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The transgressor did wrong, but I had done something similar:

Interpersonal forgiveness and cognitive dissonance

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ABSTRACT

Basing on the Dissonance-Attribution Model of Interpersonal Forgiveness, this study examined whether asking victims to visualize past transgression that was behaviourally similar to the hypothetical transgression would induce greater cognitive dissonance and further promote victims’ forgiveness. The present findings partially supported the hypotheses, showing that victims who visualized behaviourally similar past transgression had higher overall forgiveness level than participants who visualized behaviourally dissimilar past transgression and participants who visualized no past transgression. However, there were no significant differences in the participants’ causal attributions and affective empathy. The forgiveness-promoting effect of visualizing behaviourally similar past transgression was believed to be contributed by increase in the importance of dissonant cognitions and blocking of certain ways to reduce cognitive dissonance.
INTRODUCTION

Importance of Investigating Forgiveness

The importance of investigating intervention to increase forgiveness resides in the contributions of forgiveness to interpersonal relationship, individual psychological well-being and individual physical health. Forgiveness contributes to the restoration and re-strengthening of damaged relationship after transgression (McCullough & Worthington, 1995). It enhances psychological wellbeing, especially when the victims had strong commitment to the relationship with the offender (Karremans, Van Lange, Ouwerkerk, & Kluwer, 2003). High forgiveness level is associated with fewer physical symptoms, fewer somatic complaints, less medication taken, fewer fatigue and better sleep quality (Lawler, Younger, Piferi, Jobe, Edmondson, & Jones, 2005).

Definition of Forgiveness

Most researchers agree that forgiveness should be distinguished from “pardonning” (which implies relinquishing the legal penalties for the transgression), “condoning” (which implies justifying the offence), “excusing” (which implies considering the transgressor had defensible reasons for committing the wrongdoing), “forgetting” (which implies memory about the transgression has decayed or went unconscious), “denying” (which implies unwilling to recognize the transgression) and “reconciliation” (which implies restoring a relationship) (McCullough, Pargament, & Thoresen, 2000; McCullough & Witvliet, 2002).
Besides the above assumptions, there is still no consensus in other areas about the definition of forgiveness (McCullough et al., 2000). McCullough, Rachal, Sandage, Brown, & Hight (1998) defined forgiving as comprising decrease in the motivations to “avoid contact with the offending partner” and decrease in the motivations to “revenge against the offending partner or see harm come to the offending partner”. On the other hand, Enright and Coyle (1998) viewed genuine forgiveness as a voluntary and unconditional “gift” which did not result from third party pressure or apology. Although in the Chinese culture, unconditional forgiving was the ideal, daily life forgiving was seldom the case (Fu, Watkins, & Hui, 2004). Therefore, the definition of forgiveness given by McCullough et al. (1998) corresponds more to the real world situation and it would be employed in this paper.

**Factors Affecting Granting of Forgiveness**

**Relationship-related factors**

When people had close, satisfactory and committed relationship with the transgressor, they were more likely to forgive the transgressor (McCullough et al., 1998). Commitment means the intention to continue the relationship, including long-term orientation to the involvement and feelings of a close and emotional bond of affection (Karremans et al., 2003).

**Situational factors**

The presence of apology increases forgiveness (McCullough, Worthington, & Rachal, 1997), but transgressors who apologize without removing the offence are rated more
negatively than transgressors who do not apologized at all (Weiner, Graham, Peter, & Zmuidinas, 1991). Transgressors who confess are rated more favourably and are more likely to be forgiven (Zechmeister, Garcia, Remero, & Vas, 2004). In a study using hypothetical transgression, it was found that the likelihood of being forgiven of the transgressor was negatively related to the severity of the transgression (Boon & Sulsky, 1997).

**Social-cognitive factors**

Forgiveness is affected by attribution. When offence is more severe, victims are more likely to attribute the blame to the transgressor and consequently become less likely to forgive the transgressor (Bradfield & Aquino, 1999). Victims who attribute greater blame to the transgressors have more revengeful thoughts and behaviours and less forgiving thoughts and behaviours (Bradfield & Aquino, 1999). In marriage relationship, responsibility attribution has direct influence on forgiveness and it also affects forgiveness indirectly through reduction in negative emotional reactions and increase in affective empathy (Fincham, Paleari, & Regalia, 2002).

Affective empathy means the sharing of another person’s emotional states (Levension & Ruef, 1992). In the study of McCullough et al. (1997), participants’ affective empathy level was manipulated through group assignment. The first group was given an empathy-enhancing seminar, the second group was given a comparison seminar which talked about the efficacy of forgiveness and the control group was not given any seminar. The three groups of
participants’ forgiveness levels were measured before the seminars, right after the seminars and six weeks after the seminars. Participants given the empathy-enhancing seminars were found to have greater increase in forgiveness than participants given comparison seminar or participants given no seminar at all. McCullough et al., (1998) argued that affective empathy could completely mediate the apology-forgiveness relationship. In simpler words, it was argued that affective empathy could totally account for the relationship between apology and forgiveness.

**Cognitive Dissonance**

*An overview of cognitive dissonance*

Cognitions can be relevant or irrelevant to one another and relevant cognitions are either consonant or dissonant. If one cognition follows from the other cognition, the two cognitions are consonant; if the opposite of one cognition follows from the other cognition, the cognitions are dissonant. When people have dissonant cognitions, they would experience psychological discomfort and they are said to be having cognitive dissonance (Festinger, 1957). As having cognitive dissonance would make one feel psychologically discomfort, the presence of dissonance creates pressure to reduce or eliminate the dissonance.

The strength of the pressure to reduce the dissonance depends on the magnitude of the cognitive dissonance (Festinger, 1957). Festinger (1957) maintained that the magnitude of dissonance is a function of the number of consonant cognitions, the importance of consonant
cognitions, the number of dissonant cognitions and the importance of dissonant cognitions. It means that the magnitude of dissonance will increase when the number and importance of dissonant cognitions increase, provided that the number and importance of consonant cognitions are kept constant. Meanwhile, the magnitude of dissonance will decrease when the number and importance of consonant cognitions increase, provided that the number and importance of dissonant cognitions are kept constant. The measurement of cognitive dissonance requires a special cognition be defined as the generative cognition, then other cognitive elements would be assigned the status of consonant or dissonant based on this particular generative cognition. Festinger (1957) did not give clear criteria for how to weight the importance of a given cognition and Leippe and Eisenstadt (1999) suggested that the importance of a cognitive element depends on its criticality, relevance and centrality to self-definition. Self-definition is a central and broad-based developmental process throughout the life-span. It involves the establishment of a coherent, differentiated, stable, realistic and positive sense of self (Blatt & Blass, 1996). In other words, if a cognitive element is critical, relevant or central to whether a person can establish a coherent, differentiated, stable, realistic and positive sense of self, the cognitive element is important to the person.

