiveness PP. Finally, Steiger's Z demonstrated that Forgiveness AN is more negatively associated with mean maltreatment than Forgiveness PP.

## INTRODUCTION

Augusti et al. (2018), describe a practical way to understand childhood maltreatment by grouping maltreatment according to abuse and neglect with abuse encompassing sexual, physical, and emotional abuse, and neglect encompassing physical and emotional neglect. According to the National Children's Alliance (2015), the most up-to-date statistics suggest that 683,000 children fell victim to abuse and neglect in 2015 in the United States alone. The same organization noted neglect as the most common form of maltreatment amongst maltreated children with statistics showing 75% neglect, 17.2% physical abuse, and 8.4% sexual abuse, with some of the data representing cooccurring maltreatment. According to Banyard (1999) and McCauley, Kern, Kolodner, Dill, & Schroeder (1997), experiencing multiple forms of maltreatment during childhood is more common than experiencing one type with 22-55% experiencing more than one type of abuse. Kim et al. (2017) noted high prevalence rates of cooccurrence across multiple settings, including psychiatric hospitals, Child Protective Services, and adult retrospective studies.

According to Kim et al. (2017), childhood maltreatment (e.g., abuse, neglect) leads to undesirable physical, emotional, social, and behavioral outcomes. In fact, adulthood psychological disorders have been associated with experiencing childhood maltreatment (Angelakis, Gillespie, & Panagioti, 2019). According to a 2019 meta-analysis by Angelakis et al., found that adults who were abused (e.g. physical, emotional, sexual) were 2-3 times more at risk of suicidal thoughts and attempts when compared to those who were not maltreated. Some studies propose that negative outcomes (e.g. anger, emotional problems, behavioral problems) are associated with the frequency and severity an individual experiences childhood maltreatment. Research proposes that frequency involves the amount of times a child experiences the abuse

(i.e., how often) and severity indicates the intensity of maltreatment (Charak & Koot, 2015; Shin et al., 2013). Other researchers suggest that individuals who experience more than one type of abuse are likely to have higher mental health issues than individuals who experience one type (Arata et al., 2005). According to Arata and colleagues (2005), quantity of abuse type may produce more detrimental effects for children (e.g., higher depression) than the type of abuse itself. Similarly, Snyder and Heinze (2005) note that the risk of developing mental health issues (e.g., anxiety, depression, anger) increases the more times one is a bystander to abuse. Along with the emotional and behavioral turmoil associated with childhood maltreatment, economic effects take place with per-victim lifetime costs of child maltreatment reaching \$16.6 million (fatal incidences) and \$831,000 (nonfatal incidences) in the United States (Peterson, Florence, & Klevens, 2018).

Research has demonstrated that forgiveness has been linked to better mental health and better coping when one has been treated wrongly (Freedman & Zarifkar, 2016). For those treated wrongly, anger and resentment can occur over long periods of time when one has not forgiven, which is linked to negative physical effects (e.g., high blood pressure) and detrimental effects on one's quality of life (Freedman & Zarifkar, 2016). Similarly, childhood trauma and some personality traits are associated with "stressful interpersonal life events" (Pos et al., 2016). The current study will focus on forgiveness as it pertains to general emotional distress and personality characteristics for those who were victims of childhood maltreatment.

## **Childhood Maltreatment**

### **Childhood Abuse**

The Child Welfare Information Gateway (2016) identifies physical, emotional, and sexual abuse as three separate abuse types. Commonly used legal definitions are used regarding state-

wide agencies and their need to intervene. Physical abuse is described as “any nonaccidental physical injury to the child and can include striking, kicking, burning, or biting the child, or any action that results in a physical impairment of the child.” Emotional abuse is described as “injury to the psychological capacity or emotional stability of the child as evidenced by an observable or substantial change in behavior, emotional response, or cognition and injury as evidenced by anxiety, depression, withdrawal, or aggressive behavior.” According to the Child Welfare Information Gateway (2016), federal definition of sexual abuse is described as

The employment, use, persuasion, inducement, enticement, or coercion of any child to engage in, or assist any other person to engage in, any sexually explicit conduct or simulation of such conduct for the purpose of producing a visual depiction of such conduct; or The rape, and in cases of caretaker or interfamilial relationships, statutory rape, molestation, prostitution, or other form of sexual exploitation of children, or incest with children. (p. 2).

According to the National Children’s Alliance, in 2015, 205, 438 children disclosed sexual abuse and 60, 897 children disclosed physical abuse in the United States. Transgressors of these children included relatives of the child (51%), parents (39%), and known/not family (10%).

### **Childhood Neglect**

The Child Welfare Information Gateway notes common state-wide definitions of child neglect as, “the failure of a parent or other person with responsibility for the child to provide needed food, clothing, shelter, medical care, or supervision to the degree that the child’s health, safety, and well-being are threatened with harm.” Childhood neglect is the least researched type of childhood maltreatment despite its monetary and overall societal impact and less light is shed on this area of maltreatment compared to others (Bland, Lambie, & Best et al., 2018; Mulder,

Kulper, vanderPut, Stams, & Assink, 2018). A key difference between neglect and abuse can be explained by lacking a fundamental or positive behavior versus adding a negative behavior (Mulder et al., 2018). The international prevalence of physical neglect is 16% and emotional neglect is 18% (Bland et al., 2018).

Although specific research pertaining to neglect is now often being described as “neglect of neglect” (Mennen, Kim, Sang, & Trickett, 2010), a recent meta-analysis was conducted, providing a clearer insight regarding neglect. Mulder et al. (2018) conducted a meta-analytic review pertaining to risk factors for children who experienced neglect. The authors found parents with low education, poor mental health, and who have engaged in “antisocial/criminal offending” result in the strongest predictor of childhood neglect. Other key findings included a higher chance of neglect in those were not white as well as those whose parents were also neglected or abused. Limitations of this study included sample size.

### **Outcomes of Childhood Maltreatment**

Research has found various long-term effects associated with childhood maltreatment that include internalizing behaviors and externalizing behaviors. Prino and Peyrot (1994) found more externalizing outcomes in individuals exposed to childhood physical abuse (e.g., high aggression) and more internalizing outcomes in individuals exposed to childhood neglect (e.g. withdrawn). According to Springer et al. (2003) victims of childhood maltreatment (e.g., abuse, neglect) are at an increased risk of becoming victims of adulthood abuse. It is common for individuals who experienced childhood sexual abuse, to experience sexual abuse as adults (Springer et al., 2003). Arata et al. (2005) referenced studies with notable, yet inconsistent findings across maltreatment types pertaining to adulthood outcomes after maltreatment

exposure. Some results indicated similar outcomes for abused and neglected individuals, while others indicated different conclusions.

Loos and Alexander (1997), found that adults who experienced childhood abuse and neglect did not have the same outcome as those who only experienced neglect with those who experienced neglect predicting stronger connections to low self-esteem and loneliness. Interestingly, lower self-esteem has been associated with emotional abuse when compared to physical and sexual abuse, indicating other factors contributing to child maltreatment (Mullen, Martin, Anderson, Romans, & Herbison, 1996). For example, a recent study had important findings pertaining to emotional childhood maltreatment. Taillieu, Brownridge, Sareen, and Afifi, (2016) included a sample of adults who were emotionally abused, emotionally neglected, emotionally abused and neglected, and those who experienced no maltreatment. Findings showed that emotional neglect indicated more risk for depression and avoidant personality disorder; whereas emotional abuse indicated more overall risk for mental health disorders and substance use disorder, thus indicating some overlap with depression being a mental health disorder. Taillieu et al. (2016) suggest that based on their findings, emotional neglect may be associated with withdrawn tendencies and emotional abuse can consist of many subtypes (e.g. belittling, threatening); therefore, may produce differential results between subtypes. Contrarily to Taillieu et al. (2016), Brown, Cohen, Johnson, and Smailes (1999) found that suicide attempts and depression were higher in adults who were sexually abused, and suicide attempts and depression were not associated with neglect in childhood. Also, individuals who experienced maltreatment as children were more likely to experience depression and suicide than those who did not experience childhood maltreatment.

