

COMMUNICATING FORGIVENESS: HOW ORGANIZATIONAL MEMBERS SEEK  
FORGIVENESS TO BENEFIT THEIR WORKPLACE

A Thesis

by

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This thesis meets the standards for scope and quality of  
Texas A&M University-Corpus Christi and is hereby approved.

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## ABSTRACT

Though often challenging, conflict is an inevitable part of organizational life. At some point, organizational members will have to face their interpersonal issues, or risk suffering negative implications in their roles as individuals and professionals. The purpose of the thesis was to understand how and why organizational members seek forgiveness in their workplace, as well as examine the organizational conditions and outcomes that encourage forgiveness. The researcher conducted semi-structured interviews via Zoom and Webex with a convenience snowball sample of 10 full-time organizational members. A thematic analysis revealed themes of *Maintaining Positive Relationships*, *Maintaining Personal and Professional Image*, *Direct Forgiveness-Seeking Strategies*, *Indirect Forgiveness- Seeking Strategies*, *Leadership Participation*, *Open Communication Climate*, *Forgiveness as a Learning Experience*, *Positive Organizational Climate*, and *Strengthened Positive Relationships*. The theoretical implications of this study suggest that forgiveness-seeking can employ POS to sustain a positive feeling in the workplace. A practical implication is that organizational leaders should play an active role in cultivating forgiveness seeking behaviors and climates by establishing consistent practices for their members to deal with conflict.

*Keywords:* forgiveness, positive organizational scholarship, organizational members, leaders

## DEDICATION

This thesis is dedicated to anyone who has ever made a mistake at work and then decided they needed to do the *right* thing, even if it was the hard thing. For all the forgiveness-seekers, this is for you. Thank you for making your organization better.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This thesis could not have been completed in its fullest form without the help and support of many people. I could not have completed this work without the amazing and miraculous work (especially in the last two months) of my God and his son. It was, without a doubt, divine intervention that allowed me finish and defend this study.

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# CHAPTER I

## INTRODUCTION

Though often challenging, conflict is an inevitable part of organizational life. At some point, organizational members will have to face interpersonal issues, or risk suffering negative implications on their roles as individuals and professionals. In fact, 85% of surveyed employees admitted to experiencing some level of conflict within their workplace relationship or organization (CPP, Inc, 2008). In some cases, up to 90% of employees were involuntarily terminated for from their organization as the result of unresolved conflict in the workplace (Dana, 2001). Instead of working through interpersonal conflicts, organizational supervisors and subordinates enabled tension to build and deviant behaviors to continue without correction. As a result, according to the CCP Inc,'s Global Human Capital Report (2008), when organizations experience conflict, they can often lose up to \$359 billion dollars in productivity or an average of 2.8 hours per week attempting to resolve conflict. Similarly, Menon and Thompson (2016) found that found that \$8,000 dollars are wasted per day when organizational members avoid addressing workplace conflict. It is clear that organizations lose money and productivity due to interpersonal conflict in the workplace. To organizational members, the cost of conflict may include time spent in challenging interactions with others, cognitive energy focused on uncertain interpersonal relationship status, and added feelings of tension to a sometimes already stressful workplace environment (Metts, Cupach, & Lippert, 2006; Paul & Putman, 2017; Waldron & Kloeber, 2012). While conflict will always occur, organizational members can resolve conflict and mend damaged interpersonal relationships through communicating forgiveness.

### **Conflict in Organizations**

To begin, the antecedent of forgiveness is conflict or a series of conflicts which occur(s) between organizational members. It is relevant then to examine what conflict is and its components to better understand how to manage that conflict, such as through the forgiveness process. Conflict is “a disagreement between two or more parties who perceive incompatible goals or means of achieving those goals” (Jones, 2001, p. 90). Simply put, conflict is the result of contradictory or often misunderstood values or events, which causes individuals to respond to these experiences. Dana (2001) notes that conflict occurs between interdependent parties who often have competing interests. Within organizations, conflict can have detrimental effects on people. If conflicts are not confronted by organizational members or are dealt with in unproductive ways, the process of conflict can be more severe than the actual transgression that has occurred. Conflict is also an interactive process, meaning that individuals must engage in behavior practices, such as communication, to mediate the differences in goals, expectations, and needs. For example, individuals utilize their coworkers as vital information resources. Individuals may, while managing conflict, manage authority through communication channels (Dana, 2001). This means that organizational members will often negotiate power in order to barter what they want to receive out of the interpersonal exchange.

