Collectivistic Self-Construal and Forgiveness

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This study tested a theoretical model of the relationship between collectivism and forgiveness. Participants (N = 298) completed measures of collectivistic self-construal, forgiveness, and forgiveness-related constructs. A collectivistic self-construal was related to understanding forgiveness as an interpersonal process that involved reconciliation. Individuals with more collectivistic views reported higher trait forgivingness, which predicted the tendency to respond to specific offenses with decisional rather than emotional forgiveness. Individuals with a more collectivistic self-construal may place more value on interpersonal harmony, reconciliation, and decisions to forgive rather than emotional peace. Implications suggest that counselors understand issues of conflict, hurts, and forgiveness within an assessment of clients’ self-construal.

Keywords: forgiveness, culture, collectivism, self-construal

Counselors regularly address issues of forgiveness with their clients (Baskin & Enright, 2004; Sandage, Hill, & Vang, 2003; Wade & Worthington, 2003). This is especially true for clients who have experienced severe hurts and offenses that have negatively affected their mental health and well-being. Evidence has accumulated supporting the potential benefits of responding to such severe hurts with forgiveness, including improved physical and psychological health (Lawler-Row, Karremans, Scott, Edlis-Matityahou, & Edwards, 2008; Toussaint & Webb, 2005; Worthington, Witvliet, Pietrini, & Miller, 2007). Furthermore, research has shown that forgiveness interventions in psychotherapy or in psychoeducational groups can promote not only forgiveness but also greater well-being (e.g., Baskin & Enright, 2004; Lundahl, Taylor, Stevenson, & Roberts, 2008; McCullough & Worthington, 1995; Wade, Worthington, & Meyer, 2005). Given the positive effects of forgiveness, it is important to understand what influences the propensity to be forgiving.

Although forgiveness has received extensive empirical attention in the last 25 years (for reviews, see Fehr, Gelfand, & Nag, 2010; McCullough, Pargament, & Thoresen, 2000; Worthington, 2005), minimal research has explored how differences between cultures and differences in cultural self-construal or view of self affect people’s understanding and practice of forgiveness (Kadi-
In today’s global society, where geographical divisions are becoming less relevant, it is important to understand issues of conflict, hurts, and forgiveness within a broader cultural context. Initial research suggests that the forgiveness process does differ across a variety of cultures (Fu, Watkins, & Hui, 2004; Paz, Neto, & Mullet, 2008; Suwartono, Prawasti, Prawasti, & Mullet, 2007). However, the majority of theoretical models of forgiveness and the strategies to promote forgiveness have arisen from an individualistic worldview. Forgiveness is viewed as an intraindividual process, and people are encouraged to forgive for self-enhancing motives such as increased inner peace and emotional well-being. Less often has the interpersonal context of forgiveness been seriously considered (Baumeister, Exline, & Sommer, 1998; Zechmeister & Romero, 2002; for a review, see Rusbult, Hannon, Stocker, & Finkel, 2005). Thus, the primary goal of the present article is to examine empirically a theoretical model of collectivistic forgiveness that considers the roles of interpersonal harmony and reconciliation.

Understanding Collectivism and Forgiveness

The most widely studied pattern for organizing cultural differences over the past 25 years has been the dimension of individualism and collectivism (Oyserman, Coon, & Kemmelmeier, 2002; Triandis, 2007). Triandis (1995) defined individualism and collectivism using four main characteristics. Individualism is defined as a social pattern consisting of loosely linked individuals who (a) see themselves as relatively independent from the collective in which they are members; (b) are motivated primarily by their own preferences, needs, rights, or contracts they have made with others; (c) place more importance on personal than collective goals; and (d) tend to make decisions on whether to associate with others on an analysis of costs and benefits to the individual. Collectivism, in contrast, is defined as a social pattern consisting of closely linked individuals who (a) see themselves as connected with the collective in which they are members; (b) are motivated primarily by the social norms and duties of their collective; (c) place more importance on collective goals than on their own personal goals; and (d) emphasize their connectedness to other members of the collective.

