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Exploring Associations Between Children’s Forgiveness Following Parental Divorce and Psychological Well-Being

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ABSTRACT

To better understand the disparity in children’s reactions and experiences related to parental divorce, we explored differences in children’s forgiveness following parental divorce. Using different samples of divorced children (children, adolescents, young adults), the current research tested in four studies the basic prediction that children’s forgiveness is positively associated with their psychological well-being. We found that self-reported forgiveness was positively associated with indicators of psychological well-being, for adolescents and young adults, but not for children in late childhood. Furthermore, there was some indication that forgiveness toward the mother, compared to the father, was more important for well-being. The findings are discussed considering broader theoretical questions how forgiveness in the context of divorce may help to restore parent-child relationships after divorce.


KEYWORDS

Divorce; forgiveness; parent-child relationship; psychological well-being

Children experiencing the divorce of their parents must deal with many, often unwanted, changes (e.g., moving to a different school or house), as well as with parental conflict, anger, and distress. Parental divorce may thus onset feelings of resentment, sadness, and even intense anger in children (Amato, 2010). Some of these feelings may be directed at the parents. Children may be angry at their parents for splitting up or for talking negatively about the other parent so that they get caught in the middle (i.e., triangulation). This can be detrimental to the parent-child relationship, which in turn may have negative consequences for children’s psychosocial functioning (e.g., Davies & Cummings, 1994).

Based on the scientific literature on interpersonal forgiveness (Karremans & Van Lange, 2008; McCullough et al., 1998), we argue that forgiveness is key to understanding how children adjust to their parents’ divorce. Although a few studies addressed forgiveness after divorce, for example showing that forgiveness among ex-spouses is associated with better

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psychological well-being (e.g., Kluwer, 2016; Rye et al., 2005), higher coparenting quality (e.g., Bonach & Sales, 2002), and more constructive parenting (Rye et al., 2012), these studies exclusively focused on the ex-partner relationship.

Research on forgiveness in children with divorced parents is surprisingly scarce. In addition, research on children's adjustment to parental divorce relies mostly on parents' judgments of their children's well-being instead of children's own perceptions. However, parents may have biased perceptions and may underestimate children's negative feelings (e.g., Lagattuta et al., 2012). In the present research, we aim to explore in four studies whether children's forgiveness in the context of divorce is associated with their psychological well-being, using children's own perceptions and experiences concerning the divorce or separation (hereinafter referred to as *divorce*) of their parents. More specifically, we argue that feelings of unforgiveness combined with children's motivation to maintain the relationship with their parent(s) creates psychological tension, leading to a decrease in psychological well-being (for a similar reasoning, see Karremans et al., 2003).

Children's adjustment to parental divorce

When parents divorce, children become vulnerable to developing a wide variety of social, behavioral, and emotional problems (Amato, 2010; Lamb, 2012). Initially, most children experience distress when their lives, relationships, and living arrangements change and their parents have conflicts around the divorce (e.g., Karberg & Cabrera, 2020). For some children, these difficulties are short-lived and within a few years after the divorce, they are able to adjust and move on (e.g., Amato, 2010; Lansford, 2009). For others, however, the road to becoming well-adjusted is longer and paved with obstacles that hamper their coping with the divorce (e.g., Cavanagh & Huston, 2008; Van Dijk et al., 2020). Why does parental divorce put some children at risk for maladjustment and reduced well-being while others show resilience? There is increasing scientific attention to the factors that can explain these differences (e.g., Kelly & Emery, 2003; R. C. Van der Wal et al., 2019).

Most studies attempting to explain differences in children's post-divorce adjustment have focused on family functioning, such as parental conflict and economic difficulties (Amato & Keith, 1991; Hetherington, 1992). Yet, how children cope with parental divorce is also important. Indeed, children who perceive more control over their lives (Sentse et al., 2011), experience fewer feelings of (irrational) guilt about the divorce (Laumann-Billings & Emery, 2000), and those who do not suppress or deny their painful feelings regarding the divorce, tend to adjust better to the divorce (Roubinov & Luecken, 2013; Sandler et al., 1994). In line with these findings, the present study adopts an individual differences perspective and examines children's forgiveness. We

argue that children's (in)ability to forgive the parent(s) generally acts as a marker for vulnerability and resilience to hurtful events (e.g., Van der Wal et al., 2016), which may also help to understand the disparity in children's reactions and experiences related to parental divorce.

Children's forgiveness in the context of divorce

Forgiveness can generally be defined as a prosocial motivational change toward an offending other (McCullough, 2001). In the context of parental divorce, this means that children regulate their negative emotions, cognitions, and behavior toward the parent(s) caused by the divorce into more neutral or even positive ones (McCullough et al., 1998). Although children may initially respond with feelings of anger, resentment, and retaliation to hurtful events (e.g., Troop-Gordon & Asher, 2005), a forgiving response is more beneficial for children's well-being and the maintenance of relationships in general (Maio et al., 2008; Van der Wal et al., 2016).