Possible ways to reduce cognitive dissonance include adding consonant cognitions, eliminating dissonant cognitions, adding importance to the consonant cognitions and weakening the importance of the dissonant cognitions. The choice of way depends on the
resistance to change of each cognition and the cognition that is the least resistant would be the first cognition to be changed (Festinger, 1957). In the traditional forced compliance paradigms (e.g. Festinger & Carlson, 1959), cognitive dissonance was induced by making people “freely” do something that they would not do in normal situation, such as by getting people to advocate a position that they did not support.

**The hypocrisy-induced cognitive dissonance**

The theory of cognitive dissonance has undergone numerous theoretical challenges and revisions and among them is the hypocrisy paradigm brought by Aronson, Fried, & Stone (1991). The hypocrisy paradigm is an extension of the self-concept version of cognitive dissonance which suggests cognitive dissonance is induced when the positive self-concept is threatened (Thibodeau & Aronson, 1992). In other words, the positive self-concept is the generative cognition in the self-concept (Aronson, 1968). The hypocrisy paradigm is made up of two factors: advocating a position that one supports and being made mindful of one’s past failure to act accordingly. Both factors are necessary to arouse dissonance, meaning the presence of either factor alone is not sufficient to do so. When people find that they are not practising the way they support, they would feel hypocritical. Since most people’s self-concept does not include acting hypocritically, so their self-concept would be threatened and they would experience cognitive dissonance.

The hypocrisy paradigm has been successfully applied in many social areas. For example,
the study of Stone, Aronson, Lauren Crain, Winslow, & Fried (1994) has used it as a mean to encourage young adults to use condoms. In the study, subjects publicly advocated how important safe sex was and then they were systematically reminded that they had failed to use condoms in the past. To reduce dissonance, at the end of the experiment, more subjects in this hypocrisy condition bought condoms than the subjects in the control conditions and the average number of condoms bought by subjects in this hypocrisy condition was also greater than that bought by subjects in the control conditions.

In the study of Fried and Aronson (1995), when participants were given a chance to misattribute their arousal to sources other than their hypocritical behaviour, for example, to an overheated room, they no longer changed their attitude. Thus, the attitudinal change typically found within the context of hypocrisy paradigm was demonstrated to be not arising from priming, impression management and all other explanations which are not driven by a motivation to reduce arousal. Instead, the hypocrisy paradigm was confirmed as a form of dissonance and the attitudinal change was believed to be a dissonance reduction strategy.

**A Dissonance-Attribution Model of Interpersonal Forgiveness**

Takaku (2001) and Takaku, Weiner, & Ohbuchi (2001) have used hypocrisy paradigm to promote victims’ forgiveness towards people who transgress them. It was found that by asking people to recall past experience in which they themselves were the transgressors could facilitate their granting of forgiveness towards people who transgress them.
According to the research about self-serving bias and the fundamental attribution error, when people evaluate an experience in which they were the transgressor, they have the tendency to underestimate the influences of dispositional and controllable factors and overestimate the influences of situational and uncontrollable factors in explaining their behaviours. On the other hand, when people evaluate other people’s wrongdoing, they have the tendency to overestimate the influences of dispositional and controllable factors and underestimate the influences of dispositional and controllable factors and attribute the cause of the transgressor’s behaviours to dispositional or controllable factors.

In the self-concept version of cognitive dissonance, dissonance is induced when the positive self-concept is threatened. Having been reminded about their own past transgression, people would be mindful that when they evaluated their past wrongdoing, they failed to practise in accordance with what they are preaching, so they would feel hypocritical. Since most people’s self-concept does not include acting hypocritically, these people’s self-concept would be threatened and they would experience cognitive dissonance. To reduce dissonance, these people may change the way of attribution about the cause of transgression, such change may then increase positive emotions which in turn increase the likelihood of forgiving.

**Present Study**

**Objectives**

The present study would explore the way to further enhance victims’ granting of
forgiveness by using the basic framework of Takaku (2001) and Takaku et al. (2001). In the present study, it is speculated that if the visualized past transgression is similar to the hypothetical transgression in the dimension of behavioural similarity, the magnitude of cognitive dissonance would be greater and people’s forgiveness level for the hypothetical transgression would be higher. For instance, if the hypothetical transgression is about someone holding unjustified hostile manner towards a friend, when people visualize experience behaviourally similar to the hypothetical transgression i.e. experience in which they held unjustified hostile manner towards others, they would encounter greater magnitude of cognitive dissonance and their forgiveness level for the hypothetical transgression would be higher.

**Rationales**

Recall that the magnitude of cognitive dissonance is a function of the number of consonant cognitions, the importance of consonant cognitions, the number of dissonant cognitions and the importance of dissonant cognitions (Festinger, 1957). In the self-concept version of cognitive dissonance, the generative cognition is the positive self-concept (Aronson, 1968), therefore, cognitions that follow the positive self-concept are consonant cognitions and cognitions that negate the positive self-concept are dissonant cognitions. If a cognition is relevant, central and relevant to a person’s self-definition, the cognition is regarded as important to the person (Leippe & Eisenstadt, 1999). Possible ways to reduce eliminate
cognitive dissonance include adding consonant cognitions, eliminating dissonant cognitions, adding importance to the consonant cognitions and weakening the importance of the dissonant cognitions. The choice of way depends on the resistance to change of each cognition and the cognition that is the least resistant would be the first cognition to be changed (Festinger, 1957).

As suggested by the research about self-serving bias and fundamental attribution error, when people are given a research scenario of hypothetical transgression in which a friend holds hostile manner towards them, they would be likely to have the cognition “I reasoned the friend’s hostile manner as mainly a reflection of his/her disposition or the influences of controllable factors.” On the other hand, if people are asked to visualize a behaviourally similar past transgression i.e. an experience in which they held hostile manner, they would be likely to have the cognition “I reasoned my hostile manner towards my friend as mainly a reflection of the influences of situational or uncontrollable factors.” If, instead, people are asked to visualize a behaviourally dissimilar past transgression i.e. an experience in which they were late for an appointment, they would be likely to have the cognition “I reasoned my lateness as mainly a reflection of the influences of situational or uncontrollable factors.”