In this article, collectivistic forgiveness is defined as a decision to forgive that is motivated by maintaining social harmony and occurs within a context that values reconciliation and relational repair (see Hook, Worthington, & Utsey, 2009). There are two propositions of this model. First, collectivistic forgiveness occurs within a broad context of social harmony, reconciliation, and relational repair. Second, collectivistic forgiveness focuses on a decision to forgive that is primarily motivated by a desire to maintain social harmony rather than a desire to regulate personal emotions.

In support of the first proposition regarding the context of collectivistic forgiveness, theorists have proposed a strong link between forgiveness and reconciliation for collectivists (e.g., Sandage & Wiens, 2001; Sandage
In a sample of students and teachers from the People’s Republic of China, other-oriented personality variables such as face concern, desire for harmony, and relationship orientation more strongly predicted trait forgivingness (one’s tendency to forgive others over time and across situations) than did individual personality traits such as self-esteem and anxiety (Fu et al., 2004). In a sample of adults from the Congo (collectivistic culture) and France (individualistic culture), collectivists viewed forgiveness and reconciliation as more closely related than did individualists (Kadiangandu et al., 2007).

With regard to the second proposition, we view forgiveness as involving two related but distinct processes (Exline, Worthington, Hill, & McCullough, 2003). Decisional forgiveness is a behavioral intention to reduce negative behavior toward the offender and (if possible and appropriate) restore positive behavior toward the offender. However, one can make a sincere decision to forgive yet still be emotionally unforgiving toward the offender (e.g., angry, resentful, hurt). Emotional forgiveness is the internal experience of replacing negative emotions with positive emotions (e.g., empathy, love, compassion). The relationship between a collectivistic orientation and decisional and emotional forgiveness has not yet been explicitly tested. Indeed, psychometrically adequate instruments to measure the constructs of decisional and emotional forgiveness have only recently become available (Worthington, Hook, Utsey, Williams, & Neil, 2007). We propose in the present study that individuals with a collectivistic worldview may view forgiveness as a prescribed duty that does not necessarily imply personal emotional change and will thus generally exhibit more decisional forgiveness than emotional forgiveness. In partial support of this proposition, some participants from a collectivistic culture (i.e., Taiwan) indicated a decision to forgive yet displayed physiological signs consistent with emotional unforgiveness (Huang & Enright, 2000).

Present Study

Although research evidence has started to accumulate that collectivism is a relevant construct for understanding forgiveness, this research has yet to empirically test a systematic theoretical model. Thus, the aim of the present study is to examine the two main tenets of the model: that for people who more strongly endorse a collectivistic worldview, (a) forgiveness will occur within a strong interpersonal context and (b) forgiveness will be more often decisional than emotional. To test these ideas, we measured collectivism in our sample by assessing self-construal. Collectivism has been strongly linked to an interdependent self-construal (Markus & Kitayama, 1991; Oyserman et al., 2002; Singelis, 1994). Most of the extant cross-cultural research on collectivism and forgiveness has compared two cultures (generally an Eastern and Western culture) and attributed differences in forgiveness to cultural differences in individualism and collectivism. However, despite the benefits of cross-cultural research, critics have observed that this assumption is problematic because cultures differ not only on individualism and collectivism
but also on many other variables such as language, honor, power, or other noncultural factors such as gross national product (Oyserman & Lee, 2008). To address this potential confound, we measured individual differences in collectivistic self-construal within a culture.

The first proposition is that people with a more collectivistic self-construal understand forgiveness within the context of social harmony, reconciliation, and relational repair. To test this proposition, we have three primary hypotheses. First, we hypothesize that people who have a more collectivistic self-construal will be more likely to reconcile with an offender. Second, we hypothesize that people who have a more collectivistic self-construal will be more likely to understand forgiveness as an interpersonal process (i.e., something that happens between two people) rather than an intrapersonal process (i.e., something that happens within one person). Third, we hypothesize that the relationship between forgiveness and reconciliation is influenced by collectivistic self-construal. Specifically, people with a more collectivistic self-construal will have a stronger relationship between forgiveness and reconciliation, and people with a less collectivistic self-construal will have a weaker relationship between forgiveness and reconciliation.