Why would forgiveness in the context of divorce be associated with enhanced psychological well-being for children? To address this question, it is important to consider the parent-child relationship in which forgiveness is taking place. As most children do not want their parents to divorce, children may not always feel capable of responding with forgiveness in response to their parents' divorce, perhaps especially when the divorce was unexpected or accompanied by many changes. At the same time, most children are loyal to both parents, and need and want to be close to their parents, despite of what happened. In support of this, children often mediate their parents' disputes and feel caught between their parents following divorce (e.g., Amato & Afifi, 2006). Some children even have to maintain and potentially rebuild the relationship with each parent separately (independently of the relationship that parents have with each other). At some point, children may thus find themselves in a situation in which they are motivated to maintain or repair the relationship with their parents on the one hand but have a hard time forgiving them on the other hand.

This internal conflict is important for understanding associations between children's forgiveness in the context of parental divorce and their psychological well-being (Karremans et al., 2003). Psychological well-being can be seen as a broad category of phenomena that includes people's moods and emotions, overall satisfaction with life, and satisfaction with specific life domains (Diener et al., 1999). Not being able to forgive a parent for their divorce may undermine psychological well-being in at least two ways. First, the combination of a lack of forgiveness on the one hand, and the motivation to maintain a good relationship with the parent on the other hand may contribute to a state of psychological tension (Karremans et al., 2003). Psychological tension created by these competing motives may negatively affect children's psychological

well-being. Second, and relatedly, a lack of forgiveness may lead children to seek distance in the parent-child relationship following divorce (e.g., Hetherington & Jodl, 1994; Johnston et al., 2005). Children may also respond with aggression and revenge, which may trigger a reciprocal cycle of negativity within the parent-child relationship. Crucially, children who lack good and stable relationships with their parents after divorce are more likely to manifest behavioral and emotional problems during childhood and even adulthood (e.g., Amato, 2010; Lansford, 2009). Hence, we expect that forgiveness in the context of divorce is associated with enhanced psychological well-being for children because forgiveness restores positive relations with the parent, whereas unforgiveness harms the parent-child relationship and thus their well-being (e.g., McCullough, 2001).

There is some previous research that examined children's forgiveness in a divorce context. For example, Zagrean et al. (2020) demonstrated that in divorced families children's forgiveness is positively associated with better family functioning. Moreover, Nousse Graham et al. (2012) tested the effectiveness of a forgiveness intervention for adult children of divorce, aged 20 to 40 years old. Between-group analysis revealed little difference between the intervention-group and the control group, whereas within-group difference indicated the forgiveness intervention-group made significant positive changes on measures of forgiveness and parent – child relationship quality. Finally, Freedman and Knupp (2003) conducted a forgiveness intervention among adolescents who had experienced a hurt associated with parental divorce. They found, however, no significant differences in forgiveness between the forgiveness intervention-group and a control group. Hence, although there are some previous studies on this topic, support for our prediction that forgiveness in the context of divorce is positively associated with children's well-being is mostly preliminary and somewhat mixed.

The present research

The primary goal of the present research is to explore whether children's forgiveness in response to parental divorce is associated with enhanced psychological well-being. Considering that children remain children with divorced parents throughout their lives, we test our hypothesis in four separate samples of children of divorced parents, namely late childhood (Study 1), adolescents and young adults (Study 2), and young adults (Study 3 and 4).

We considered several control variables because we wanted to test the unique effect of forgiveness on children's psychological well-being. Firstly, we took into account three characteristics of the divorce: 1) perceived parental conflict, as previous research documented strong associations between parental conflict and children's well-being (Van Eldik et al., 2020), 2) time since the divorce, since many children show considerable

improvements in post-divorce adjustment over time (e.g., Amato, 2010) (in Study 4), and 3) whether children had contact with their father and with their mother or not (except for Study 1), as forgiveness may be a stronger predictor of well-being when the relationship is intact (e.g., Kluwer, 2016). Secondly, we controlled for three demographics: 1) age, since forgiveness tendencies tend to increase with age (Kaleta & Mróz, 2018), 2) gender, because divorce has stronger negative effects on psychological well-being of girls than boys (Størksen et al., 2006), and 3) living situation, because young adults who live on their own tend to report higher well-being as compared to those who live with (one of) the parents (Kins et al., 2009) (Studies 3–4).

It is important to note that all studies were part of larger research projects. Below, we describe in detail only the measures relevant to this paper. Due to strict procedures and participants who did not provide consent for sharing their responses, we are not able to share the data of Study 1 to 3. Materials and data scripts for Study 4 can be found at the [Open Science Framework](#).