Since explanations attributing the cause of the transgressor’s wrongdoing in the hypothetical transgression to situational factors (for simpler presentation, in this paper, these explanations would be termed as “situational explanations”) or explanations attributing the
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cause of the transgressor’s wrongdoing to uncontrollable factors (for simpler presentation, in this paper, these explanations would be termed as “uncontrollable explanations”) would affirm that the people are having inconsistent ways of attributions really and simply because their roles in the hypothetical transgression and past transgression are different, each situational or uncontrollable explanation for the hostile manner of the transgressor of the hypothetical transgression is a dissonant cognition.

Compared with people who are asked to visualize behaviourally dissimilar past transgression, people who are asked to visualize behaviourally similar past transgression would be likely to think of more situational and uncontrollable explanations for the transgressor’s wrongdoing in the hypothetical transgression. For instance, traffic congestion may be a possible explanation for being late in an appointment, but it is not a reasonable explanation for holding unusual hostile manner. Thus, people who are asked to visualize behaviourally similar past transgression would be likely to have more dissonant cognitions, experience greater dissonance and grant higher level of forgiveness.

It is normal that the people who are asked to visualize behaviourally dissimilar past transgression would try to make sense of the hypothetical transgression and come up with a few situational and uncontrollable explanations; for example, they may guess with common sense that the friend holds unusual hostile manner because the friend has bad mood that day or because the friend was sick. However, as they did not hold hostile manner towards friend
or they do not remember they did, the situational and uncontrollable explanations are not so
relevant and critical to their self-definition, even the situational and uncontrollable
explanations are unconvincing, their self-definition would not be threatened so much.

On the other hand, for people who are asked to visualize behaviourally similar past
transgression, the situational and uncontrollable explanations are very relevant and critical to
their self-definition. They themselves have held hostile manner towards friend because they
had bad mood and became so irritable or because they were sick and became insensitive to
other people’s feelings, if the situational and uncontrollable explanations are unconvincing, it
would directly imply they were just excusing for their past wrongdoing, their self-definition
will be more severely threatened. Therefore, each situational or uncontrollable explanation
about the cause of the hypothetical transgression would be more important to people who are
asked to visualize behaviourally similar past transgression, it means that the importance of the
dissonant cognitions would be greater for this group and so the magnitude of dissonance
would be greater and in turn the forgiveness level of this group for the hypothetical
transgression would be higher.

Regarding the way of reducing cognitive dissonance, since for people who are asked to
visualize behaviourally similar past transgression, changing or removing the dissonant
cognitions (the situational explanations and the uncontrollable explanations ) would severely
threaten positive self-image; compared with people who are asked to visualize behaviourally
dissimilar past transgression, they would be more likely to change their way of attribution i.e. shifting from attributing the cause of the hypothetical transgression to dispositional or controllable factors to attributing the cause to situational or uncontrollable factors.

Furthermore, by increasing the behavioural similarity between participants’ past transgression and the hypothetical transgression, it becomes less likely that participants would reduce cognitive dissonance by adding the consonant cognition that the two transgressions are different and so the discrepancy in the explanations for each transgression is reasonable.

It may be possible that when some people read the hypothetical transgression, the hypothetical transgression may already serve as retrieval cue and remind them of behaviourally similar past transgression, if these people have held unjustified hostile manner towards friends in the past. This case is similar to the case in which people are asked to visualize behaviourally similar past transgression, the main difference is people in the first case spontaneously visualize that experience, but people in the second case are originally unaware of that experience and are encouraged to visualize that experience with external aid.

It is uncertain that exactly which information of the hypothetical transgression will appear as retrieval cues to participants. By saying that people may spontaneously think of behaviourally similar transgression, it is assumed that the information about holding hostile manner is serving as retrieval cues in those cases. However, it also seems logically possible that some people may spontaneously think of behaviourally dissimilar past transgression. For
example, the words like “friend”, “feel offended” may remind people that they have made his
or her friend feel offended, nevertheless, offending friends can be due to various reasons and
the wrongdoing was not necessarily about holding hostile manner. In terms of number of
dissonant cognition and importance of dissonant cognition, this case does not differ much
from the case in which people are asked to visualize behaviourally dissimilar past
transgression. The main difference is people in the first case spontaneously visualize that
experience, but for the second case, people are originally unaware of that experience and they
are encouraged to visualize that experience with external aid.

As affective empathy was argued to be a mediator for forgiveness (MuCullough et al.,
1998), given that in the present study, people who visualize behaviourally similar past
transgression are believed to have higher forgiveness level, these people may have greater
affective empathy level towards the transgressor of the hypothetical transgression than people
who visualize behaviourally dissimilar past transgression.

Hypotheses

The first hypothesis is that the higher the behavioural similarity between the hypothetical
transgression and the victim’s past transgression, the more benevolent would be the victim’s
attributions regarding the causes of the hypothetical transgression (perceive the causes as
temporary, external or uncontrollable). The second hypothesis is that the higher the
behavioural similarity, the higher would be the levels of affective empathy towards the
transgressor. The third hypothesis is that the higher the behavioural similarity, the fewer
would be the victims’ revenge motivations and avoidance motivations towards the
transgressor and the higher would be the victim’s overall forgiveness level for the
hypothetical transgression.

METHOD

Participants

The sample consisted of 68 participants (31 males and 37 females). 21 participants were
students of an introductory psychology course at the University of Hong Kong who
participated in the study as a partial fulfilment of the course. The remaining participants were
solicited through open recruitment. 64 participants were university undergraduate students
and 4 participants were university graduates and held bachelor degree. 2 participants were
excluded from the study because they reported that they did not have the requested past
transgression. 2 participants were discarded after participation because they were asked to
visualize behaviourally dissimilar past transgression, but at the end of the study, they reported
that they were reminded of a behaviourally similar past transgression when they filled in
Questionnaire 2. Furthermore, 1 participant was discarded because the participant was
assigned not to visualize any past transgression, but at the end of the study, he reported that he
was reminded of a behaviourally dissimilar past transgression when he filled in Questionnaire
2. At the point of data analysis, there were 21 participants in each of the Similar Group,
Dissimilar Group and Control Group. 5 participants in the Similar Group could spontaneously visualize behaviourally similar past transgression and did not go through the random group assignment.

To ensure the collected data were objective and truly reflect participants’ thoughts and feelings, during the study, all participants were blind about the true purpose of the study. Instead, they were told that the study aimed at exploring people’s reactions to various kinds of offence and the prevalence of various kinds of offence.