Whereas the first proposition of the model focuses on the relationships among trait variables, the second proposition focuses on the relationship between collectivistic self-construal and decisional versus emotional forgiveness of a specific offense (i.e., state forgiveness). We theorize that people with a more collectivistic worldview will be more likely to make a decision to forgive rather than experience complete emotional forgiveness. To test the second proposition, we have two additional hypotheses. Specifically, our fourth hypothesis is that people with a more collectivistic self-construal will report higher levels of decisional forgiveness (but not emotional forgiveness). Our fifth hypothesis is that people with a more collectivistic self-construal, because they have developed within a culture that values social harmony, will have a higher dispositional tendency to forgive (i.e., trait forgivingness). This disposition to be forgiving should in turn predict increased decisional forgiveness. Specifically, we hypothesize that the link between collectivistic self-construal and decisional forgiveness will be mediated by trait forgivingness.

**Method**

**Participants**

Participants were 298 undergraduate college students from a large urban university in the southeastern United States. Participants were recruited from an introductory psychology class and participated in the study in exchange for a small amount of course credit. The sample included 28.6% men and 71.4% women, ranging in age from 18 to 46 years ($M = 19.2$, $SD = 2.9$). Participants reported a variety of ethnicities, including 54.1% White/Caucasian, 22.8% Black/African American, 13.9% Asian/Asian American, 4.1% Latino/Latina, and 5.1% other.
Instruments

Collectivistic self-construal. We assessed collectivistic self-construal with the Interdependent subscale of the Self-Construal Scale (SCS; Singelis, 1994). Having an interdependent sense of self is one of the core characteristics of a collectivistic worldview (Markus & Kitayama, 1991; Oyserman et al., 2002). The Interdependent subscale of the SCS consists of 12 items that measure one’s tendency to think of oneself as interdependent with others (e.g., “It is important for me to maintain harmony within my group”). Participants indicate their agreement with each item on a 7-point rating scale from 1 = strongly disagree to 7 = strongly agree. Scores on the Interdependent subscale have shown evidence of internal consistency, with Cronbach’s alpha coefficients ranging from .71 to .73 (Singelis, 1994). Scores on the subscale have also shown evidence of construct validity. The Interdependent subscale predicted attributions to situational and contextual influences (Singelis, 1994). For the current sample, the Cronbach’s alpha coefficient was .78 (95% confidence interval [CI] = .74–.82) for the Interdependent subscale of the SCS.

Trait forgivingness of others. We assessed trait forgivingness, a person’s general tendency to forgive others over time and across situations, with the Trait Forgivingness Scale (TFS; Berry, Worthington, O’Connor, Parrott, & Wade, 2005). The TFS consists of 10 items that measure trait forgivingness (e.g., “I am a forgiving person”). Participants indicate their agreement with each item on a 5-point rating scale from 1 = strongly disagree to 5 = strongly agree. In multiple studies, scores on the TFS have shown evidence of internal consistency, with Cronbach’s alpha coefficients ranging from .74 to .80 (Berry et al., 2005). Scores on the TFS have also shown evidence of construct validity; were positively correlated with agreeableness, empathic concern, and perspective taking; and were negatively correlated with anger, rumination, and hostility (Berry et al., 2005). For the current sample, the Cronbach’s alpha coefficient was .77 (95% CI = .73–.81).