Study 1

The purpose of Study 1 was to test our main hypothesis in a sample of children in late childhood whose parents were divorced. Specifically, we tested the hypothesis that forgiveness toward parental divorce is associated with enhanced psychological well-being.

Method

Participants

The study was part of a larger study on classroom seating arrangements (Van den Berg & Stoltz, 2018). It was conducted in agreement with the policies of the schools where the data were collected. Parents were informed in a letter about the study and had the option to decline participation (i.e., passive consent). In total, 32 parents declined to participate. Children were asked for active assent to participate before each assessment (none declined). The study was approved by the Institutional Review Board (ECSW2015–1210–347).

A sample of 1,547 children in grade 4 to 6 from 28 elementary schools in The Netherlands was invited to take part in the study, of whom $n = 205$ children had divorced parents (13%). The age range of the sample with divorced parents was 9–13 years old ($M = 10.25$, $SD = .95$) and 107 were girls (52.2%). A sensitivity power analysis indicated that with 205 participants, the study was able to detect correlations of $r = .19$ and larger, with 80% power ($\alpha = .05$, two-tailed).

Procedure

Participants completed the questionnaire in their own classroom. We started by assessing children's psychological well-being, since we wanted to prevent that thoughts about parental divorce would influence children's responses to the well-being questions. Next, children received questions about the relationship with, and between, their parents. In case their parents were divorced, we proceeded by measuring children's self-reported forgiveness toward parents in response to the divorce. Finally, to neutralize their mood, children were exposed to a fragment from the popular Minions movie, after which they were thoroughly debriefed. Participants received a small gift in exchange for their participation.

Measures

Psychological well-being. We used two different indicators of psychological well-being. First, children were asked to grade their life on a scale from 1 (*the worst possible life*) to 10 (*the best possible life*) (Cantril, 1965). Second, children's general life happiness was measured using the Delighted-Terrible Scale (Andrews & Withey, 1976). Children were asked to circle the number that best described how they felt at the moment given five facial pictures with expressions ranging from sad to happy (1 to 5).

Questions about the parents. Children were asked whether they had contact with their father and with their mother, and if so, how they would rate the relationship quality with their father and with their mother at the moment, from 1 (*not good at all*) to 7 (*very good*). Next, they were asked how often their parents fight with each other, 1 (*never*) to 7 (*a lot*).

Forgiveness. Children were asked on a scale from 1 (*not at all*) to 7 (*very much*); at this moment, to what extent can you forgive your parents for the divorce?

Results

Analyses were performed in SPSS 26.0. The descriptive statistics are reported in Table 1 and correlations are reported in Table S1 (see Supplementary Materials). To examine unique associations with psychological well-being following divorce, we conducted multiple linear regression analyses in which we regressed grade for life and subjective happiness on forgiveness, controlling for divorce characteristics (perceived parental conflict frequency and contact with the father), age, and gender. We could not control for children's contact with the mother, since all children had contact with their mother. Regarding grade for life (Table 2), we only found a unique effect of gender: boys gave a higher grade to their lives than girls. Regarding subjective happiness

Table 1. Means, Standard Deviations, and frequencies of main variables (study 1–4).

	Study 1 Children <i>n</i> = 205 M (<i>SD</i>)	Study 2 Adolescents/Young Adults <i>n</i> = 218 M (<i>SD</i>)	Study 3 Young Adults <i>n</i> = 452 M (<i>SD</i>)	Study 4 Young Adults <i>n</i> = 160 M (<i>SD</i>)
Age	10.25 (0.95)	17.46 (2.32)	21.81 (2.00)	21.49 (1.99)
% Female	52.2%	88.1%	89.8%	76.3%
% Living on their own	-	7.8%	61.7%	71.9%
Parental conflict frequency (1–7)	3.34 (2.08)	2.33 ^a (1.21)	1.58 ^a (0.95)	0.77 ^b (1.76)
Parental conflict severity (1–7)	-	-	-	3.38 (1.76)
Time since divorce in years	-	-	-	8.99 (5.78)
Grade for life (1–10)	8.13 (1.64)	5.87 (1.49)	7.32 (0.94)	-
Satisfaction with life (1–7)	-	3.76 (1.28)	5.13 (0.96)	4.82 (1.07)
Subjective happiness (1–7)	4.14 (0.89) ^a	3.86 (1.39)	5.40 (1.11)	4.60 (1.16)
% Contact father: yes	99.5%	89.9%	95.4%	86.9%
% Contact mother: yes	100%	97.7%	99.3%	98.1%
Relationship quality father (1–7)	5.87 (1.61)	4.13 (2.16)	4.46 (1.92)	4.92 (1.44)
Relationship quality mother (1–7)	6.44 (1.03)	5.09 (1.91)	5.75 (1.44)	5.71 (1.29)
Divorce-specific forgiveness (1–7)	5.46 (1.88)	3.36 (1.24)	4.31 (0.97)	-
Divorce-specific forgiveness father (1–7)	-	-	-	5.51 (1.67)
Divorce-specific forgiveness mother (1–7)	-	-	-	6.18 (1.17)