**Measures**

**Independent Variable**

*Behavioural similarity.* The behavioural similarity between participants’ past transgression and the hypothetical transgression were manipulated by requesting participants to visualize different kinds of transgression. There are two experimental conditions and one control condition. As the hypothetical transgression was about holding hostile manner, for the experimental condition of high behavioural similarity (Similar Group), participants were asked to visualize an experience in which they held hostile manner toward another person. The instruction was as follows:

“Now, please use three minutes to visualize an experience which most

suits the following criteria. The criteria are in the experience even though

the person did not do anything seriously wrong, you held hostile manner
toward the person i.e. in which you responded coldly, impatiently or impolitely. An example is when a friend who had been fairly close to you or your parent was trying to talk to you, even the friend did not do anything seriously wrong, you held hostile manner toward them and responded coldly, impatiently or impolitely.”

For the experimental condition of low behavioural similarity (Dissimilar Group), participants were asked to visualize an experience in which they failed to meet a time agreement. The instruction was as follow:

“Now, please use three minutes to visualize an experience which most suits the following criteria. The criteria are in the experience you failed to keep a time agreement i.e. in which you gave or return something to somebody late, urgently postponed or cancelled an appointment or you were late. An example is you promised to give something to somebody who had been fairly close to you, but you failed to do so at the originally agreed time.”

For the control condition (Control Group), participants were not asked to visualize any experience.

**Dependent Variables**

*Causal Attributions.* The Revised Causal Dimension Scale (CDS) (McAuley, Duncan,
& Russell, 1992) was used to measure participants’ casual attributions about the cause of the transgressor’s wrongdoing described in the hypothetical transgression. The scale comprised four dimensions, namely locus of casualty, stability, personal control and external control. There were 3 items for each dimension and 12 items in total. Participants were asked to use a 9-point scale to indicate their impressions or opinions about the causes of the transgressor’s wrongdoing of the hypothetical transgression. Higher scores reflected more internal, more stable, more personally controllable and more externally controllable causal attributions.

Affective Empathy. Batson’s Affective Empathy Scale (Coke, Batson, & McDavis, 1978; Toi & Batson, 1982) was used to measure participants’ affective empathy toward the transgressor of the hypothetical transgression. The scale originally comprised 8 items, following the practice of McCullough et al. (1998) which examined the role of affective empathy as a mediator of forgiveness, the present study used a four-item version of the scale. Participants were asked to use a 6-point scale to indicate the degree to which they felt each affect (empathic, concerned, moved and soft-hearted) toward the transgressor of the hypothetical transgression at the time of rating. Higher scores indicated higher level of affective empathy.

Forgiveness. The Transgression-Related Interpersonal Motivations Inventory (TRIM) (McCullough et al., 1998) was used to measure participants’ forgiveness level toward the transgressor of the hypothetical transgression. Corresponding to the definition of McCullough
et al. (1998) that forgiving comprises decrease in revenge motivations and decrease in avoidance motivations, the inventory could be further divided into two subscales, the Revenge subscale and the Avoidance subscale. There were totally 12 items, with 5 items in the Revenge subscale and 7 items in the Avoidance subscale. Participants were asked to use a 6-point scale to indicate their current thoughts and feelings about the transgressor of the hypothetical transgression. Lower scores indicated higher forgiveness level.

Additional explanations were given for two items so that participants would be clear about the meanings of the English idioms contained in the two items. Basing on the Concise Oxford English Dictionary (Soanes & Stevenson, 2004), additional explanation “make the friend suffer a loss or misfortune for the friend’s own wrongdoing” was put aside the item “I’ll make the friend pay”. Basing on the Oxford Dictionary of Idioms (Siefring, 2004), additional explanation “inflict similar trouble or harm on the friend as the friend has inflicted on me” was put aside the item “I’m going to get even”.

**Potential Confounding Factors**

*Dispositional Forgiveness of Others.* Since the present study did not have completely random group assignment, to ensure the differences in the participants’ scores in the dependent variables, if any, were not due to differences in participants’ dispositional forgiveness of others, participants were asked to complete the Heartland Forgiveness Scale Other subscale (HFS Other subscale) (Thompson, Snyder, Hoffman, Michael, Rasmussen,
Billings, Heinze, Neufeld, Shorey, Roberts, & Roberts, 2005). There were 6 items. Participants were asked to use a 7-point scale to indicate the number that best described their typical reactions to the type of negative situation described in each item. Higher scores indicated higher level of dispositional forgiveness of others.

*Perceived Severity of Hypothetical Transgression.* Participants’ perceived severity of the hypothetical transgression was measured on a 9-point scale to indicate the severity of the wrongdoing of the transgressor of the hypothetical transgression. Higher scores indicated higher severity. The measure aimed to ensure the differences in the participants’ scores in the dependent variables, if any, were not due to differences in participants’ perceived severity of the hypothetical transgression, which was suggested by past research to have influence on victims’ forgiveness (Boon & Sulsky, 1997).

*Manipulation Check.* Participants were asked to use a 9-point scale to indicate how similar the wrongdoing of the transgressor of the hypothetical transgression was to their wrongdoing in their past transgression. Higher scores indicated higher behavioural similarity. Such measure aimed to check if participants in the two experimental groups were successfully manipulated to perceive the requested degree of behavioural similarity between their past transgression and the hypothetical transgression.

**Stimuli**

As the hypothetical transgression of Takaku (2001) and Takaku et al. (2001) appeared to
include more than one kind of transgression, such as being irresponsible for not informing the victim about the lateness, returning something important late and partly destroying something important, if the hypothetical transgression was employed, it would be difficult to manipulate the independent variable of behavioural similarity. One prominent obstacle was that it may not be likely that every participant have experienced all of the various transgressions. Therefore, a new hypothetical transgression was written for the present study by using a scenario from the Willingness to Forgive Scale (Deshea, 2003) as the framework.