Trait reconciliation. We assessed trait reconciliation, the tendency to reconcile with an offender over time and across situations, with the Reconciliation Likelihood Scale (RLS), a measure created for the present study. The RLS is adapted from the Forgiveness Likelihood Scale (FLS; Rye et al., 2001). In the original FLS, participants read 10 hypothetical forgiveness scenarios and are instructed to imagine that the scenarios happened to them. Participants indicate, for each scenario, the likelihood that they would be willing to forgive the offender. For the RLS, participants read the same 10 hypothetical forgiveness scenarios as the original FLS. However, on the RLS, participants indicate the likelihood that they would be willing to reconcile or restore their relationship with the offender (e.g., “Your friend has been talking about you behind your back. When you confront this person, he/she denies it, even though you know that he/she is lying. What is the likelihood that you would choose to reconcile with your friend?”). Participants indicate their likelihood of reconciliation on a 5-point rating scale from 1 = not at all likely
to 5 = extremely likely. As with the FLS, the item scores are summed to yield a total trait reconciliation score. For the current sample, the Cronbach’s alpha coefficient for the RLS was .77 (95% CI = .73–.81).

Understanding of forgiveness. We assessed understanding of forgiveness with the Forgiveness Understanding Scale (FUS; Hook, 2007). The FUS consists of 12 items that measure the tendency to view forgiveness as occurring primarily within an interpersonal context or primarily within an intrapersonal context. Participants indicate their agreement with each item on a 5-point rating scale from 1 = strongly disagree to 5 = strongly agree. The FUS has two six-item subscales. The first measures the tendency to view forgiveness within an intrapersonal context (e.g., “A person can completely forgive another without telling him or her”). The second measures the tendency to view forgiveness within an interpersonal context (e.g., “The purpose of forgiveness is to heal the relationship between two or more people”). Scores on the FUS in multiple samples of college students have shown evidence of internal consistency, with Cronbach’s alpha coefficients ranging from .76 to .84 for the Intrapersonal subscale and .70 to .76 for the Interpersonal subscale (Hook, 2007). The 3-week temporal stability coefficient was .62 for the Intrapersonal subscale and .64 for the Interpersonal subscale (Hook, 2007). For the current sample, the Cronbach’s alpha coefficients for the subscales of the FUS were .80 (95% CI = .76–.83) for the Intrapersonal subscale and .72 (95% CI = .66–.76) for the Interpersonal subscale.

Decisional forgiveness. We measured decisional forgiveness of a person on a target offense with the Decisional Forgiveness Scale (DFS; Worthington, Hook, et al., 2007). The DFS consists of eight items that measure the degree to which one has made a decision to forgive someone of a specific offense. Participants indicate their agreement with each item on a 5-point rating scale from 1 = strongly disagree to 5 = strongly agree. The DFS has two four-item subscales. The first measures prosocial intentions toward the offender (e.g., “If I see him or her, I will act friendly”). The second measures harmful intentions toward the offender (e.g., “I will try to get back at him or her”). Scores on the DFS and subscales in multiple samples of college students have shown evidence of internal consistency, with Cronbach’s alpha coefficients ranging from .82 to .86 for the full scale, .78 to .83 for the Prosocial Intentions subscale, and .82 to .86 for the Harmful Intentions subscale (Worthington, Hook, et al., 2007). The 3-week temporal stability coefficient was .73 for the full scale, .72 for the Prosocial Intentions subscale, and .68 for the Harmful Intentions subscale (Worthington, Hook, et al., 2007). Scores on the DFS have also shown evidence of construct validity and were correlated with other measures of state forgiveness, trait forgivingness, forgiveness-related constructs such as empathy and anger, and a behavioral measure of forgiveness (Worthington, Hook, et al., 2007). For the current sample, the Cronbach’s alpha coefficients for the DFS and subscales were .80 (95% CI = .77–.83) for the full scale, .79 (95% CI = .75–.83) for the Prosocial Intentions subscale, and .78 (95% CI = .73–.82) for the Harmful Intentions subscale.
**Emotional forgiveness.** We measured emotional forgiveness of a person on a target offense with the Emotional Forgiveness Scale (EFS; Worthington, Hook, et al., 2007). The EFS consists of eight items that measure the degree to which one has experienced emotional forgiveness and peace for a specific offense. Participants indicate their agreement with each item on a 5-point rating scale from 1 = *strongly disagree* to 5 = *strongly agree*. The EFS has two four-item subscales. The first measures positive emotions toward the offender (e.g., “I feel sympathy toward him or her”). The second measures negative emotions toward the offender (e.g., “I no longer feel upset when I think of him or her”). Scores on the EFS and subscales in multiple samples of college students have shown evidence of internal consistency, with Cronbach’s alpha coefficients ranging from .69 to .83 for the full scale, .80 to .85 for the Presence of Positive Emotion subscale, and .76 to .79 for the Reduction of Negative Emotion subscale (Worthington, Hook, et al., 2007). The 3-week temporal stability coefficient was .73 for the full scale, .81 for the Presence of Positive Emotion subscale, and .61 for the Reduction of Negative Emotion subscale (Worthington, Hook, et al., 2007). Scores on the EFS have also shown evidence of construct validity and were correlated with other measures of state forgiveness; trait forgivingness; forgiveness-related constructs such as empathy, rumination, and anger; and a behavioral measure of forgiveness (Worthington, Hook, et al., 2007). For the current sample, the Cronbach’s alpha coefficients for the EFS and subscales were .76 (95% CI = .71–.80) for the full scale, .85 (95% CI = .82–.88) for the Presence of Positive Emotion subscale, and .77 (95% CI = .73–.81) for the Reduction of Negative Emotion subscale.