Note. ^arange = 1–5, ^b Open-ended question: *How often are your parents in conflict with each other on average on a weekly basis?*

(Table 4), we only found a significant unique and negative effect of parental conflict frequency. Thus, in a sample of children in late childhood we found no support for our hypothesis that forgiveness toward parental divorce is associated with enhanced psychological well-being.

Study 2

In Study 2, we sought to test our hypothesis that divorce-specific forgiveness is associated with psychological well-being in adolescents and young adults. Forgiveness toward parents might bear particular importance during adolescence and early adulthood when young people develop their own identity and detach themselves from their parents (e.g., Arseth et al., 2009). Issues around divorce may therefore have a stronger impact on their well-being. We used a sample of adolescents and young adults (11 years and older). Importantly, the participants were recruited from an intervention program in which adolescents and young adults with divorced parents were brought into contact with young adults for support. As the present sample includes the adolescents and young adults that were seeking support, this sample is likely to be relatively more distressed than the general population with divorced parents.

Method

Participants

We used baseline data from an effect study on the Buddy Program (Van der Wal et al., 2021), a multiple-wave study among children with divorced parents

in the Netherlands. In the Buddy Program, adolescents with divorced parents are brought into contact with young adults (a Buddy, over 18 years old), who also have divorced parents. To find support, they can communicate with each other via an app. The data relevant to the current study were collected among adolescents seeking support before the Buddy Program started, and before they got in contact with a Buddy. The study was approved by the Institutional Review Board of our institution (16–093).

A sample of 218 adolescents and young adults participated in this study, ranging in age from 11 to 24 years old (192 girls; $M_{\text{age}} = 17.46$, $SD_{\text{age}} = 2.32$). Of this sample, 83% were (high school/University) students, and the rest had finished school/University; 82% lived with (one of) their parents, and 8% lived on their own. Most participants were born in the Netherlands (97%). A sensitivity power analysis indicated that with 218 participants, the study was able to detect correlations of $r = .19$ and larger, with 80% power ($\alpha = .05$, two-tailed).

Procedure

As soon as participants signed up for the Buddy Program, they were invited to participate in a study evaluating the Buddy Program. In an information letter, participants were told that they would receive several questionnaires related to their lives as a child with divorced parents. If they were interested, participants could leave their e-mail address, after which they were asked to read and sign the consent form. For participants younger than 16 years old, one of their parents was also asked to read the information letter and to consent with the adolescent's participation in the study.

Once consent was received, participants received a link to the questionnaire programmed in Qualtrics. Completing the questionnaire took about 30 minutes. Participants answered various questions regarding their parents' divorce, their well-being, and their perception of the divorce. Only those questions relevant for the current study are reported. At the end, participants were debriefed and thanked for their participation.

Measures

Psychological well-being. We used three indicators of psychological well-being. First, as in Study 1, participants were asked to grade their life on a scale from 1 (*the worst possible life*) to 10 (*the best possible life*) (Cantril, 1965). Participants also completed the Satisfaction with Life Scale (SwLS; Diener et al., 1985). Participants were asked to rate their agreement from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 7 (*strongly agree*) with five statements (e.g., "In most ways, my life is close to my ideal"). Cronbach's α was .81. Third, participants' subjective happiness was measured using the Subjective Happiness Scale (SHS; Lyubomirsky & Lepper, 1999). For four statements, participants were asked to indicate to what extent the descriptions were most appropriate to them (e.g., "In general, I consider

myself, from 1 (*not a very happy person*) to 7 (*a very happy person*). Cronbach's α was .84.

Questions about the parents. Participants were asked whether they had contact with their father and mother, and how they would rate the relationship quality with their father and with their mother at the moment, on a scale from 1 (*not good at all*) to 7 (*very good*). Participants were also asked how long ago the divorce had taken place in years (ranging from 0 to 25 years ago). Perceived parental conflict frequency was assessed by asking whether their parents fight in their presence from 1 (*not at all*) to 5 (*always*).

Forgiveness. On a scale from 1 (*not at all*) to 7 (*very much*) participants were asked: At this moment, to what extent can you forgive your parents for the divorce?