The new hypothetical transgression was believed to reflect a common transgression (Deshea, 2003), so participants would feel easy to project themselves into the hypothetical transgression and it would be likely that they had behaviourally similar past transgression. Main modifications about the new hypothetical transgression included the addition of background information concerning the closeness, relationship satisfaction and commitment between the transgressor and the victim. Such modification aimed to unify participants’ perception of the three factors, which were suggested by past research to have influences on victims’ forgiveness level (McCullough et al., 1998). The victim was written as having strong commitment to the relationship with the transgressor before the transgression took place, because victims’ forgiveness level for the transgressor was particularly associated with enhancement in the victims’ psychological well-being if the victims had a strongly committed relationship with the transgressor (Karremans et al., 2003). Then, to match the component of
“strong relationship commitment”, while at the same time not making the new hypothetical transgression itself too easy and in turn too likely for participants to grant forgiveness, the victim was written as having fairly close and fairly satisfied relationship with the transgressor before the transgression took place. Also, following the practice of Takaku (2001) and Takaku et al. (2001), a paragraph of apology was added to the new hypothetical transgression. The present hypothetical transgression was as follow:

You and your friend were fairly close; you have been fairly satisfied with your relationship with the friend and had the intention to continue the friendship, including long-term orientation to the involvement and feelings of a close and emotional bond of affection.

This friend stopped calling you to do things together. You brought it to your friend’s attention and the friend said sorry to you. Then several weeks went by without a phone call from the friend. You began to worry about the friend and phoned this friend, but your phone messages went unanswered. When you finally contacted your friend and asked the friend what was going on, your friend got angry and yelled, “You are so annoying! Don’t you have your own life to attend to? Can’t you stop being so controlling?”

One week later, the friend explained to you, “Something bad happened to
me recently and I was in a bad mood that day when I yelled at you. I apologize. I am so sorry. It is entirely my fault. I feel awful and terribly guilty; I must have caused you a lot of aggravation. I will do anything to make up for this.”

Procedure

Participants were first of all asked to complete Questionnaire 1 which measured their dispositional forgiveness of others. Then, they were given the hypothetical transgression and told to imagine how they would think, feel, and behave if something like that really happened to them as a victim. After that, they were asked if the hypothetical transgression reminded them of any experience of theirs.

Group assignment was carried out according to the participants’ responses. Participants who reported they could spontaneously visualize experience in which they held hostile manner were assigned to visualize that behaviourally similar past transgression (Similar Group). Participants who reported they could spontaneously visualize experience in which they had transgressed others by doing something other than holding hostile manner, were assigned to visualize that behaviourally dissimilar past transgression (Dissimilar Group). The remaining participants who could not spontaneously visualize any past transgression were randomly assigned to visualize behaviourally similar transgression (Similar Group), to visualize behaviourally dissimilar transgression (Dissimilar Group) or to visualize no past
transgression (Control Group).

Following the practice of Fointiat (2004), probing questions were raised to participants in the Similar Group and Dissimilar Group in order to facilitate their visualization of the past transgression. All participants of these two groups received identical number of probing questions. The probing questions were “Can u tell me whom did you offend?”, “When did the event happen?”, “What happened?”, “What were you thinking about in that situation?”, “How did you behave in that situation?” and “How did you feel in that situation?” Participants were noted that they were free to give longer answers to a particular probing question if they had more to say for that question.

After the interview, to compel participants to associate their own past transgression with the hypothetical transgression, the researcher pointed out whether and which of the key elements of the two incidents were similar or dissimilar. For the Similar Group, the researcher said:

“After listening to your experience, I find your wrongdoing in your experience behaviourally similar to the friend’s wrongdoing in the story. You may think there are some differences between your wrongdoing in your experience and the friend’s wrongdoing in the story. However, when we compare two incidents, we focus on comparing the major and most important elements of the two incidents.”
The major and the most important element regarding the friend’s wrongdoing in the story is ‘someone holding hostile manner toward another person’. In your experience, you also held hostile manner toward XXX (the victim of their past transgression), therefore your wrongdoing in your experience is behaviourally similar to the friend’s wrongdoing in the story.”

For the Dissimilar Group, the researcher said:

“After listening to your experience, I find your wrongdoing in your experience behaviourally dissimilar to the friend’s wrongdoing in the story. When we compare two incidents, we focus on comparing the major and most important elements of the two incidents.

The major and the most important element regarding the friend’s wrongdoing in the story is ‘someone holding hostile manner toward another person’. On the other hand, in your experience, you failed to meet the time agreement between you and XXX (the victim of their past transgression), therefore your wrongdoing in your experience is behaviourally dissimilar to the friend’s wrongdoing in the story.”

Next, all participants in the Similar Group, Dissimilar Group and Control Group were asked to complete Questionnaire 2 which measured the three dependent variables, the
potential confounding factors and the manipulation check. Finally, to ascertain that participants in the Similar Group and Dissimilar Group visualized only the requested kind of transgression, participants in these two groups were asked if they were reminded of any other past transgression. Likewise, to ensure participants in the Control Group did not visualize any past transgression, participants in this group were asked if they were reminded of past transgression.

RESULTS

Manipulation Check

An independent sample t-test showed that there were significant differences between the self-reported ratings of behavioural similarity between the participants’ past transgression and the hypothetical transgression of the Similar Group and the Dissimilar Group [t (40) = 8.83, p < 0.01]. Participants in the Similar Group (M = 6.05, SD = 1.32) perceived their past transgression as significantly more similar to the hypothetical transgression when compared with participants in the Dissimilar Group (M = 2.67, SD = 1.15). Cohen’s d = 2.79, reflecting a large effect size and a strong relationship between the experimental manipulation of behavioural similarity and participants’ rated behavioural similarity between their past transgression and the hypothetical transgression.

Causal Attributions

Cronbach’s alpha of the four dimensions of locus causality, stability, personal control and
external control were .58, .58, .78 and .72 respectively. Four one-way ANOVAs were employed to compare the causal attributions about the cause of the transgressor’s wrongdoing described in the hypothetical transgression of the Similar Group, Dissimilar Group and Control Group.

On the dimension of locus casualty, there were no significant differences \( F (2, 60) = 1.04, p = .36 \) between the attributions of the Similar Group (\( M = 16.90, SD = 4.33 \)), the Dissimilar Group (\( M = 18.33, SD = 3.90 \)) and the Control Group (\( M = 16.67, SD = 3.89 \)). The Eta squared for this dimension was .034, meaning about 3% of the variance could be explained by the independent variable of behavioural similarity between the participants’ past transgression and the hypothetical transgression.

On the dimension of stability, there were no significant differences \( F (2, 60) = .70, p = .50 \) between the attributions of the Similar Group (\( M = 9.80, SD = 3.40 \)), the Dissimilar Group (\( M = 11.10, SD = 3.24 \)) and the Control Group (\( M = 10.52, SD = 3.93 \)). The Eta squared for this dimension was .023, meaning about 2% of the variance could be explained by the independent variable of behavioural similarity.