**Procedure**

We recruited participants from undergraduate introductory psychology courses. Students participated in exchange for a small amount of course credit. Participants completed the study online. Participants read a consent form that explained the procedures of the study and their rights as participants. They then indicated consent. We first instructed participants to think about someone who had hurt or offended them and to write a summary of the transgression. Participants then completed the questionnaires. Participants completed the situation-specific questionnaires based on their chosen transgression. We debriefed participants and gave them course credit for their participation. We provided participants with our contact information should they have questions or concerns.

**Results**

Prior to conducting the primary statistical analyses, we checked the data for assumptions, including missing data, outliers, and normality. Three cases had large amounts of missing data, and thus we deleted them from the analysis. After deleting these cases, we used mean substitution to correct for the small
amount of additional missing data (3% or less per item). To check for outliers, we examined the standardized values for each variable. We found a small number of outliers with standardized scores above 3 or below −3 (2% or less per variable). However, the outliers fell within the ranges of expected values and thus were considered to represent true responses and were retained in subsequent analyses. Examination of the histograms for each variable, as well as the skewness and kurtosis statistics, revealed that the assumptions of normality were met.

**Hypotheses 1–3 (Test of Proposition 1)**

The first proposition of the collectivistic forgiveness model was that collectivistic forgiveness occurs within a broad context of social harmony, reconciliation, and relational repair. We proposed three hypotheses to examine this proposition. The first hypothesis was that participants with a more collectivistic self-construal would be more likely to reconcile with an offender. This hypothesis was supported. Collectivistic self-construal was positively related to trait reconciliation, $r(293) = .25, p < .001$.

The second hypothesis was that participants with a more collectivistic self-construal would be more likely to understand forgiveness as an interpersonal process rather than an intrapersonal process. To test this hypothesis, we conducted a $t$ test for dependent correlations to determine whether the correlation between collectivistic self-construal and an interpersonal understanding of forgiveness ($r = .26$) was significantly different from the correlation between collectivistic self-construal and an intrapersonal understanding of forgiveness ($r = −.06$). This hypothesis was supported. There was a significant difference between these two correlations, $t(292) = 3.37, p < .001$.