Results

Analyses were performed in SPSS 26.0. The descriptive statistics are reported in Table 1 and correlations are reported in Table S2 (see Supplementary Materials). As can be seen, participants' scores on subjective happiness and satisfaction with life were around the center of the scale, and their grade for their life was on average 5.87. These results are substantially lower than a norm-group of Dutch adolescents reporting 7.3 as overall grade for their life (Health Behavior in School-aged Children-Netherlands, 2017). Hence, these findings support the suggestion that this sample was relatively distressed.

To examine the unique associations with psychological well-being following divorce, we conducted multiple linear regression analyses in which we regressed grade for life, satisfaction with life and subjective happiness on forgiveness, controlling for divorce characteristics (perceived parental conflict frequency and contact with the father and with the mother), and demographics (age and gender). Regarding grade for life (Table 2), satisfaction with life (Table 3), and subjective happiness (Table 4), we found significant unique and positive effects of forgiveness. We also found unique negative effects of perceived parental conflict frequency. Thus, in a sample of adolescents and young adults we found support for our hypothesis that forgiveness in the context of divorce is associated with enhanced psychological well-being.

Table 3. Regression of satisfaction with life with Divorce-specific Forgiveness and controls as predictors (study 2-4).

	Study 2 Adolescents/Young Adults (n = 218)				Study 3 Young Adults (n = 452)				Study 4 Young adults (n = 160)						
	β	Cl _{low}	Cl _{high}	t	p	β	Cl _{low}	Cl _{high}	t	p	β	Cl _{low}	Cl _{high}	t	p
Divorce-specific forgiveness	.23	.11	.37	3.64	<.001	.24	.15	.33	5.14	<.001	.02	-.11	.14	0.24	.807
Divorce-specific forgiveness father											.17	-.01	.32	1.81	.072
Divorce-specific forgiveness mother	-.11	-1.00	.08	-1.67	.097	-.01	-.46	.36	-0.23	.817	-.22	-1.31	-.08	-2.24	.026
Contact father ^a	-.01	-1.13	1.03	-0.09	.927	-.02	-1.29	.83	-0.43	.668	-.01	-1.46	1.25	-0.16	.877
Contact mother ^a	-.25	-.40	-.13	-3.92	<.001	-.11	-.21	-.02	-2.47	.014	.09	-.05	.16	1.07	.287
Parental conflict frequency											-.10	-.17	.05	-1.14	.258
Parental conflict severity											.08	-.02	.05	0.98	.327
Time since divorce	-.09	-.84	.16	-1.34	.181	.01	-.25	.33	0.27	.789	.06	-.26	.56	0.72	.473
Gender ^b	-.08	-.12	.03	-1.28	.202	-.09	-.09	.00	-1.84	.066	.02	-.08	.11	0.26	.799
Age	-	-	-	-	-	.17	.14	.53	3.33	<.001	.08	-.21	.59	0.96	.337
Living situation ^c															

Note. ^a Contact father/mother 0 = yes, 1 = no; ^b Gender 0 = male, 1 = female; ^c Living situation 0 = with parents, 1 = on own.

F(6, 211) = 6.06, p < .001, R² = .15 F(7, 444) = 7.39, p < .001, R² = .10 F(10, 149) = 2.35, p = .013, R² = .14

Table 4. Regression of subjective happiness with Divorce-specific Forgiveness and controls as predictors (study 1–4).

	Study 1 Children (n = 205)				Study 2 Adolescents/Young Adults (n = 218)					
	β	C _{low}	C _{high}	t	p	β	C _{low}	C _{high}	t	p
Divorce-specific forgiveness	.03	-.05	.09	0.47	.642	.21	.09	.38	3.27	.001
Contact father ^a	-.01	-1.91	1.62	-0.16	.873	-.02	-.69	.49	-0.33	.743
Contact mother ^a	-	-	-	-	-	.07	-.57	1.81	1.03	.305
Parental conflict frequency	-.15	-.13	-.00	-2.03	.044	-.24	-.42	-.13	-3.75	<.001
Gender ^b	-.04	-.31	.18	-0.51	.609	-.07	-.84	.26	-1.06	.292
Age	-.07	-.07	.19	0.95	.345	-.08	-.13	.03	-1.27	.207
	F(5, 199) = 1.35, p = .244, R ² = .03									
Study 3 Young Adults (n = 452)										
	β	C _{low}	C _{high}	t	p	β	C _{low}	C _{high}	t	p
Divorce-specific forgiveness	.20	.13	.34	4.31	<.001	.03	-.11	.16	0.35	.729
Divorce-specific forgiveness father						.22	.03	.40	2.34	.020
Divorce-specific forgiveness mother						-.08	-.93	.41	-0.77	.442
Contact father ^a	-.01	-.54	.43	-0.22	.823	.04	-1.17	1.80	0.42	.677
Contact mother ^a	.02	-1.03	1.49	0.36	.719	.13	-.02	.20	1.56	.120
Parental conflict frequency	-.08	-.21	.01	-1.76	.079	-.10	-.19	.05	-1.17	.246
Parental conflict severity						.04	-.02	.04	0.53	.599
Time since divorce	.00	-.34	.34	0.3	.980	.13	-.10	.79	1.53	.128
Gender ^b	-.01	-.06	.05	-0.18	.860	.10	-.04	.16	1.13	.260
Age	.08	-.06	.40	1.47	.141	.10	-.18	.70	1.18	.239
Living situation ^c						F(10, 149) = 1.87, p = .053, R ² = .11				