On the dimension of personal control, there were no significant differences \( F (2, 60) = 3.07, p = .054 \) between the attributions of the Similar Group (\( M = 14.00, SD = 5.46 \)), the Dissimilar Group (\( M = 16.38, SD = 3.92 \)) and the Control Group (\( M = 12.81, SD = 4.76 \)). The Eta squared for the dimension of personal control was .022, meaning about 2% of the
variance could be explained by the independent variable of behavioural similarity.

On the dimension of external control, there were no significant differences \( F(2, 60) = .69, p = .51 \) between the attributions of the Similar Group \( (M = 11.86, SD = 4.73) \), the Dissimilar Group \( (M = 11.67, SD = 4.03) \) and the Control Group \( (M = 13.14, SD = 4.55) \). The Eta squared for the dimension of external control was .093, meaning about 9% of the variance could be explained by the independent variable of behavioural similarity.

### Affective Empathy

Cronbach’s alpha was .79, reflecting high internal consistency among the four items. A one-way ANOVA was employed to compare the affective empathy toward the transgressor of the hypothetical transgression of the Similar Group, Dissimilar Group and Control Group. There were no significant differences \( F(2, 60) = 2.36, p = .10 \) between the Similar Group \( (M = 13.43, SD = 2.89) \), Dissimilar Group \( (M = 11.67, SD = 3.85) \) and the Control Group \( (M = 13.43, SD = 2.11) \). The Eta squared was .073, meaning about 7% of the variance could be explained by the independent variable of behavioural similarity.

### Forgiveness

Cronbach’s alpha for the overall forgiveness level was .90, showing high internal consistency among the 12 items. A one-way ANOVA was employed to compare the overall forgiveness levels toward the transgressor of the hypothetical transgression of the Similar Group, Dissimilar Group and Control Group. There were significant differences between the
three groups’ overall forgiveness levels \[F (2, 60) = 6.45, p < .01\]. Post hoc test (Bonferroni) showed that participants in Similar Group (\(M = 13.39, SD = 7.17\)) were significantly more forgiving toward the transgressor of the hypothetical transgression than participants in the Dissimilar Group (\(M = 22.71, SD = 8.59\)) and the Control Group (\(M = 20.67, SD = 10.49\)), with \(p < .01\) and \(p = .029\) respectively. However, the Dissimilar Group (\(M = 22.71, SD = 8.59\)) did not have significantly different overall forgiveness level from the Control Group (\(M = 20.67, SD = 10.49\)), with \(p = 1.00\). The Eta squared was .18, meaning about 18% variation can be accounted for by the independent variable of behavioural similarity.

Cronbach’s alpha for Revenge subscale and the Avoidance subscale were .77 and .92 correspondingly, reflecting high internal consistencies. Two one-way ANOVAs were employed to further compare the three groups’ forgiveness level for the Revenge subscale and the Avoidance subscale. There were significant differences for both the Revenge subscale \[F (2, 60) = 6.04, p < .01\] and the Avoidance subscale \[F (2, 60) = 5.32, p < .01\]. Post hoc test (Bonferroni) showed that on the Revenge subscale, participants in the Similar Group (\(M = 4.52, SD = 2.73\)) were significantly less revengeful than participants in the Control Group (\(M = 7.95, SD = 4.10\)), with \(p < .01\). Also, though the difference was not statistically significant, there was a trend for the Similar Group to be less revengeful than participants in the Dissimilar Group (\(M= 6.90, SD = 2.81\)), with \(p = .065\). However, participants in the Dissimilar Group (\(M= 6.90, SD = 2.81\)) did not have significantly fewer revenge motivations.
than participants in the Control Group (M = 7.95, SD = 4.10), with p = .91. The Eta squared for the Revenge subscale was .17, meaning about 17% variation could be explained by the independent variable of behavioural similarity.

Post hoc test (Bonferroni) showed that on the Avoidance subscale, participants in Similar Group (M = 8.86, SD = 5.38) were significantly less avoidant than participants in the Dissimilar Group (M = 15.81, SD = 7.05), with p = .03. However, participants in the Similar Group (M = 8.86, SD = 5.38) and participants in the Dissimilar Group (M = 15.81, SD = 7.05) were not significantly less avoidant than those in the Control Group (M = 12.71, SD = 8.07), with p = .23 and p = .46 respectively. The Eta squared for the Avoidance subscale was .15, meaning about 15% variation could be explained by the independent variable of behavioural similarity.

**Dispositional Forgiveness of Others**

Cronbach’s alpha was .60, reflecting satisfactory internal consistency among the six items. A one-way ANOVA was employed to compare the dispositional forgiveness of others of the Similar Group, Dissimilar Group and Control Group. There were no significant differences [F (2, 60) = .25, p = .78] between the Similar Group (M = 26.10, SD = 3.82), Dissimilar Group (M = 25.48, SD = 5.26) and Control Group (M = 26.43, SD 4.11).

**Perceived Severity of Hypothetical Transgression**

A one-way ANOVA was employed to compare the perceived severity of the hypothetical
transgression of the Similar Group, Dissimilar Group and Control Group. There were no significant differences \([F (2, 60) = .27, p = .77]\) between the Similar Group (\(M = 5.10, SD = 2.97\)), Dissimilar Group (\(M = 5.43, SD = 1.83\)) and Control Group (\(M = 5.48, SD = 1.57\)).

**DICUSSSION**

**Implications**

The present findings showed that the experimental manipulation regarding the independent variable of behavioural similarity was successful because when being asked at the end of the second set of questionnaire, participants in the Similar Group rated their past transgression as more behaviourally similar to the hypothetical transgression than participants in the Dissimilar Group.

Since there was no significant difference between the three groups of participants’ causal attributions and affective empathy, the present findings were inconclusive to support the first and second hypotheses. The third hypothesis, which stated the higher the behavioural similarity the higher would be the victims’ forgiveness level, was partially supported. The present findings showed that the participants in the Similar Group, who were instructed to visualize behaviourally similar past transgression, had the highest overall forgiveness level among the three groups. Moreover, further analysis about the Avoidance subscale and Revenge subscale revealed that participants in the Similar Group were less avoidant towards the transgressor in the hypothetical transgressor than those in the Dissimilar Group, were less
revengeful than those in the Control Group and were marginally less revengeful than those in the Dissimilar Group. However, participants in the Similar Group were not less avoidant than the Control Group and participants in the Dissimilar Group were neither less revengeful nor less avoidant than the Control Group.

Since there was no significant difference in the dispositional forgiveness of others and the perceived severity of the hypothetical transgression between the Similar Group, Dissimilar Group and the Control Group, the significant differences regarding the dependent variable of forgiveness mentioned in the last paragraph are believed to be truly caused by the independent variable of behavioural similarity.