Ney, Fung, and Wickett (1994) found that individuals who experience verbal abuse, sexual abuse, and neglect, are likely to feel less joy and optimism for life as. Arata et al. (2005) found symptoms directly associated with different types of child maltreatment (neglect, physical, sexual) including those who experienced childhood sexual abuse had high rates of suicidal ideation and sexual encounters (Arata et. al, 2005). This same study found differences when comparing outcomes for individuals who experienced one form of abuse and individuals who experienced multiple types of child maltreatment. These findings included more negative outcomes (e.g. higher depression, more suicidal thoughts, higher sexual encounters, and lower self-esteem) for those with more than one type of abuse, thus indicating effects with cooccurrence and quantity of maltreatment.

Springer et al. (2003) noted that childhood abuse plays a role in “onset adult psychopathology.” Gould et al. (2012) describes biological alterations in a child’s ability to manage stress because of childhood stress or trauma can lead to anxiety disorders. Macmillan et al. (2001) found higher rates of anxiety and depressive disorders in both women and males who experienced childhood sexual or physical abuse than those who did not. The authors also found that there is more of a connection between mental health disorders and childhood maltreatment for women than men. Individuals who have experienced childhood abuse are often diagnosed with eating disorders, fibromyalgia, irritable bowel, chronic fatigue syndrome, chronic pain syndrome, anxiety disorder, post-traumatic stress disorder, and depression (Springer et al., 2003).

Neglect (e.g. physical, emotional) plays a role in childhood psychological development, thus potentially effecting adulthood mental well-being (Bland et al., 2018). The role of a caregiver is foundational in one’s social functioning as lack of engagement, safety, and support can lead to poor social functioning (Müller, Bertsch, Bülau, Herpertz, & Buchheim, 2019). Ways in which

poor social functioning impacts adulthood includes difficulties making connecting relationships and insensitivity towards others (Müller et al., 2019). According to Weightman, Knight and Baune (2019) there is a connection between major depressive disorder and social cognitive impairments. Other negative effects of emotional neglect include fear and avoidance (Müller et al., 2019). Similarly, establishing and maintaining relationships can be difficult for individuals who have experienced childhood sexual abuse, thus potentially lowering their quality of life (Springer et al., 2003).

### **Forgiveness**

The word forgiveness is challenging to define since researchers' have various viewpoints and different backgrounds that shape their belief of forgiveness (Freedman & Zarifkar, 2016). According to Freedman and Zarifkar (2016), there are different perspectives and definitions of forgiveness. Currently, literature demonstrates forgiveness breaking into types including state forgiveness, trait forgiveness, and dispositional forgiveness. State forgiveness involves forgiveness as it pertains to a specific wrongdoing; meanwhile, trait and dispositional forgiveness involves one's general ability to forgive across situations (Worthington et al., 2015). Two articles highlight specific characteristics of forgiveness in their definition as Wade, Hoyt, Kidwell, and Worthington (2014) describe forgiveness interventions as an intrapersonal experience that involves more than minimizing negativity (e.g. anger, vengeful rumination), but increasing positivity. Enright and the Human Developmental Study Group (1991) note forgiveness involves offering the transgressor a "gift." Although researchers highlight different characteristics in definitions, there are key underlying themes across both definitions including the victims experience of wrongdoing (e.g. emotional, physical, social, or psychological); transgressor's intent is irrelevant and they are responsible for the wrongdoing, victims' need to

“willfully” change their adverse outlook (e.g. lessening revenge, resentment, negative affect); and apology from the transgressor is not necessary to achieve forgiveness. According to Freedman and Zarifkar (2016), current forgiveness definition debates include whether forgiveness should encapsulate positive attitudes toward transgressor or only lack of negative attitudes toward transgressor. Worthington et al. (2015) note a possible need for positive attitudes toward the transgressor may be due to the relationship between the victim and their transgressor. They suggest that victims who value the relationship with their transgressor (e.g. family member) may desire positive attitudes. Freedman and Zarifkar (2016) and Worthington et al. (2015), note that the ability to forgive is challenging and does not include overlooking the victims’ struggle (e.g. forgetting, justifying, reduced anger due to time). The current study will use state forgiveness and follow the common themes listed above to define forgiveness. The study will also include positive attitudes toward the transgressor and lack of negative attitudes toward the transgressor to potentially find significant outcomes that may add to the forgiveness definition debate.

Worthington et al. (2015), note that many variables can impact one’s forgiveness including personal beliefs, attachment styles, personality, circumstances surrounding the incident, religious beliefs, and relationship with the transgressor. In many cases, the foundation of forgiveness is based on religious or spiritual upbringing (Freedman & Zarifkar, 2016). Freedman and Chang’s (2010) study included data regarding if religion shaped their thoughts on forgiveness with 79% indicating it did and 21% indicating it did not (Freedman & Zarifkar, 2016).

Practicing forgiveness has the potential to allow for an individual to understand the self and know they did not deserve to experience their situation and the aftermath of those hurtful

experiences (Freedman & Zarifkar, 2016). According to Wade, Bailey, and Shaffer (2005), an individual who can forgive may have certain characteristics (e.g., self-esteem, ego-strength) based on the finding that people with greater self-esteem were more likely to talk about forgiveness in therapy. Freedman and Zarifkar (2016), suggest a therapist could identify self-esteem levels to determine if this should be improved prior to discussing forgiveness.

Individuals who have experienced abuse may have a harder time forgiving their transgressor when an apology has not been given when compared to others (Freedman & Zarifkar, 2016). Freedman and Zarifkar (2016), note forgiveness can help “restore” self-worth as acknowledging they did not deserve wrongdoing implies the victim has self-respect. Resentment, anger, and revenge are common feelings to have after experiencing pain and are associated with self-respect (Freedman & Zarifkar, 2016); however, negative effects (e.g. reduced self-respect and self-esteem) may occur if feelings of anger and resentment linger for an extended period. For example, Enright and Fitzgibbons (2000) note effects of long-term anger include higher depression and anxiety. Meanwhile, Dinger, Ehrenthal, Nikendei, and Schauenburg (2017) found that improved self-esteem can lead to bettering depression.

Cardi, Milich, Harris and Kearns (2007) note there are few studies involving forgiveness and forgiveness interventions with people who have experienced some form of victimization. Cardi et al. (2007) found that women who were victimized (e.g., physical, emotional) at any point in their lifetime and had high self-esteem were less likely to forgive their offender; however, more likely to work on the self through forgiveness techniques (e.g., reducing anger, negative affect). The authors note results may be influenced by victims’ respecting the self and suggest that forgiveness therapy may not be a great match for those with high self-esteem. The same study found no differences between positive or negative attitudes toward the self or the

transgressor and suggest that may be due to feeling they deserved the wrongdoing, feeling powerless, and not having the “psychological resources” to forgive. The authors suggest future research should investigate how forgiveness impacts people and who it impacts.

Freedman and Enright (1996) investigated how a forgiveness intervention impacted individuals who were victims of incest. Results indicated that after the intervention was introduced, forgiveness and hope increased, while depression and anxiety decreased for those in the experimental group when compared to the control group. Freedman and Enright (1996) note there could be a therapist, treatment interaction in that both could influence effectiveness. A recent study by Ghahari and Rad (2018) investigated the effectiveness of forgiveness skill on anxiety and depression for women who were sexually abused as children. Results showed that forgiveness reduced anxiety and depression. Morton, Tanzini, and Lee (2019) investigated forgiveness and life satisfactions in those who experienced childhood sexual abuse with an adult, Adventist sample. Results indicated that forgiveness of others had a weaker relationship to life satisfaction when compared to forgiveness of self and neither moderated life satisfaction. Morton et al. (2019) suggests a possible influence of the moderating results is that this study measured dispositional forgiveness rather than state forgiveness. The authors suggest that future research should investigate state forgiveness and expand the sample type. The current study aims to bridge this gap in understanding the association of victimization such as childhood maltreatment and forgiveness in adulthood by measuring state forgiveness and including a sample of individuals who experienced various forms of childhood maltreatment.