Note. ^a Contact father/mother 0 = yes, 1 = no; ^b Gender 0 = male, 1 = female; ^c Living situation 0 = with parents, 1 = on own.

Study 3

Study 3 used data from the same intervention program as Study 2, with the important difference that we now used the data from the young adults that were providing support in the Buddy program. Our main goal was to examine whether we could replicate the findings of Study 2 in this slightly older, and less distressed, sample of young adults.

Method

Participants and procedure

For the current study, data were collected before the Buddy Program started among young adults providing support for a child with divorced parents. The study was approved by the Institutional Review Board of our institution (16–065). A sample of 452 young adults was included, ranging in age from 18 to 27 years old (406 girls; $M_{\text{age}} = 21.77$, $SD_{\text{age}} = 1.99$). Of this sample, 76% were students, and the rest had finished school/University; 62% lived on their own, and 38% lived with (one of) their parents. Most participants were born in The Netherlands (97%). A sensitivity power analysis indicated that with 452 participants, the study was able to detect correlations of $r = .13$ and larger, with 80% power ($\alpha = .05$, two-tailed). We used the same procedure as in Study 2.

Measures

We used the same measures as in Study 2. Cronbach's α for *satisfaction with life* was .75, and for *subjective happiness* .86.

Results

Analyses were performed in SPSS 26.0. The descriptive statistics are reported in Table 1 and correlations are reported in Table S3 (see Supplementary Materials). As can be seen, compared to the distressed sample of adolescents in Study 2, the present sample scored relatively high on psychological well-being and comparable to national norm data of Dutch young adults (Statistics Netherlands CBS, 2020).

To examine the unique associations with psychological well-being following divorce, we conducted multiple linear regression analyses in which we regressed grade for life, satisfaction with life and subjective happiness on forgiveness, controlling for divorce characteristics (perceived parental conflict frequency and contact with the father and with the mother) and demographics (age, gender and living with vs. without parents). Regarding grade for life (Table 2), we found a significant unique and positive effect of forgiveness. We also found a unique effect of contact with the father: participants that had contact with their father gave a higher grade to their lives than participants that did not have contact with their father.

Regarding satisfaction with life (Table 3), we found a significant unique and positive effect of forgiveness. We also found a unique effect of living situation: participants living without parents were more satisfied with their lives than participants living with parents. Furthermore, we found a unique negative effect of perceived parental conflict frequency.

Regarding subjective happiness (Table 4), we again found a significant unique and positive effect of forgiveness.

Hence, in a sample of young adults we found further support for our hypothesis that forgiveness in the context of divorce is associated with higher levels of psychological well-being.

Study 4

Studies 2 and 3 provided support for our main prediction that forgiveness in the context of divorce is positively associated with children's well-being. In Study 4 we further tested our prediction in a sample of young adults with divorced parents. We also addressed a potential limitation in the previous studies. That is, forgiveness was measured in response to the event itself, parental divorce, and not specifically regarding the father or the mother. The positive link between forgiveness and psychological well-being may mask discrepancies in forgiveness toward the parents. Specifically, children may forgive one parent, but not the other, and this may affect the relationships differently. This may especially be applicable to older children, as they tend to differentiate more between their father and mother and have fewer feelings of being caught between parents (e.g., Amato & Afifi, 2006). Hence, Study 4 addressed this potential limitation by assessing levels of forgiveness toward the father and mother separately. To this end, we used a more elaborate and validated measure of forgiveness (e.g., McCullough et al., 1998), as compared to the one-item measure of forgiveness in our previous studies.

Method

Participants

A sample of 281 University students participated in the online study. Of these participants, 121 (43%) did not complete the questionnaire. Furthermore, one participant aged 43 was an outlier from the student sample, and therefore excluded from the analyses. As a result, the final sample contained $n = 160$ participants (122 females), ranging in age from 18 to 27 years ($M_{\text{age}} = 21.49$ years, $SD_{\text{age}} = 1.99$ years). Most participants (72%) did not live with (one of) their parents. Participants took part either for course credit or financial rewards (€2.50). The study was approved by the Institutional Review Board of our institution (16–087). A sensitivity power analysis indicated that with

160 participants, the study was able to detect correlations of $r = .22$ and larger, with 80% power ($\alpha = .05$, two-tailed).