In past studies, compared with participants who were instructed to imagine themselves as the victim of the hypothetical transgression, participants who were asked to visualize past transgression perceived the cause of the hypothetical transgression as less stable (Takaku, 2001; Takaku et al., 2001) and less controllable (Takaku et al., 2001). The findings of the present study did not replicate the mentioned past research findings, suggesting that for a common transgression like the one described in the present hypothetical transgression, all participants were eventually able to name a few common causes out of common sense and in turn made similar casual attributions, even though they were not aware they have committed that kind of wrongdoing or though they indeed had never done so. Therefore, the changes in causal attributions caused by visualization of own past transgression were not big enough to
incur any statistically significant differences between the causal attributions of the Similar Group, Dissimilar Group and Control Group.

As there were no significant differences between the three groups of participants’ affective empathy toward the transgressor of the hypothetical transgressor whereas there were significant differences between the three groups’ forgiveness levels, the present findings suggested that higher forgiveness level was not necessarily associated with higher affective empathy and the findings did not support the view of McCullough et al. (1997) that forgiving was primarily empathy-driven. It seemed that in some cases, victims’ have higher forgiveness level not because they share the emotional states of the transgressor to a greater extent, but because of a rather self-focused reason, which is the victims simply have a stronger need to preserve their positive self-concept by increasing their forgiveness level for the transgressor.

Recall the magnitude of dissonance will increase when the number and importance of dissonant cognitions increase, provided that the number and importance of consonant cognitions are kept constant (Festinger, 1957). Also recall each situational or uncontrollable explanation for the hostile manner of the transgressor of the hypothetical transgression was believed to be a dissonant cognition for the participants in the Similar Group and the Dissimilar Group. Given that the present findings are statistically inconclusive to conclude that compared with the Dissimilar Group and the Control Group, the Similar Group has made different casual attributions for the hypothetical transgression at the time of rating, it cannot
be said that the Similar Group had higher forgiveness level because this group recognized
more situational or uncontrollable explanations for the hypothetical transgression and in turn
had more dissonant cognitions and greater cognitive dissonance after visualizing the
behaviourally similar past transgression.

Instead of having larger number of dissonant cognitions, it seemed that one possible
reason may be that the dissonant cognitions were more important to the Similar Group than to
the Dissimilar Group. Recall that the importance of a cognitive element depends on its
criticality, relevance and centrality to self-definition (Leippe & Eisenstadt, 1999). The Similar
Group has been reminded that they themselves have held hostile manner due to the situational
or uncontrollable factors, thus the defensibility of the situational and uncontrollable
explanations are very relevant and critical to the self-definitions of the participants in the
Similar Group. It is because if the situational and uncontrollable explanations are
unconvincing, it would directly imply they were just excusing for their wrongdoing, their
self-threatened will be more severely threatened. Therefore, each situational or uncontrollable
explanation about the cause of the hypothetical transgression might be more important to
participants in the Similar Group than participants in the Dissimilar Group. It followed that
compared with the Dissimilar Group, the Similar Group might feel more hypocritical and
might have greater magnitude of dissonance than the Dissimilar Group, causing the Similar
Group’s attitudinal change from not forgiving to forgiving to be greater and the Similar
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Group’s overall forgiveness level to be higher.

When people experience cognitive dissonance, the psychological discomfort would urge them to reduce the dissonance through include adding consonant cognitions, eliminating dissonant cognitions, adding importance to the consonant cognitions and weakening the importance of the dissonant cognitions (Festinger, 1957). The choice of way to reduce cognitive dissonance depends on the resistance to change of each cognition and the cognition that is the least resistant would be the first cognition to be changed (Festinger, 1957). Another possible reason behind the higher overall forgiveness level of the Similar Group is that the Similar Group was prevented from using the following two ways to reduce or eliminate the cognitive dissonance induced by visualizing past transgression. Firstly, in comparison to the Dissimilar Group, the situational and uncontrollable explanations were more critical to the self-definitions of the Similar Group, so the Similar Group was less capable of reducing the cognitive dissonance by removing these dissonant cognitions. Secondly, as the visualized past transgression was behaviourally similar to the hypothetical transgression, the Similar Group was prevented from reducing cognitive dissonance through adding the consonant cognition “the hypothetical transgression and the past transgression are dissimilar, so my discrepancy in the explanations for each transgression is reasonable”. On the other hand, with the mentioned consonant cognition in mind, the Dissimilar Group was able to reduce most of the cognitive dissonance induced by visualizing behaviourally dissimilar past transgression. Therefore, the
forgiveness-promoting effect of visualizing past transgression on the Dissimilar Group diminished to the extent that the Dissimilar Group was not significantly more forgiving than the Control Group.

When victims encounter interpersonal transgression, their “feelings of righteous indignation” give rise to revenge motivation and their “feelings of hurt-perceived attack” give rise to avoidance motivations (McCullough et al., 1998). Revenge motivations include motivation to make the transgressor suffer a loss or misfortune for his or her wronging and avoidance motivations include motivation to keep as much distance from the transgressor as possible. When participants first read the hypothetical transgression, it is natural that they developed revenge-related cognitions such as “The friend deserves my revenge and I would make the friend pay” as well as avoidance cognitions such as “The friend should be avoided and I would keep as much distance between us as possible”.

After visualizing behaviourally similar past transgression, the claims of participants in the Similar Group that the transgressor should be revenged and avoided implied they themselves should be revenged and avoided by the victim in their past transgression. Such implicit implication negates their positive self-concept which is the generative cognition according to the self-concept version of cognitive dissonance (Aronson, 1968), so revenge and avoidance motivations were dissonant cognitions to the Similar Group.

It was originally speculated that given the two mentioned ways of reducing cognitive
dissonance were blocked, participants in the Similar Group would then change their way of attribution regarding the wrongdoing of the transgressor described in the hypothetical transgression so that the casual attributions would become identical or at least similar to the causal attributions they made for their past transgression. It was speculated that such changes in causal attributions would in turn further promote forgiveness. However, the absence of significant differences in causal attributions about the hypothetical transgression between the Similar Group, Dissimilar Group and Control Group showed that in reducing cognitive dissonance, participants in the Similar Group might have sidestepped causal attributions and directly worked on another set of dissonant cognitions i.e. their revenge and avoidance motivations towards the transgressor of the hypothetical transgression. Since as articulated in the previous paragraph, the two other ways of reducing cognitive dissonance were blocked, to reduce cognitive dissonance, participants in the Similar Group removed more of their revenge and motivations than the Dissimilar Group, thereby leading to its higher overall forgiveness level than both the Dissimilar Group and the Control Group.