### **Forgiveness Therapy**

Forgiveness therapy is considered a relatively new therapeutic style with research spanning across the last two decades (Freedman & Zarifkar, 2016). According to Freedman and

Zarifkar (2016), forgiveness therapy can be defined as a way for individuals who have been mistreated to work through and defeat negative attitudes and resentment towards their transgressor. The goal behind forgiveness therapy is to home in on anger that can lead to the inability to move forward and provide new ways of thinking about their transgressor (Freedman & Zarifkar, 2016). Other goals of forgiveness therapy involve acquiring a more empathetic outlook and encouraging the victim to view their transgressor as human. This typically occurs toward the end of forgiveness therapy and can lead to dissipating ideas of revenge (Freedman & Zarifkar, 2016). Wade et al. (2005) indicated that a majority of clients receiving therapy (75%) wanted to learn how to forgive their transgressor; however, had mixed feelings on dealing with this issue in therapy. This research indicates that therapists can play a vital role in educating their clients on the effects of forgiveness (Freedman & Zarifkar, 2016). Freedman and Zarifkar (2016), note it is important to express to their clients the differences between revenge and justice and that forgiveness and legal action are not mutually exclusive. According to Worthington et al. (2015), forgiveness therapy includes three models (e.g., the process model of forgiveness, stress-and-coping model of forgiveness, and the evolutionary model of forgiveness). Although different models, Worthington et al. (2015) describes them as “complementary” of one another. Enright and Fitzgibbons (2015) note that models of forgiveness therapy can be used alone; however, forgiveness therapy can be used within several approaches including psychodynamic therapy, cognitive-behavioral therapy, and family and systems therapy.

According to a meta-analysis by Lundahl, Taylor, Stevenson, and Roberts (2008), Enright’s Psychological Model of Interpersonal Forgiveness (process model of forgiveness) was the most effective intervention pertaining to forgiveness. It has four phases including Uncovering, Decision, Work, and Deepening and 20 stages that make up the phases (Freedman

& Zarifkar, 2016). Phase 1 (Uncovering) involves the victim understanding how the negative event as well as their response to the event impacts them. Phase 2 (Decision) involves the victim deciding to engage in forgiveness. Phase 3 (Work) involves reworking the victims' outlook of their transgressor to include more empathy (e.g. they are a human beings too). Phase 4 (Deepening) involves the victim understanding forgiveness in their life and increasing positivity (e.g. feelings, affect) (Freedman & Zarifkar, 2016). This model has been useful with samples including those who have experienced incest (Freedman & Enright, 1996), domestic abuse, and college aged individuals who did not feel loved by their parents with individuals receiving forgiveness treatment producing higher levels of forgiveness and better mental health functioning (i.e., depression, anxiety, self-esteem) than those who did not receive forgiveness treatment (Freedman & Zarifkar, 2016). This meta-analysis included a measurement of long-term effects, which demonstrated that positive outcomes from forgiveness therapy were maintained after posttreatment (Lundahl et al., 2008).

Rahman, Iftikhar, Kim, and Enright's 2018 pilot study on effectiveness of forgiveness therapy with sexually and physically abused adolescents, noted higher value in increasing forgiveness opposed to acquiring forgiveness at the highest level as results indicated forgiveness therapy was effective with the experimental group who received therapy with forgiveness increasing to the midpoint of the scale. Freedman and Zarifkar (2016), explain that therapy may take longer as it pertains to forgiveness for individuals who have experienced abuse. When compared to individuals who experience other forms of hurt, it can be more challenging for abused victims to forgive. An argument against productivity of utilizing forgiveness techniques includes the possibility of an abused individual reuniting with their transgressor after forgiveness takes place; however, there is lackluster research indicating undesirable outcomes associated

with forgiveness (Freedman & Zarifkar, 2016). According to Rahman et al. (2018), individuals are likely to have negative mental health such as depression and anxiety if they have experienced child maltreatment; therefore, it is vital to introduce treatment that combats these negative effects stemming from childhood to change outcomes in adulthood such as forgiveness therapy.

### **Personality**

Personality can be described as an individual's predicted behaviors and thoughts (Brents, James, Cisler, & Kilts, 2018). According to Brose, Rye, Lutz-Zois, and Ross (2005), personality and forgiveness research is starting to develop. Research pertaining to forgiveness and the five-factor model, has produced results indicative of possessing helpful and hurtful personality traits, with Neuroticism suggesting individuals are less prone to forgive (Brose et al., 2005). The ability to forgive other people has been shown to be positively correlated with Agreeableness.

Ambiguity still resides within the relationship between forgiveness and Extraversion, Conscientiousness, and Openness to Experience given research has indicated conflicting results.

Brose et al. (2005) references three studies regarding Openness to Experiences and four studies pertaining to Conscientiousness that indicate no relationship with the ability to forgive others. Walker and Gorsuch (2002) note no links between the surgency facet of Extraversion and forgiving others; however, Ross et al. (2004) indicated that the positive emotions facet of Extraversion was positively correlated to forgiving others and self-forgiveness, indicating the need for more research. It is important to note that Walker and Gorsuch (2002) and Ross et al. (2004) measured dispositional forgiveness.

Brose et al. (2005) had significant findings with Neuroticism negatively correlating with forgiveness and Agreeableness positively correlating with forgiveness. Other results from the same study indicated people who have positive feelings toward the transgressor are also

extraverted. Openness to Experience is not associated with forgiving a transgressor. Regression analyses indicate Conscientiousness is negatively associated with having no negative feelings towards transgressor.

According to Pos et al. (2016), both negative incidences such as trauma experienced during childhood and personality traits such as neuroticism and openness to experience are prone to negative adulthood outcomes (e.g., “stressful interpersonal life events”). The authors note a relationship between stress-sensitivity and childhood trauma as well as a connection between stress-reactivity and personality traits (e.g., Neuroticism, Openness to Experience). Pos et al. (2016), used the five-factor model of personality traits as a mediator in their research involving child trauma (e.g., abuse, neglect) and adulthood life events within a sample of individuals who were diagnosed with a psychotic disorder. Results from this study indicated that individuals who experienced childhood trauma also experience negative life events and have higher Openness to Experience. Other results include a negative association between Extraversion and childhood neglect. Limitations of this study included a nongeneralizable sample.

A recent study by Rogers, McKinney, and Asberg (2018), found that personality traits such as Neuroticism, Conscientiousness, and Agreeableness correlate with experiencing childhood maltreatment from a parent. Other findings from this study include no correlation between Agreeableness and Conscientiousness and experiencing childhood emotional maltreatment from a father. Also, substance use correlated with low levels of Conscientiousness and high levels of neuroticism. According to Brents et al. (2018), an adult who possesses the Neuroticism trait due to childhood maltreatment may also experience addiction, depression, anxiety, and suicidal thoughts. Possessing the Agreeableness trait may help combat negative outcomes (e.g. drug abuse) for adults who are more likely to partake in those behaviors (Brents

et al., 2018). Brents et al. (2018) used Neuroticism as a mediator and found that higher levels “mediated the effect of the severity of childhood maltreatment history on family and psychiatric functioning.”

### **Purpose**

The World Health Organization (2016), note complications associated with researching childhood maltreatment due to vastly different abuse definitions used across studies and the quality of self-report questionnaires from victims and parents. Research has demonstrated a multitude of ways of studying abuse and/or neglect including combining abuse and neglect (Pos et al., 2016) and comparing effects of one type of abuse with those who experience cooccurring abuse (Rapsey, Scott, & Patterson, 2019). Other factors contributing to the ongoing difficulties in studying childhood maltreatment include different measurements of severity of maltreatment, different sample type (Kim et al., 2017), and an individual’s threshold or sensitivity to variables (e.g., stress) (Pos et al., 2016). According to Arata et al. (2005), research has produced differential effects and outcomes between childhood maltreatment (e.g., sexual, physical, emotional, neglect) given that researchers operationalize and quantify data differently. For these reasons, generalizing results can be difficult; however, across studies, there is evidence to support negative internalizing behaviors such as depression and anxiety (Arata et al., 2005; Springer, Sheridan, Kuo, and Carnes, 2003) and negative externalizing behaviors such as anger in adults who were victims of childhood maltreatment (Arata et al., 2005; Augusti et al., 2018).