Procedure

The data were collected using Qualtrics software. After giving informed consent, participants were informed that they would receive several questionnaires tapping into parental divorce. Participants were allowed to quit the survey at any point. We started by assessing participants' psychological well-being levels, followed by questions about the relationship with, and between, their parents. Next, they received questions about forgiveness. After completing the survey, participants were debriefed and thanked.

Materials

Psychological well-being. Similar to Studies 1–3, we used various indicators of psychological well-being, with the same measures for *satisfaction with life* (Cronbach's $\alpha = .83$) and *subjective happiness* (Cronbach's $\alpha = .88$).

Questions about the parents. Participants were asked whether they had contact with their father and with their mother, and if so, how they would rate the relationship quality with their father and with their mother at that moment, from 1 (*not good at all*) to 7 (*very good*). Participants were also asked, with an open-ended question, how often their parents are in conflict with each other on average on a weekly basis, and how severe they rated those fights from 1 (*not at all severe*) to 7 (*extremely severe*). Additionally, participants were asked to indicate how long ago the divorce took place in years (ranging from 0 to 27 years ago).

Forgiveness. Level of forgiveness toward the father and toward the mother separately was measured with three items, one from each subscale, of the Dutch version of the Transgression-Related Interpersonal Motivations scale (TRIM; McCullough et al., 1998; adapted by; Karremans et al., 2005). Participants were asked to think about the divorce of their parents and rate their agreement with six statements for each parent separately; When I think about the divorce of my parents, "I have forgiven my father/mother for the divorce" (benevolence subscale), "I would like my father/mother to get hurt as well" (revenge subscale), and "I would like to avoid my father/mother" (avoidance subscale). Participants responded on a 7-point scale, ranging from 1 (*completely disagree*) to 7 (*completely agree*). Cronbach's α for forgiving the father was .83, and forgiving the mother was .77. For our analyses, we used the mean scores on all items, after recoding revenge and avoidance items, such that higher scores indicated higher forgiveness.

Results

Analyses were performed in SPSS 26.0. Young adults reported on average high levels of psychological well-being, although slightly lower than young adults in Study 3 (Table 1). Forgiveness toward the father correlated positively and significantly with forgiveness toward the mother, $r = .23$, $p = .004$. Within-child variation between forgiveness toward the father and mother was large, with an intraclass correlation coefficient (ICC) of .21, suggesting that young adults' forgiveness toward the father differs largely from their forgiveness toward the mother. Correlations among study variables are reported in Table S4 (see Supplementary Materials).

To examine the unique associations with psychological well-being following divorce, we conducted multiple linear regression analyses in which we regressed satisfaction with life and subjective happiness on forgiveness toward the mother and toward the father, controlling for divorce characteristics (perceived parental conflict frequency and severity, time since divorce, and contact with the father and with the mother) and demographics (age, gender, and living with vs. without parents).

Regarding satisfaction with life (Table 3), we only found a unique effect of contact with the father: participants that had contact with their father were more satisfied with their lives than participants that did not have contact with their father.

Regarding subjective happiness (Table 4), we found a significant unique and positive effect of forgiveness toward the mother. Thus, in a sample of young adults we found some support that forgiveness toward the mother specifically, but not toward the father, is associated with enhanced psychological well-being.

General discussion

The present research examined the association between forgiveness in the context of divorce and psychological well-being. In samples of adolescents and young adults, but not children in late childhood, we found that self-reported forgiveness was positively associated with psychological well-being, especially when it concerned forgiveness toward the mother. Clearly, these cross-sectional studies do not allow to make inferences about causality, but the findings are largely consistent with the general idea that positive parent-child relationships are a crucial human need, and that helping to restore such social relations is how forgiveness obtains its positive association with well-being (e.g., McCullough, 2008).

Prior research has shown that parental conflict and time since the divorce are the most important determinants of children's well-being following parental divorce (e.g., Amato, 2010; Hetherington, 2006). Specifically, children

who are exposed to long-lasting conflict between their parents after the divorce are generally more depressed and show more psychological symptoms than children whose parents have only minor conflict (Amato & Keith, 1991). In three of the four studies we replicated this crucial role of parental conflict on children's psychological well-being. Yet importantly, our results revealed that forgiving adolescents and young adults displayed higher levels of well-being, independent of whether they perceived frequent or severe conflict between the parents, and also independent of time since divorce. Moreover, even when considering their age, gender and living situation, their forgiveness was positively associated with psychological well-being. This emphasizes the importance of adolescents' and young adults' forgiveness, as it uniquely contributes to understanding post-divorce adjustment in terms of psychological well-being.