It was hypothesized the Similar Group would have both fewer revenge motivations and avoidance motivations than the Dissimilar Group and the Control Group, but the findings did not support the hypothesis. Interestingly, it seemed that the forgiveness-promoting effect of visualizing behaviourally similar past transgression operated differently on the two components of forgiveness i.e. avoidance and revenge. On the Revenge subscale of TRIM, the
Similar Group was significantly less revengeful than the Control Group and was marginally significant than the Dissimilar Group. In contrast, on the Avoidance subscale of TRIM, the Similar Group was only significantly less avoidant than the Dissimilar Group and there was not even a trend for the Similar Group to be less avoidant than the Control Group. It seemed that the forgiveness-promoting effect of visualizing behaviourally similar past transgression on the Revenge subscale was greater.

The mean score of all participants on the revenge subscale was 6.46 whereas the mean score of all participants on the avoidance subscale was 12.46, reflecting regardless of intervention, in average, the revenge motivations of the participants tended to be less intensified than the avoidance motivations of the participants. Recall that the choice of way to reduce or eliminate cognitive dissonance depends on the resistance to change of each cognition and the cognition with least resistance would be the first cognition to be changed (Festinger, 1957). It followed that the reason behind the greater forgiveness-promoting effect on the Revenge subscale might be that the revenge motivations of the participants were actually less intensified right after reading the hypothetical transgression and were in turn less resistant to be changed. Thus, when the Similar Group needed to find ways to reduce cognitive dissonance, the cognitions concerning revenge motivations were changed to a greater extent than the cognition concerning avoidance motivations, thereby making the forgiveness-promoting effect of visualizing behaviourally similar past transgression on the
Revenge subscale great enough to cause significant difference between the Similar Group and the Control Group and also to cause marginally significant difference between the Similar Group and Dissimilar Group. On the other hand, cognitions concerning avoidance motivations might be more resistant to change that the forgiveness-promoting effect of visualizing behaviourally similar past transgression on the Avoidance subscale was just great enough for the Similar Group to be significantly less avoidant than the Dissimilar Group only, but not also significantly less avoidant than the Control Group.

The practical implication of the present study lies in its extension and refinement of the intervention tactic brought up by the Dissonance-Attribution Model of Interpersonal Forgiveness, which is the tactic of increasing victims’ forgiveness level by asking the victims to visualize past transgression. In extension of transgressions which mainly involve actual material loss like the one described in Takaku (2001) and Takaku et al. (2001), the present study shows that the tactic is also applicable for transgressions which mainly involve emotional suffering such as the hypothetical transgression of the present study. Moreover, the present study shows that if the current transgression from which the victim is suffering is a common one, for the tactic to be effective, the victim should be reminded of a past transgression that is behaviourally similar to the current transgression.

**Limitations**

The major drawback of the present study is that in the present study, hypocrisy-induced
cognitive dissonance was not directly measured, but instead it was only inferred from attitudinal change in forgiveness. In the study of Takaku et al., (2001) which was a cross-cultural examination of the Dissonance-Attribution Model of Interpersonal Forgiveness, a 3-item scale was devised to measure hypocrisy-induced dissonance. However, the two items of the scale (“I would feel hypocritical if I judge myself as a more trustworthy and dependable person than he is”, “It would be unfair for me to think that I am a more responsible person than he is given my own past misbehaviour”) seem to be restricted to the hypothetical transgression used in that study and they are not applicable for the present hypothetical transgression which is about holding hostile manner. Therefore, instead of using that scale devised by Takaku et al. (2001), the present study followed the conventional practice of the majority of the other studies investigating hypocrisy-induced dissonance and infer the presence and magnitude of dissonance from the presence and magnitude of attitudinal change (e.g. Fointiat, 2004; Fried & Aronson, 1995; Stone et al., 1994).

**Directions for Future Studies**

The present findings suggested that victims who visualized behaviourally similar past transgression have higher forgiveness level because the cognitions concerning the situational and uncontrollable explanations given by the transgressor are more important to them. The findings raised the possibility that the visualization of behaviourally similar past transgression promote victims’ forgiveness by strengthening the effect of the apology or the explanations
given by the transgressor. Following-up this study, future studies may investigate whether the forgiveness-promoting effect of visualizing behaviourally similar past transgressor will disappear if the transgressor does not apologize or does not give any explanations for his or her wrongdoing.

To further increase the applicability of the intervention tactic of promoting victims' forgiveness level by asking the victims to visualize past transgression, future studies may explore whether increasing the relationship similarity between victims' past transgression and the hypothetical transgression would further enhance the victims' forgiveness level. Assume the hypothetical transgression is about being held hostile manner by a family member, a relationally similar past transgression is one in which the victim transgressed a family member and a relationally dissimilar past transgression can be one in which the victim transgressed a friend.

Our relationship with certain people affects our expectations about the attitudes and behaviours of those people, for instance, we may expect family members to tolerate our emotions but we may not expect friends to do so. A daughter who is scolded by her moody mother may attribute her mother’s hostile manner to the mother’s disposition; however when the daughter holds hostile manner towards her mother, the daughter may reason her wrongdoing as due to her expectation that family members should understand and tolerate her emotions. Therefore, visualizing relationally similar past transgression may make the victims
recognize more situational explanations for the current transgression, have more dissonant
cognitions, greater magnitude of cognitive dissonance and in turn greater forgiveness.

Certainly, it may also be possible that like the case of the present study, the
forgiveness-promoting effect of visualizing relational similar past transgression, if any, would
also work by blocking certain ways of reducing cognitive dissonance.

The present study confirmed that when people read hypothetical transgression, they may
spontaneously visualize behaviourally similar and behaviourally dissimilar past transgression.
When people visualize past transgression in greater details, they may be able to think of more
situational and uncontrollable factors leading to the transgressor’s wrongdoing, so these
people are likely to have more dissonant cognitions, experience greater cognitive dissonance
and in turn have higher forgiveness level. To examine if asking probing questions is an
essential step for the intervention tactic of promoting victims’ forgiveness level by reminding
them of their past transgression, future study may explore the effect of the detailedness of the
visualized past transgression on victims’ forgiveness level. Future studies may compare the
forgiveness levels of people who spontaneously visualize past transgression and those of
people who are aided to visualize past transgression with probing question.
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