Given the likelihood of co-occurrence, inconsistent symptomatology results, research on the importance of measuring frequency, as well as studies indicating effectiveness of forgiveness therapy, the purpose of this study is to inquire if forgiveness predicts severity of mental health symptoms (e.g. depression, anxiety, stress) in survivors of childhood maltreatment above and

beyond personality characteristics (e.g. Extraversion, Agreeableness, Conscientiousness, Neuroticism, Openness to Experience), and gender. Research produced by Kim et al. (2017) suggests that co-occurrence of different forms of maltreatment is common. Studies have addressed long-term effects of child maltreatment including maladaptive coping strategies, poor mental and physical health, and psychopathology rates. Past research has addressed childhood maltreatment/trauma with personality traits, personality traits with forgiveness, and forgiveness with childhood trauma. Research has yet utilized these variables to analyze if forgiveness is important when the type of abuse and personality have been accounted for. Furthermore, this study aims to inquire helpful information in possibly utilizing forgiveness therapy for specific populations.

### **Hypotheses**

- I. Forgiveness will be negatively associated with depression, anxiety, and stress for those who experienced childhood maltreatment of any kind. Furthermore, forgiveness will account for significant variance in depression, anxiety, and stress above and beyond what is accounted for by personality and other characteristics (e.g., gender of the participant and frequency of the abuse).
- II. Neuroticism will be negatively associated with Forgiveness AN (i.e., absence of negative feelings toward a transgressor) and Forgiveness PP (i.e., presence of positive feelings toward a transgressor).
- III. Agreeableness will be positively associated with Forgiveness AN and Forgiveness PP.
- IV. Extraversion will be positively associated with Forgiveness AN and Forgiveness PP.
- V. Conscientiousness will be negatively associated with Forgiveness AN.

VI. Mean maltreatment scores will be negatively correlated with both Forgiveness AN and Forgiveness PP. It is predicted that Forgiveness PP will be more strongly negatively associated than Forgiveness AN.

## METHODS

### Participants

Participants included adults aged 18 years or older from various online sources. Recruitment occurred in the form of sharing a Qualtrics link to websites and other online sources including reddit and social media sites. Reddit groups included those who experienced childhood maltreatment. Data was cleaned in part based on suggestions made by Meade and Craig (2012), e.g., removing the data of individuals who completed the survey in an inordinately short or long amount of time). A total of 581 participants were recruited for this study; however, only 312 participants were analyzed for the following reasons: participants did not reach the end of the survey ( $N = 249$ ), participants were 2 standard deviations from the average time it took to complete the survey ( $N = 2$ ), participants reported being under the age of 18 years ( $N = 5$ ), a single participant reached the end of the survey in 9 seconds ( $N = 1$ ), participants did not complete the Rye Forgiveness Scale ( $N = 9$ ), a participant did not answer any questions on the M5-50 and half of the Depression, Anxiety, and Stress Scale ( $N = 1$ ), and previews were deleted from data set ( $N = 2$ ). Participants were not compensated for their involvement.

Descriptive statistics were implemented to analyze variables relevant to this study. Amongst the 312 participants in this study the most frequently endorsed ethnic/racial identification was Caucasian (84%) followed by Hispanic/Latinx (6.7%), Asian (6.7%), African-American (2.6%), Other/Open option (2.2%), Native American (1%), and Pacific Islander (0%). In terms of gender, participants identified as women (77.9%), men (13.8%), and the remaining identified on the gender-queer/ trans spectrum (8.3%). Participants' age ranged from 18 to 76 with the average age being 30 ( $SD = 10.11$ ). Concerning childhood maltreatment, individuals who reported a 0 were considered individuals who did not experience maltreatment. To account

for missing childhood maltreatment data, participants were given a score of 0 to also indicate the same. The remaining participants experienced varying degrees of maltreatment; emotional abuse (96.8%), physical abuse (52.9%), sexual abuse (43.9%), emotional neglect (96.5%), and physical neglect (89.1%).

## **Materials and Procedure**

### **Background**

**Demographic Questions.** Demographic questions were presented to participants prior to the following questionnaires. Respondents were asked questions pertaining to their age, racial identity, sex, gender identity, sexual orientation, religious beliefs, current or prior therapy involvement, and state occupancy. In an effort to combat careless responding with an online survey, demographic questions were kept to a minimum and short-forms of some measures were utilized as lengthy questionnaires can lead to participants abandoning studies.

### **Maltreatment**

**Childhood Maltreatment Questions (Taillieu et al., 2016).** Childhood maltreatment questions were adapted from a childhood maltreatment study (Taillieu et al., 2016) who adapted their maltreatment questions from an Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACES) Study (Dong, Anda, Dube, Giles, & Felitti, 2003). The adapted items are used to examine sexual, physical, and emotional abuse and physical and emotional neglect. Respondents are asked to rate how often they experienced maltreatment on a Likert scale from 1 (*Never*) to 5 (*Very often*). A single item assessed sexual abuse including, “*I’ve experienced unwanted sexual touching or fondling, or any attempted or actual intercourse by an adult or other person that was unwanted or occurred when I was too young to understand what was happening.*” Physical abuse is also assessed using a single item including, “*I’ve been hit so hard that it left marks, bruises, or caused an injury by a*

*parent or guardian.*” Emotional abuse included 3 items, such as, “A parent or guardian swore at or insulted me.” Emotional neglect is assessed with 3 items, including, “A *parent or guardian was not a source of strength and were unsupportive.*” Regarding physical neglect, 4 items are used including, “*I’ve been made to go hungry or did not have regular meals prepared.*” If respondents endorse any response except “Never”, the following question appears asking participants to select all that apply, “*Who did this?*” Answer choices include mother, father, stepmother, stepfather, boyfriend or girlfriend of my parent, other family member, acquaintance (describe), and other (describe). The same follow-up question and response options appear after all 12 items are answered and participants are to choose only one response. The current study produced adequate internal consistency with the following Cronbach alpha coefficients; Emotional Abuse ( $\alpha = .83$ ), Emotional Neglect ( $\alpha = .89$ ), Physical Neglect ( $\alpha = .83$ ), and Total Maltreatment ( $\alpha = .89$ ). In the current study, childhood maltreatment questions were utilized differently for respective analyses, hierarchical linear regression and Steiger’s Z. For instance, each maltreatment type was created by averaging items that belong in each. The hierarchical linear regression (hypothesis I) utilized each maltreatment type separately to identify differences in maltreatment types when measuring general emotional distress and accounting forgiveness. Steiger’s Z (hypothesis VI) utilized the mean or average of all maltreatment types.

### **General Emotional Distress**

**Depression Anxiety Stress Scale Short Form (DASS-21; Lovibond & Lovibond, 1995).** The DASS-21 is a self-report, state measure consisting of 21 items. The 21 items are evenly and respectively distributed across three scales including depression, anxiety, and stress with 7 items in each. Participants are asked to rate each item as it applies to them within the last week. Response options are on a Likert scale from 0 (*Did not apply to me at all*) to 3 (*Applied to*

*me very much, or most of the time*). Regarding the depression scale, a sample item includes “*I felt that I had nothing to look forward to.*” The anxiety scale includes questions such as “*I felt I was close to panic.*” A sample item from the stress scale includes “*I found myself getting agitated.*” Scores are derived from a scoring manual with higher scores on each scale (i.e. depression, anxiety, stress) indicating higher levels of dysfunction. According to a 2010 study produced by Szabó, adequate internal consistency of the DASS-21 is represented through subscale Cronbach alpha coefficients with Depression ( $\alpha = .87$ ), Anxiety ( $\alpha = .79$ ), and Stress ( $\alpha = .83$ ). Similar to Szabó (2010), this study’s internal consistency is adequate with the following Cronbach alpha coefficients; Depression ( $\alpha = .91$ ), Anxiety ( $\alpha = .83$ ), Stress ( $\alpha = .85$ ), and total emotional distress ( $\alpha = .92$ ). In the current study, the mean or average general emotional distress score was implemented when running hypothesis I.