We found unique positive associations between forgiveness and psychological well-being for adolescents and young adults, but not for children in late childhood. This discrepancy may be due to the fact that adolescents are undergoing various developmental changes, and divorce-related transitions may present additional challenges, fostering growth for some while creating developmental vulnerabilities for others. Research by Hines (1997) supports this notion, indicating that adolescents experience divorce differently than younger children, and that a positive parent-adolescent relationship can mitigate the negative effects of divorce. Furthermore, it is noteworthy that the children in Study 1 reported relatively high levels of forgiveness and relationship quality with their parents, particularly when compared to the adolescents and young adults in Studies 2–4. This aligns with existing research suggesting that parent-child processes are most influential and susceptible to interparental conflict during adolescence (Branje, 2018), a time when the parent-child relationship becomes more horizontal in nature (Van Dijk et al., 2020). Future, ideally longitudinal, research is needed to further examine the developmental trajectory of forgiveness, but for now, the present findings suggest that forgiveness in the context of divorce seems to be particularly important for the psychological well-being of adolescents and young adults.

The generally positive impact of stable and good parent-child relationships on child well-being may explain the positive association between forgiveness and psychological well-being. In Study 4, we found that the association between forgiveness and psychological well-being was only significant for forgiveness toward the mother, and not the father. Although speculative at this point, one explanation might be that (Dutch) children generally live and interact more with their mother than with their father following divorce (Statistics Netherlands CBS, 2016). Previous theorizing supports the idea that forgiveness is associated

with enhanced psychological well-being through restoring valuable relationships (i.e., “relationship maintenance function of forgiveness”, McCullough, 2008).

Limitations and future research

Several limitations of the research need to be acknowledged. First, three of the four studies used single item-measures of forgiveness. We know single-item measures are more vulnerable to random measurement errors, which are more likely to be canceled out with multiple items. Single items may also be more vulnerable to unknown biases in meaning and interpretation. Nevertheless, and mostly driven by practical reasons, we decided to use single-item measures in Studies 1–3. The advantage is that it shortens survey length, and hence leads to greater survey effectiveness, especially in difficult populations, such as in our case. There were also ethical reasons to prefer single-item measures, as it minimizes participant burden. Second, the cross-sectional design of the present research prevents us from drawing conclusions about causal links or possible feedback loops between forgiveness and psychological well-being. For instance, acting in a forgiving manner may causally predict higher psychological well-being, but, in turn, higher psychological well-being may also increase the inclination to forgive (e.g., Bono et al., 2008). Future research using longitudinal data should test this. Third, in order for children to forgive their parents, they must feel hurt by their parents and/or hold them accountable for the hurt they have experienced. However, we did not measure hurtful feelings, so we cannot be certain that this was the case. Nevertheless, previous research suggests that children generally experience negative affect toward their parents as a result of the divorce (e.g., Amato, 2010). For future research, it would be important to identify the aspects or persons involved in divorce that are particularly hurtful and therefore difficult to forgive. Moreover, although we did consider frequency and intensity of perceived parental conflict, to include all types of perceived parental conflict future research should include overt and covert types of conflict pre- and post-divorce (e.g., Cao et al., 2022). Finally, our samples were not random and given that the great majority of our samples were white girls, we could not test the effects of gender and ethnicity and conclusions should be generalized with caution.

This exploratory study on children’s forgiveness in the context of divorce offers several important avenues for future research. For example, qualitative research may help to get a better understanding of what children need in becoming more forgiving following divorce. Moreover, as mentioned above, future longitudinal research in which children that experience parental divorce are followed over time may help to study different individual trajectories. Third, future research may incorporate

a dyadic perspective and examine whether both children's and parents' personal well-being increases when children respond in more forgiving ways to parental divorce. After all, from the perspective of the parent, a child that is not able to forgive the parent for the divorce, may be perceived as withdrawing or angry. Or worse, it may be perceived as taking the other parent's side, which likely decreases parents' well-being as well as complicate their interaction with the other parent. Thus, children's ability to forgive parental divorce may have beneficial effects even beyond the child's well-being.

Concluding remark

The main aim of the present studies was to start exploring children's forgiveness in the context of parental divorce. In both adolescent and young adult samples, we found forgiveness to be associated with higher psychological well-being. Future studies should examine whether interventions on forgiveness literacy and education (for a review, see Rapp et al., 2022) would generalize to the context of parental divorce both by increasing forgiveness and improving well-being or post-divorce adjustment among children. Although such studies are warranted, the current findings indicate that forgiveness may be an effective way in maintaining essential parent-child relationships following parental divorce. In this way, we hope to have inspired other scholars to further investigate this important topic of children's forgiveness following parental divorce.

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