The third hypothesis was that the relationship between trait forgivingness and trait reconciliation would be moderated by collectivistic self-construal. To test this hypothesis, we used a hierarchical regression analysis with trait reconciliation as the criterion variable, trait forgivingness as the predictor variable, and collectivistic self-construal as the moderator variable. In line with recommendations (Aiken & West, 1991), we first centered the predictor and moderator variables to reduce multicollinearity. As predicted, collectivistic self-construal moderated the relationship between trait forgivingness and trait reconciliation, incremental $F(1, 291) = 4.24, p = .040, \Delta R^2 = .01$ (see Table 1). This was a small effect based on Cohen’s (1988) guidelines of .02, .15, and .35 for small, medium, and large effect sizes, respectively. The moderator effects are illustrated in Figure 1. Tests of simple slopes revealed that the relationship between trait forgivingness and trait reconciliation was stronger at high levels of collectivistic self-construal (1 SD, $\beta = .48, p < .001$) relative to low levels of collectivistic self-construal (−1 SD, $\beta = .26, p = .002$). This hypothesis was supported.

**Hypotheses 4–5 (Test of Proposition 2)**

The second proposition of the collectivistic forgiveness model was that collectivistic forgiveness is more closely linked to a decision to forgive than to
the emotional experience of forgiveness. Accordingly, in the fourth hypothesis, we predicted that participants with higher collectivistic self-construal would report higher levels of decisional forgiveness (but not higher emotional forgiveness) than would those with lower collectivistic self-construal. To examine this hypothesis, we conducted a $t$ test for dependent correlations to determine whether the correlation between collectivistic self-construal and decisional forgiveness ($r = .15$) was significantly different from the correlation between collectivistic self-construal and emotional forgiveness ($r = -.05$). This hypothesis was supported. There was a significant difference between these two correlations, $t(292) = 4.34$, $p < .001$. Furthermore, collectivistic self-construal was negatively correlated with the EFS Reduction of Negative

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<tr>
<th>Step and Variable</th>
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<th>95% CI</th>
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<td>[.03, .19]</td>
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<td>Trait forgivingness</td>
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<td>[.26, .50]</td>
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<td>Step 2</td>
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<td>Trait forgivingness</td>
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<td>Collectivistic Self-Construal $\times$ Trait Forgiveness</td>
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Note. CI = confidence interval.

*$p < .05$. **$p < .01$.
Emotion subscale ($r = -0.18, p = .002$), meaning that as a person reports higher levels of collectivistic self-construal, he or she reports having more negative emotions toward the offender (e.g., more anger, resentment). It should be noted that although these relationships were significant, the effect sizes for the relationships between collectivistic self-construal and forgiveness of a specific offense were small based on Cohen and Cohen’s (1983) guidelines of .10, .30, and .50 for small, medium, and large correlations, respectively.

The fifth hypothesis was that because people high in collectivistic self-construal have strong norms to maintain group harmony, they would be more likely to develop a dispositional tendency to forgive (i.e., trait forgivingness), and thus would be more likely to respond to a specific offense with decisional forgiveness. We tested this mediation hypothesis using a series of steps outlined by Baron and Kenny (1986; see Figure 2). In Step 1, we established that the initial variable (collectivistic self-construal) significantly predicted the criterion variable (decisional forgiveness), $\beta = .15, t(293) = 2.51, p = .013$. In Step 2, we established that the initial variable (collectivistic self-construal) significantly predicted the mediating variable (trait forgivingness), $\beta = .29, t(293) = 5.11, p < .001$. In Step 3, we established that the mediating variable (trait forgivingness) significantly predicted the criterion variable (decisional forgiveness) while controlling for the initial variable (collectivistic self-construal), $\beta = .34, t(292) = 6.01, p < .001$. In this step, the initial variable (collectivistic self-construal) no longer significantly predicted the criterion variable (decisional forgiveness), $\beta = .05, t(292) = 0.82, p = .411$. The mediated effect of collectivistic self-construal on decisional forgiveness through trait forgivingness was significant, Sobel $z = 3.88, p < .001$. Thus, the fifth hypothesis was supported.

**Discussion**

The results of the present study provide insight into our understanding of how people with a more collectivistic worldview understand and practice
forgiveness differently than those with a less collectivistic worldview. Specifically, having a collectivistic self-construal predicted understanding forgiveness within the context of reconciliation, relational repair, and social harmony. Furthermore, having a collectivistic self-construal predicted making a decision to forgive the offender rather than experiencing emotional forgiveness, and this effect was primarily driven by a dispositional tendency to forgive.