## **Forgiveness**

**Rye Forgiveness Scale (RFS; Rye et al., 2001).** The RFS is a 15 item self-report scale that measures how much an individual is able to forgive their transgressor. The RFS divides into two subscales including the Absence of Negative subscale (Forgiveness AN) and the Presence of Positive subscale (Forgiveness PP). The Absence of Negative subscale identifies how much an individual can part from negative feelings and behaviors when thinking about their transgressor and the Presence of Positive subscale identifies positive feelings associated with their transgressor. The Absence of Negative subscale consists of 10 items including “*I can’t stop thinking about how I was wronged by this person.*” The Presence of Positive subscale consists of 5 items including “*I have compassion for the person who wronged me.*” Response options are on a Likert scale from 1 (*Strongly Disagree*) to 5 (*Strongly Agree*). Scores are derived from a scoring manual and produce an overall score as well as subscale scores. Higher scores indicate

higher levels of forgiveness. Internal consistency is sufficient with the following Cronbach alpha coefficients; RFS Total ( $\alpha = .87$ ) Forgiveness AN ( $\alpha = .86$ ), and Forgiveness PP ( $\alpha = .85$ ). According to Worthington et al. (2015), the RFS is positively correlated with other measures of forgiveness including the Enright Forgiveness Inventory (EFI), thus indicating adequate concurrent validity. Scores on the RFS are higher after forgiveness interventions indicating predictive validity (Worthington et al., 2015). Internal consistency for the present study is sufficient with the following Cronbach alpha coefficients; RFS Total ( $\alpha = .88$ ) Forgiveness AN ( $\alpha = .88$ ), and Forgiveness PP ( $\alpha = .80$ ). Similar to childhood maltreatment questions, forgiveness was utilized differently depending on analyses ran. An average forgiveness score was used to analyze the hierarchical linear regression (hypothesis I). When running Pearson's correlations (hypotheses II, III, IV, V) and Steiger's Z (hypothesis VI), subscales were formed by averaging items and both subscales were utilized for analyses.

## **Personality**

**M5-50 (Socha, Cooper, & McCord, 2010).** The M5-50 is a 50 item, self-report personality questionnaire consisting of 5 subscales including Extraversion, Agreeableness, Conscientiousness, Neuroticism, and Openness to Experience with 10 items in each. Participants are asked to rate each item according to which describes them the most accurately. Response options are on a Likert scale from 1 (*Inaccurate*) to 5 (*Accurate*). Sample items for Extraversion, Agreeableness, Conscientiousness, Neuroticism, and Openness to Experience respectively include, "*Make friends easily*", "*Believe others have good intentions*", "*Do just enough work to get by*", "*Panic easily*", and "*Am not interested in abstract ideas.*" Raw scores are produced through an excel file and subscale scores are produced through SPSS given the need to reverse code items. According to a 2010 study by Socha, Cooper, and McCord, the M5-50 has sufficient

reliability given Cronbach alpha coefficients were Extraversion ( $\alpha = .86$ ), Agreeableness ( $\alpha = .76$ ), Conscientiousness ( $\alpha = .85$ ), Neuroticism ( $\alpha = .86$ ), and Openness to experience ( $\alpha = .78$ ). The same study indicated significant construct validity given significant factor loadings and factor correlations. With the present study, internal consistency is adequate as Cronbach alpha coefficients include; Extraversion ( $\alpha = .87$ ), Agreeableness ( $\alpha = .73$ ), Conscientiousness ( $\alpha = .88$ ), Neuroticism ( $\alpha = .87$ ), and Openness to experience ( $\alpha = .75$ ). When implementing this personality measure to run Pearson's correlations (hypotheses II, III, IV, V), items were averaged to create subscales.

### **Procedure**

All demographic questions were administered to participants through a link provided by Qualtrics, an online, survey software program. Participants consisted of individuals from various backgrounds as the link was accessible through websites such as reddit and social media sites. Prior to beginning the survey, participants were asked to complete an informed consent that explained the sensitive nature of the survey. Participants were informed that they are able to close out of the survey at any time. Once participants agreed, they were directed to demographic questions first with other measures following. Upon completion or exit of the survey, participants received mental health resources as well as appreciation for their time given to the study. Participants were not given compensation for their involvement in the current study.

### **Analytic Plan**

This study used a hierarchical linear regression to analyze the role forgiveness has on adult mental health in survivors of childhood maltreatment while controlling for personality characteristics, maltreatment frequency, and gender. Step 1 of the model included personality traits (i.e., Extraversion, Agreeableness, Conscientiousness, Neuroticism, and Openness to

Experience), childhood maltreatment subscales (e.g., Physical Abuse, Emotional Abuse, Sexual Abuse, Physical Neglect, Emotional Neglect), and gender to predict an average general emotional distress score (i.e., depression, anxiety, and stress). Forgiveness was added in step 2 of the model. This hierarchical linear regression was used to test hypothesis I. The F-change statistic was used to see if the addition of forgiveness to the model significantly predicts average general emotional distress scores above and beyond the other predictors. Pearson's correlation was implemented to test hypotheses II, III, IV, and V prior to running the hierarchical linear regression. Additionally, a Steiger's Z test was used to test hypothesis IV by examining if positive feelings toward a transgressor (Forgiveness PP) was more negatively associated with mean maltreatment when compared to the absence of negative feelings associated with a transgressor (Forgiveness AN). A matrix correlation was used to calculate results and included correlations of Forgiveness AN and mean maltreatment, Forgiveness PP and mean maltreatment, and Forgiveness AN and Forgiveness PP.

## RESULTS

### Hypothesis I

A hierarchical linear regression was implemented with general emotional distress as the outcome to analyze hypothesis I (see Appendix F). General emotional distress (i.e., depression, anxiety, stress) was regressed onto forgiveness, while controlling for personality (i.e., Extraversion, Agreeableness, Conscientiousness, Neuroticism, and Openness to Experience), childhood maltreatment types, and gender. Personality, maltreatment types, and gender were entered in the first step of the model, and mean forgiveness (i.e., RFS) was entered into the second step. The first step of the model accounted for 56% of the variance in general emotional distress,  $R^2 = .56$ ,  $F(11, 300) = 34.38$ ,  $p < .001$ . In this first step, Neuroticism was significantly associated with general emotional distress,  $b = 0.43$ ,  $\beta = 0.56$ ,  $t(300) = 11.63$ ,  $p < .001$ . Along with Neuroticism, Conscientiousness was also significantly associated with general emotional distress,  $b = -0.08$ ,  $\beta = -0.10$ ,  $t(300) = -2.33$ ,  $p = .02$ . Regarding maltreatment types, physical neglect was the only maltreatment type significantly associated with general emotional distress,  $b = 0.09$ ,  $\beta = 0.15$ ,  $t(300) = 3.18$ ,  $p = .002$ . After adding mean forgiveness, the second step of the model accounted for an additional 1% of the variance,  $\Delta R^2 = .01$ ,  $\Delta F(1, 299) = 5.37$ ,  $p = .02$ . In the second step of the model, Neuroticism was again a significant predictor,  $b = 0.41$ ,  $\beta = 0.54$ ,  $t(299) = 11.06$ ,  $p < .001$ , as was Conscientiousness,  $b = -0.08$ ,  $\beta = -0.10$ ,  $t(299) = -2.35$ ,  $p = .02$ . Additionally, physical neglect was again associated with general emotional distress,  $b = 0.08$ ,  $\beta = 0.14$ ,  $t(299) = 3.00$ ,  $p = .003$ . Interestingly, mean forgiveness was significant and did account for a significant amount of variance above and beyond other variables as indicated by F change

for step two and it was individually a significant predictor of general emotional distress,  $b = -0.09$ ,  $\beta = -0.11$ ,  $t(299) = -2.32$ ,  $p = .02$ . Based on the results, hypothesis I was supported.

### **Hypotheses II, III, IV, & V**

Pearson's correlations were calculated to test hypotheses II, III, IV, and V to investigate the association between personality (i.e., Extraversion, Agreeableness, Conscientiousness, Neuroticism) and forgiveness (i.e., forgiveness AN, forgiveness PP) for those who have experienced childhood maltreatment (see Appendix G). Neuroticism and absence of negative feelings towards an individual's transgressor (Forgiveness AN) were negatively and significantly correlated,  $r = -.45$ ,  $p < .001$ . Neuroticism and positive feelings associated with an individual's transgressor (Forgiveness PP) were negatively and significantly correlated,  $r = -.14$ ,  $p = .01$ . In other words, people who are more neurotic, also experience less forgiveness toward their transgressor for those who have experienced maltreatment. Given the significance, hypothesis II was supported.

Agreeableness and absence of negative feelings associated with an individual's transgressor (Forgiveness AN) were positively and significantly correlated,  $r = .26$ ,  $p < .001$ . Agreeableness and positive feelings associated with an individual's transgressor (Forgiveness PP) were positively and significantly correlated,  $r = .28$ ,  $p < .001$ . In other words, people who are more agreeable, also experience more forgiveness toward their transgressor for those who have experienced maltreatment. This finding supported hypothesis III.

Extraversion and absence of negative feelings associated with an individual's transgressor (Forgiveness AN) were positively and significantly correlated,  $r = .28$ ,  $p < .001$ . Extraversion and positive feelings associated with an individual's transgressor (Forgiveness PP) were positively and significantly correlated,  $r = .17$ ,  $p = .001$ . In other words, people who are

more extroverted, also experience more forgiveness toward their transgressor for those who have experienced maltreatment. Based on the significance, hypothesis IV was supported.

Conscientiousness and absence of negative feelings associated with an individual's transgressor (Forgiveness AN) were positively and significantly correlated,  $r = .24, p < .001$ . Conscientiousness and positive feelings associated with an individual's transgressor (Forgiveness PP) were not significantly correlated,  $r = .02, p = .34$ . Given Conscientiousness and Forgiveness AN were positively correlated rather than negatively correlated as predicted, hypothesis V was not supported.

### **Hypothesis VI**

Steiger's  $Z$  was used to test hypothesis VI that mean maltreatment would be most negatively correlated with Forgiveness PP (i.e., positive feelings toward their transgressor) from the RFS than Forgiveness AN (i.e., absences of negative feelings associated with their transgressor, another subscale of RFS). When reviewing the one-tailed correlation between average maltreatment and forgiveness, results indicate that maltreatment is more strongly correlated to Forgiveness AN ( $Z = -1.81, p = .04$ ) than Forgiveness PP. This indicates that individuals who report having higher Forgiveness AN (i.e., less negative feelings toward their transgressor) also experienced less average maltreatment than those who have positive feelings toward their transgressor. Although results demonstrate a significant finding, this finding was in the opposite direction of what was predicated, thus hypothesis VI was not supported.

## DISCUSSION

The current study was conducted for various purposes: to provide further research on adulthood state forgiveness of individuals who experienced maltreatment during childhood; to focus on forgiveness as it pertains to negative outcomes (i.e., general emotional distress) and personality traits for individuals who experienced maltreatment; and to gain more knowledge that may be helpful when implementing forgiveness therapy. Past research has had difficulties generalizing negative outcomes for maltreated populations as many studies operationalize maltreatment differently and highlight different aspects of maltreatment (e.g., single vs. multiple maltreatment, frequency, severity; World Health Organization, 2016; Arata et al., 2005; Charak & Koot, 2015; Shin et al., 2013). Along with this complication in research, other aspects of maltreatment further complicate research as co-occurrence is common (Kim et al., 2017; Banyard, Williams, Saunders, & Fitzgerald, 2008). Although research does not pinpoint an exact way of quantifying maltreatment, many studies have noted negative consequences associated with maltreatment (Arata et al., 2005; Springer et al., 2003; Augusti et al., 2018; Kim et al., 2017).

Given the overwhelming statistics noting the frequency of maltreatment in children (World Health Organization, 2016), research continues to identify treatments and variables that help manage negative outcomes associated with maltreatment, including forgiveness. As with the concept of maltreatment itself, forgiveness also has definition complications given different perspectives. Additionally, different types of forgiveness (e.g., state, trait, dispositional) further complicate research as well (Freedman & Zarifkar, 2016). Freedman & Zarifkar (2016) note the potential for forgiveness to assist in healing for individuals who have experienced hurtful experiences. Respective studies have supported positive outcomes associated with forgiveness

interventions including an increased hope (Freedman & Enright, 2016) and decreased depression and anxiety (Freedman & Enright, 2016; Ghahari & Rad,2018). Current research is studying the effectiveness of forgiveness therapy for those who have experienced sexual and physical abuse (Rahman et al., 2018). For example, Freedman and Zarifkar (2016) note implications of forgiveness therapy for those who have experienced maltreatment including the need for an individual to experience treatment for longer for effectiveness.

Currently, research is continuing to grow regarding personality and forgiveness (Brose et al., 2005). Studies have provided both positive and negative results when considering personality and forgiveness. For example, high Neuroticism suggests individuals are less prone to forgive while Agreeableness is positively correlated to forgiving other people (Brose et al., 2005). The relationship between forgiveness and Extraversion, Conscientiousness, and Openness to Experience remains ambiguous given that research has indicated conflicting results (Brose et al., 2005; Walker & Gorsuch, 2002; Ross et al., 2004; Pos et al., 2016, Rogers et al., 2018). Past research has focused on various aspects of childhood maltreatment, negative outcomes, personality traits, and forgiveness. To the author's knowledge, research has not combined these variables to analyze if forgiveness is important when the type of abuse and personality have been accounted for. Establishing that forgiveness is significantly related to outcomes for survivors of maltreatment when controlling for other variables can provide valuable information on mechanisms of change for forgiveness therapy. Thus, this study was created.

Results from the hierarchical linear regression suggests forgiveness is a significant predictor for decreasing general emotional distress (i.e., depression, anxiety, stress). Although there is a small effect, forgiveness did account for a significant amount of variance above and beyond personality and abuse-specific variables. The results indicate that physical neglect,

neuroticism, and conscientiousness are significant predictors of distress when holding each other constant. Overall, regression findings imply that forgiveness is predictive of well-being even when holding type of maltreatment and personality constant.

All Pearson's correlations that were tested in this study were significant with the exception of Conscientiousness and Forgiveness PP. Although findings were significant, hypothesis V was significant in the opposite direction. Overall, those who are considered extroverted and agreeable experience state forgiveness at two levels; lacking negative feelings toward their transgressor and having positive feelings toward their transgressor. The agreeableness result is consistent with past findings (Brose et al., 2005). The extraversion finding is consistent with parts of Ross et al.'s 2004 study on trait forgiveness. Although these findings are consistent, it should be noted that the current study measured state forgiveness. This implies that regardless of measuring state or dispositional forgiveness, those who are extroverted and agreeable may be more prone to forgiveness in general. This implication is supported by Brose et al.'s (2005) study that found that those who are extroverted also have positive feelings toward their transgressor.

Pearson's correlations indicated that Conscientiousness was positively and significantly correlated with lacking negative feelings toward their transgressor and was not correlated with the presence of positive feelings toward their transgressor. This finding implies that those who are more conscientious (i.e., careful, attentive, hard-working, prepared) have the ability to work diligently to reduce negative feelings toward their transgressor while remaining aware of the wrongdoing that they experienced, thus inhibiting their ability to allow for positive feelings toward their transgressor. The current study's Neuroticism finding was consistent with Brose et al.'s (2005) study that Neuroticism negatively correlates with forgiveness. This finding suggests

that those who are neurotic (i.e., prone to mood swings, feeling down) are less likely to focus on forgiving their transgressor as they may be overwhelmed and/or fixated on the wrongdoing they experienced.

Results from Steiger's  $Z$  indicates that mean maltreatment was more strongly, negatively correlated with an absence of negative feelings toward the person they consider to be their transgressor (i.e., Forgiveness AN) than it was with having positive feelings toward their transgressor (i.e., Forgiveness PP). Although this finding does not support hypothesis VI, this information is beneficial in that lower levels of maltreatment is more negatively associated with experiencing less pessimistic feelings toward a transgressor than for those who have optimistic feelings toward their transgressor. This finding suggests that having the ability to deter negative thoughts may be more valuable than having the ability to illicit positive feelings towards someone who is responsible for maltreatment. This implication adds an interesting perspective to controversial forgiveness definitions highlighted in Freedman and Zarifkar's (2016) article as positive feelings toward an individual's transgressor may not be necessary when defining forgiveness.