These findings support previous theory and research that linked a collectivistic worldview with reconciliation and relational repair (Hook et al., 2009; Sandage & Wiens, 2001; Sandage & Williamson, 2005; Sigmund, 1999). Indeed, past research has shown that the tendency to forgive in collectivists is more closely related to variables associated with social harmony rather than personal emotional equanimity (Fu et al., 2004).

These findings have several implications for counselors, especially those who work with college students in the United States. When broaching forgiveness issues with a client who may have a more collectivistic self-construal, counselors should consider that the client might view forgiveness within the context of reconciliation and relational repair. Counselors often make sharp distinctions between forgiveness and reconciliation (e.g., Enright & Fitzgibbons, 2000; Freedman, 1998). Counselors should use caution when recommending forgiveness to a client with a collectivistic self-construal. Even though the counselor may clearly distinguish forgiveness from reconciliation, the client may not. Suggesting that a client forgive his or her offender could be harmful if the client conflates forgiveness and reconciliation. For example, clients who have been abused may prematurely seek to repair a relationship with their perpetrator. Or clients may believe that the counselor is encouraging them to reconcile, even though they do not feel ready to do so. This may heighten distrust and damage the therapeutic bond. On the basis of findings from the present article, counselors are encouraged to explore the meanings clients assign to forgiveness and related constructs. It may be helpful, after examining the context in which forgiveness unfolds, for counselors to phrase the process differently, not as “forgiving” but as “releasing anger while maintaining good boundaries.”

The findings of the present study also support previous theory and research that have suggested that those with a collectivistic worldview may make a decision to forgive, and that such forgiveness may not be accompanied by emotional forgiveness (Hook et al., 2009; Huang & Enright, 2000). However, the present research is the first to explicitly examine the relationships between collectivistic self-construal, decisional forgiveness, and emotional forgiveness.

The link between collectivistic forgiveness and decisional forgiveness also has important implications for counselors. Counselors should be aware that just because a client with a collectivistic self-construal reports that he or she has forgiven a transgressor, the person might not be experiencing emotional forgiveness or inner peace. The client may still conceal strong feelings of anger and bitterness in order to maintain highly valued social harmony. Counselors must approach this situation with cultural sensitivity. The counselor may implicitly assume—based on individualistic values—that
it would be best for the client to attain “complete” forgiveness. However, the counselor should remain aware that the client may value maintaining the relationship and social harmony more than the personal experience of emotional forgiveness and inner peace. Thus, the client might not share the assumption of the counselor and might resist work in the direction of promoting emotional forgiveness.

When working through forgiveness issues with clients who have a higher collectivistic self-construal, counselors are encouraged to work within the clients’ framework and understanding of forgiveness. Appealing to the clients’ values should enhance motivation to forgive. For example, it may be less beneficial for the collectivistic client to emphasize the personal psychological benefits of forgiving. Rather, it may be more helpful to focus on the interpersonal benefits of forgiving for the relationship and the society as a whole. Furthermore, it may be more helpful to focus on making a decision to forgive rather than on achieving complete emotional forgiveness.

Limitations of the Study

Although results supported our hypotheses, there are several limitations to our study worth noting. First, we used a cross-sectional, correlational design. Thus, although throughout the article we discussed the theoretical effects of a collectivistic self-construal on forgiveness, it is impossible with the current design to infer causality. When examining the relationships between trait measures (e.g., collectivistic self-construal) and state measures (e.g., decisional forgiveness), we have some confidence with inferring that the trait measure is influencing the state measure, because trait measures are conceptualized as personality measures that stay relatively consistent over time, whereas state measures are thought to change on the basis of the specific situation. However, when one examines the relationships between two trait measures (e.g., collectivistic self-construal and trait forgivingness of others), it is impossible to determine which trait measure is influencing the other or whether some third variable (e.g., religion; Paz et al., 2008) is driving both.