### **Limitations**

These findings should be interpreted with caution based on a number of limitations. First, the current study measured childhood maltreatment by utilizing questions that were adapted from an ACE study (Taillieu et al., 2016). While the maltreatment measure used for the current study showed adequate Cronbach's alphas, a formalized measurement such as the Childhood Trauma Questionnaire- Short Form (CTQ-SF) may be a more psychometrically sound way of measuring maltreatment. Although online studies have many benefits (e.g., privacy, stop and start, comfort of own location), online studies also have drawbacks (e.g., dropouts due to decreased interest,

convenience sampling) as can be seen in Meade and Craig's (2012) study. This is particularly relevant as many participants ( $N = 94$ ) did not reach 100% completion. Another limitation includes platforms utilized to share study. Individuals who are on support sites (e.g., Reddit), may be more prone to treat or manage their maltreatment than those who are avoidant of their experiences. Had this study posted to various platforms, results could have produced greater variability in responses, thus more generalizable findings. Additionally, this study has difficulties with generalization as the majority of the sample consisted of those who identify as Caucasian (84%).

### **Future Research**

To further evolve personality and forgiveness research (e.g., state, dispositional), it is suggested that future research should investigate differences in an individual's ability to have a general sense of forgiveness toward others and forgiveness toward their transgressor when considering certain personality traits. Based on the hierarchical linear regression and correlation findings, further research could investigate effectiveness of forgiveness therapy for various personality traits by utilizing the five-factor model of personality. Additionally, forgiveness therapy and maltreatment types should be further analyzed in terms of effectiveness given forgiveness is a predictor of well-being.

Regarding positive and negative feelings toward a transgressor, future research should analyze differences in Forgiveness AN and Forgiveness PP across different types of maltreatment, rather than average maltreatment. Additionally, other areas may be beneficial to research including comparing levels of Forgiveness AN and Forgiveness PP in those who experienced childhood maltreatment (e.g., abuse, neglect) to adverse childhood experiences (e.g., exposure to domestic violence, exposure to substance use) in order to see if forgiveness may be

more beneficial in other negative childhood experiences. This could potentially better identify a population best suited for forgiveness therapy, while assessing the importance of positive and negative feelings toward a transgressor.

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## APPENDIX A

### DEMOGRAPHIC QUESTIONS

1. What is your age in years?
2. Which racial group do you most identify? (Choose all that apply)
  - a. Caucasian
  - b. African-American
  - c. Native-American
  - d. Hispanic/Latinx
  - e. Asian
  - f. Pacific Islander
  - g. Open Option \_\_\_\_\_
3. What was the sex you were assigned at birth (sometimes referred to “biological sex”)
  - a. Male
  - b. Female
  - c. Intersex
4. What is your gender identity? With which one of these do you most identify with?
  - a. Man
  - b. Woman
  - c. Trans/Transgender
  - d. Gender Queer
  - e. Gender Non-Conforming
  - f. Gender Fluid
  - g. Gender Non-Binary
  - h. Gender Expansive
  - i. Open Option \_\_\_\_\_
5. How would you identify your sexual orientation? With which one of these do you most identify?
  - a. Straight/Heterosexual
  - b. Lesbian
  - c. Gay
  - d. Bisexual
  - e. Pansexual
  - f. Asexual
  - g. Queer
  - h. Questioning
  - i. Open Option \_\_\_\_\_

6. Which religion do you most identify?
  - a. Catholic
  - b. Jewish
  - c. Protestant (e.g. Baptist, Methodist, Lutheran, etc.)
  - d. Hindu
  - e. Buddhist
  - f. Muslim
  - g. Mormon
  - h. Jehovah Witness
  - i. Scientologist
  - j. Agnostic
  - k. Atheist/Non-theist/Secular/Humanist
  - l. Spiritual but no formal religion
  - m. Open Option: \_\_\_\_\_
  
7. Are you currently attending or in your past attended therapy?
  - a. Yes
  - b. No
  
8. Do you live: In the United States or \_\_\_\_ Outside of the United States? Which state do you live in?: [Drop Down]

## APPENDIX B

### DEPRESSION ANXIETY STRESS SCALE SHORT FORM (DASS-21)

Directions: Please read each statement and choose a number which indicates how much the statement applied to you *over the past week*. There are no right or wrong answers. Do not spend too much time on any statement.

0 = Did not apply to me at all

1 = Applied to me to some degree, or some of the time

2 = Applied to me to a considerable degree or a good part of the time

3 = Applied to me very much, or most of the time

1. I found it hard to wind down.	0	1	2	3
2. I was aware of dryness in my mouth.	0	1	2	3
3. I couldn't seem to experience any positive feelings at all.	0	1	2	3
4. I experienced breathing difficulty (e.g. excessively rapid breathing, breathlessness in the absence of physical exertion).	0	1	2	3
5. I found it difficult to work up the initiative to do things.	0	1	2	3
6. I tended to over-react to situations.	0	1	2	3
7. I experienced trembling (e.g. in the hands).	0	1	2	3
8. I felt that I was using a lot nervous energy.	0	1	2	3
9. I was worried about situations in which I might panic and make a fool of myself.	0	1	2	3
10. I felt that I had nothing to look forward to.	0	1	2	3
11. I found myself getting agitated.	0	1	2	3
12. I found it difficult to relax.	0	1	2	3
13. I felt down-hearted and blue.	0	1	2	3
14. I was intolerant of anything that kept me from getting on with what I was doing.	0	1	2	3
15. I felt I was close to panic.	0	1	2	3
16. I was unable to become enthusiastic about anything.	0	1	2	3
17. I felt I wasn't worth much as a person.	0	1	2	3
18. I felt that I was rather touchy.	0	1	2	3
19. I was aware of the action of my heart in the absence of physical exertion (e.g. sense of heart rate increase, heart missing a beat).	0	1	2	3
20. I felt scared without any good reason.	0	1	2	3
21. I felt that life was meaningless.	0	1	2	3

## APPENDIX C

### CHILDHOOD MALTREATMENT QUESTIONS

Directions: Please read each statement and choose a response which indicates how often you experienced the following statements before the age of 18 years. Note that “guardian” may consist of the following (e.g. individual living in the home, parent’s partner, family member).

- 1 = Never
- 2 = Almost Never
- 3 = Sometimes
- 4 = Fairly Often
- 5 = Very Often

1. A parent or guardian swore at or insulted me.	1	2	3	4	5
2. A parent or guardian threatened to hit or throw something at me, but didn't do it.	1	2	3	4	5
3. A parent or guardian acted in any other way that made me feel afraid. *	1	2	3	4	5
4. A parent or guardian made me feel I was unimportant.	1	2	3	4	5
5. A parent or guardian was not a source of strength and were unsupportive.	1	2	3	4	5
6. A parent or guardian did not believe in me. *	1	2	3	4	5
7. I've been left alone or unsupervised before age 10.	1	2	3	4	5
8. I've gone without needed things such as clothes, shoes, or school supplies because a parent or guardian spent the money on themselves.	1	2	3	4	5
9. I've been made to go hungry or did not have regular meals prepared.	1	2	3	4	5
10. A parent or guardian ignored or failed to get me medical treatment.*	1	2	3	4	5
11. I've been hit so hard that it left marks, bruises, or caused an injury by a parent or guardian. *	1	2	3	4	5
12. I've experienced unwanted sexual touching or fondling, or any attempted or actual intercourse by an adult or other person that was unwanted or occurred when I was too young to understand what was happening. *	1	2	3	4	5

\*Indicates a follow-up question was asked if participants endorsed any response except “Never”. Follow- up questions were designed to appear at the end of each subscale (e.g.