A second weakness of the present study is that the sample was limited to college students at a large urban university in the southeastern United States. One might presume that most are more individualistic in worldview than collectivistic. We observe, however, that White/Caucasian students made up only half of the present sample. Ethnic minorities (e.g., Asian Americans, African Americans) are typically more collectivistic than are Caucasians (Coon & Kemmelmeier, 2001). Thus, we contend that the sample did represent a sufficient range on the individualism–collectivism continuum to investigate our hypotheses. The variance of collectivistic self-construal in our sample was similar to previous research (Singelis, 1994). Regardless, our findings suggest that individuals with a more collectivistic self-construal differ in their understanding and practice of forgiveness. Future research should continue to examine whether these findings generalize to different populations from a variety of cultures.
A third weakness of the present study involves measurement issues. Because the topic of collectivistic forgiveness has only recently been theorized and never before studied directly, we had to use some measures that had not undergone full peer review. For example, we used two measures whose psychometrics were reported at a conference (e.g., the DFS and EFS; Worthington, Hook, et al., 2007), one adapted from a published instrument (e.g., the RLS; adapted from Rye et al., 2001), and one unpublished measure (e.g., the FUS; Hook, 2007). The use of non-peer-reviewed measures is far from ideal, although we note that the scores on the non-peer-reviewed measures had evidence supporting estimated reliability and validity drawn, in most cases, from multiple studies.

**Areas of Future Research**

There are several exciting avenues for future research. First, the present findings should be replicated using multicultural and cross-cultural populations. For example, participants from a more collectivistic culture could be compared with participants from a more individualistic culture. When researchers conduct comparison studies such as these, we encourage them to directly measure collectivistic self-construal rather than assume that cross-cultural differences in forgiveness are due to differences in collectivism. Related to this point, there has been relatively little research that has examined the extent to which forgiveness measures are reliable and valid across cultures. This psychometric work is necessary to ensure that participants from collectivistic cultures understand items on forgiveness measures similarly to participants from individualistic cultures.

Second, the present findings should be replicated using a longitudinal, quasi-experimental, or experimental research design that would lend stronger evidence for causality. For example, participants could be primed to think interdependently or independently. For example, Trafimow, Triandis, and Goto (1991) asked participants to describe the ways that they were either similar to or different from their family and friends. The first primed participants to think interdependently, whereas the second primed participants to think independently. Researchers could then study the effect of this on forgiveness and forgiveness-related constructs.

Third, the impact of collectivistic self-construal on forgiveness may be different for in-groups than for out-groups. Although we did not address this distinction, we hypothesize that the increased focus on decisional forgiveness may apply only for members of one’s in-group. If a person with a more collectivistic self-construal is in a situation in which he or she is trying to forgive a member of an out-group, the drive toward social harmony (and thus toward decisional forgiveness) may be absent. Most extant research has not addressed this distinction.

Fourth, research could be conducted on forgiveness interventions with collectivists. Perhaps tailoring a forgiveness intervention to a more collectiv-
istic worldview (see Hui & Ho, 2004, for a preliminary investigation) would be more effective for collectivists. For example, a collectivistic forgiveness intervention could stress the interpersonal benefits of and motivations for forgiveness. Along these lines, additional work could explore the effectiveness of culturally tailored forgiveness therapy on both in terms of forgiveness and personal well-being.

**Conclusion**

As counselors, we are ethically responsible to provide treatment that considers our clients’ personal needs including their cultural background and self-construal. The present study has shown that having a collectivistic worldview is intertwined with the ways in which a person understands and practices forgiveness. People with a more collectivistic self-construal tend to understand forgiveness within the framework of reconciliation, relational repair, and social harmony. Because of this focus, those with a more collectivistic self-construal are more likely to make a decision to forgive, yet this decision may not result in reducing the negative emotions associated with unforgiveness. Counselors must be aware of the cultural and individual differences that may affect their client’s views of forgiveness if they are to provide effective, ethically sound treatment.

**References**