Emotional Abuse, Emotional Neglect, Physical Neglect, Physical Abuse, Sexual Abuse) and participants are instructed to select all that apply. Follow-up question:

- a) Who did this? (Select all that apply)
  - a. Mother
  - b. Father
  - c. Stepmother
  - d. Stepfather
  - e. Boyfriend or Girlfriend of my parent
  - f. Other Family Member
  - g. Acquaintance, describe \_\_\_\_\_
  - h. Other, describe \_\_\_\_\_

An additional question will appear following the 12 items listed above. Participants who endorse any response requiring them to answer “Who did this” will also be asked:

- b) Think of your experiences and the people who did this to you, which was *most* significant? (Choose One)
  - a. Mother
  - b. Father
  - c. Stepmother
  - d. Stepfather
  - e. Boyfriend or Girlfriend of my parent
  - f. Other Family Member
  - g. Acquaintance, describe \_\_\_\_\_
  - h. Other, describe \_\_\_\_\_

## APPENDIX D

### RYE FORGIVENESS SCALE

Directions: Think of the person you chose as being *most* significant. Indicate the degree to which you agree or disagree with the following statements.

1 = Strongly disagree

2 = Disagree

3 = Neutral

4 = Agree

5 = Strongly agree

1. I can't stop thinking about how I was wronged by this person.	1	2	3	4	5
2. I wish for good things to happen to the person who wronged me.	1	2	3	4	5
3. I spend time thinking about ways to get back at the person who wronged me.	1	2	3	4	5
4. I feel resentful toward the person who wronged me.	1	2	3	4	5
5. I avoid certain people and/or places because they remind me of the person who wronged me.	1	2	3	4	5
6. I pray for the person who wronged me.	1	2	3	4	5
7. If I encountered the person who wronged me I would feel at peace.	1	2	3	4	5
8. This person's wrongful actions have kept me from enjoying life.	1	2	3	4	5
9. I have been able to let go of my anger toward the person who wronged me.	1	2	3	4	5
10. I become depressed when I think of how I was mistreated by this person.	1	2	3	4	5
11. I think that many of the emotional wounds related to this person's wrongful actions have healed.	1	2	3	4	5
12. I feel hatred whenever I think about the person who wronged me.	1	2	3	4	5
13. I have compassion for the person who wronged me.	1	2	3	4	5
14. I think my life is ruined because of this person's wrongful actions.	1	2	3	4	5
15. I hope the person who wronged me is treated fairly by others in the future.	1	2	3	4	5

APPENDIX E

M5-50

Directions: Without spending too much time dwelling on any one item, just give the first reaction that comes to mind. In order to score this test accurately, it is very important that you answer *every* item, without skipping any. You may change an answer if you wish. It is ultimately in your best interest to respond as honestly as possible. Mark the response that best shows how you really feel or see yourself, not responses that you think might be desirable or ideal.

- 1 = Inaccurate
- 2 = Moderately Inaccurate
- 3 = Neither
- 4 = Moderately Accurate
- 5 = Accurate

1. Have a vivid imagination	1	2	3	4	5
2. Believe in the importance of art	1	2	3	4	5
3. Seldom feel blue	1	2	3	4	5
4. Have a sharp tongue	1	2	3	4	5
5. Am not interested in abstract ideas	1	2	3	4	5
6. Find it difficult to get down to work	1	2	3	4	5
7. Panic easily	1	2	3	4	5
8. Tend to vote for liberal political candidates	1	2	3	4	5
9. Am not easily bothered by things	1	2	3	4	5
10. Make friends easily	1	2	3	4	5
11. Often feel blue	1	2	3	4	5
12. Get chores done right away	1	2	3	4	5
13. Suspect hidden motives in others	1	2	3	4	5
14. Rarely get irritated	1	2	3	4	5
15. Do not like art	1	2	3	4	5
16. Dislike myself	1	2	3	4	5
17. Keep in the background	1	2	3	4	5
18. Do just enough work to get by	1	2	3	4	5
19. Am always prepared	1	2	3	4	5
20. Tend to vote for conservative political candidates	1	2	3	4	5
21. Feel comfortable with myself	1	2	3	4	5
22. Avoid philosophical discussions	1	2	3	4	5
23. Waste my time	1	2	3	4	5
24. Believe that others have good intentions	1	2	3	4	5
25. Am very pleased with myself	1	2	3	4	5
26. Have little to say	1	2	3	4	5
27. Feel comfortable around other people	1	2	3	4	5
28. Am often down in the dumps	1	2	3	4	5
29. Do not enjoy going to art museums	1	2	3	4	5

30. Have frequent mood swings	1	2	3	4	5
31. Don't like to draw attention to myself	1	2	3	4	5
32. Insult people	1	2	3	4	5
33. Have a good word for everyone	1	2	3	4	5
34. Get back at others	1	2	3	4	5
35. Carry out my plans	1	2	3	4	5
36. Would describe my experiences as somewhat dull	1	2	3	4	5
37. Carry the conversation to a higher level	1	2	3	4	5
38. Don't see things through	1	2	3	4	5
39. Am skilled in handling social situations	1	2	3	4	5
40. Respect others	1	2	3	4	5
41. Pay attention to details	1	2	3	4	5
42. Am the life of the party	1	2	3	4	5
43. Enjoy hearing new ideas	1	2	3	4	5
44. Accept people as they are	1	2	3	4	5
45. Don't talk a lot	1	2	3	4	5
46. Cut others to pieces	1	2	3	4	5
47. Make plans and stick to them	1	2	3	4	5
48. Know how to captivate people	1	2	3	4	5
49. Make people feel at ease	1	2	3	4	5
50. Shirk my duties	1	2	3	4	5

APPENDIX F

Hierarchical Linear Regression Predicting General Emotional Distress

Predictor	<i>B</i>	<i>SE B</i>	$\beta$	<i>t</i>	<i>p</i>	95% CI
<i>Step 1</i>						
Neuroticism	.43	.04	.56	11.63	< .001**	.36 - .50
Agreeableness	-.04	.04	-.04	-.96	.34	-.12 - .04
Extraversion	-.04	.03	-.05	-1.16	.25	-.10 - .03
Conscientiousness	-.08	.03	-.10	-2.33	.02*	-.14 - -.01
Openness	-.03	.04	-.03	-.70	.48	-.12 - .06
Emotional Abuse	.06	.04	.10	1.55	.12	-.02 - .14
Emotional Neglect	.00	.04	.00	-.01	1.00	-.07 - .07
Physical Neglect	.09	.03	.15	3.18	.002**	.03 - .14
Physical Abuse	.04	.03	.10	1.79	.08	-.00 - .09
Sexual Abuse	.02	.02	.04	.90	.37	-.02 - .06
Gender	.00	.02	.01	.21	.83	-.03 - .04
<i>Step 2</i>						
Neuroticism	.41	.04	.54	11.06	<.001**	.40 - .49
Agreeableness	-.01	.04	-.01	-.29	.77	-.10 - .07
Extraversion	-.03	.03	-.04	-.82	.41	-.09 - .04
Conscientiousness	-.08	.03	-.10	-2.35	.02*	-.14 - -.01
Openness	-.04	.04	-.04	-.86	.39	-.12 - .05
Emotional Abuse	.05	.04	.09	1.38	.17	-.02 - .13
Emotional Neglect	-.02	.04	-.03	-.44	.66	-.09 - .06
Physical Neglect	.08	.03	.14	2.96	.003**	.03 - .14
Physical Abuse	.04	.02	.10	1.81	.07	-.00 - .09
Sexual Abuse	.02	.02	.03	.71	.48	-.03 - .06
Gender	.01	.02	.01	.31	.76	-.03 - .04
RFS	-.09	.04	-.11	-2.32	.02*	-.17 - -.01

Note. \*  $p < .05$  level. \*\*  $p < .01$  level.

## APPENDIX G

Correlation Matrix for Forgiveness and Personality

Variables	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	1	2	3	4	5	6
1. Forgiveness AN	2.67	.86	-					
2. Forgiveness PP	2.50	.86	.45**	-				
3. Neuroticism	3.67	.83	-.45**	-.14**	-			
4. Agreeableness	3.51	.60	.26**	.28**	-.23**	-		
5. Extraversion	2.62	.90	.28**	.17**	-.41**	.10*	-	
6. Conscientiousness	3.10	.87	.24**	.02	-.47**	.19**	.26**	-

*Note.* \*  $p < .05$  level. \*\*  $p < .01$  level.