Conflicts also often center around organizational tasks, relationships, and processes (Ayoko & Pekerti, 2008). While organizational members may have not committed a personal offense, they may have made a mistake in performing their job responsibilities, causing distress to themselves and for fellow organizational member. It is clear, then, that organizations and their members lose money and productivity due to interpersonal conflict. Additionally, organizational communication scholars have noted that the distress from conflict in the workplace could also be detrimental to the health and well-being of organizations and their

members. For these reasons, workplace conflict has long been of interest to organizational researchers. As organizational communication scholars shifted their interests to humanist approaches (Nicotera, 2020), understanding and creating effective conflict management became increasingly important to both academics and practitioners. In order to better understand how to mediate the effects of conflict and work toward a more positive relational future, scholars can explore the communication process of forgiveness.

### **Exploring Forgiveness**

Many individuals choose to exercise forgiveness in response to conflict that has occurred. Thus, it is integral to define forgiveness, as well as describe its history and the characteristics specific to its process. Interpersonal forgiveness can result in constructive interpersonal conflict, or conflict which invokes change, creates cohesiveness, and provides a solution to the problem which caused the incompatibility between relational parties (Putman, 2006). For this reason, forgiveness has been of recent interest and importance to communication researchers due to its grounding as an interpersonal process (Kelley, Waldron, & Kloeber, 2019). Kelley and Waldron (2006) define forgiveness as,

A relational process whereby harmful conduct is acknowledged by one or both partners; the harmed partner extends undeserved mercy to the perceived transgressor, one or both partners experience a transformation from negative to positive psychological states, and the meaning of the relationship is renegotiated, with the possibility of reconciliation (p. 260).

Historically speaking, forgiveness is by no means a newly emergent concept. The concept of forgiveness is deeply rooted in religious traditions (Kirkup, 1993), cultural practices (Stone, 2002; Waldron & Kloeber, 2012), and is shaped by social contexts and behaviors (Waldron &

Kloeber, 2012). Overall, however, despite differences in how people express this process, forgiveness is a deeply rooted universal concept (Kirkup, 1993; Kelley & Waldron, 2006).

Aligning with the definition presented above, the communication construct of forgiveness requires interaction between two parties in conflict. Forgiveness is a transactional process which occurs through communication where parties acknowledge that the psychological state of their relationship has been disrupted and, to act on these disruptions, parties choose to seek and grant forgiveness (Kelley, 1998; Kelley & Waldron, 2006). Forgiveness occurs through dyadic and/or polyadic communication, which can influence the relationship's future state and impacts collective relationships, such as those in the workplace (Madsen, Gygi, Hammon, & Plowman, 2009). Though the conflict may occur between the victim and offender, forgiveness is influenced by, and can have resulting outcomes on those parties' environment. While at times there are situations with multiple offenders or multiple victims, forgiveness requires that all parties engage in communication in order to resolve the conflict at hand. Overall, forgiveness is a complex process requiring that parties negotiate their relationships in order to mend conflicts (Waldron & Kelley, 2008; Kelley et al., 2019). Though an offender could be psychologically forgiven, the victim must articulate this choice through communication.

Kelley and colleagues (2019) noted that scholars exploring forgiveness have focused their attention on dialogue, negation, emotional expression and management, empathic responses, expressions of justice and mercy, sensemaking, and the healing process. In essence, forgiveness is a socially constructed process built through intrapersonal emotions and relational behaviors (Kelley & Waldron, 2006). Therefore, it is through communication that individuals can express and manage their emotions, articulate cognitive judgments, and define the state of their relationship before, during, and after forgiveness has occurred.

## **Positioning Forgiveness as a Positive Communication Act**

Before forgiveness was examined in the workplace context, organizational scholars were already interested in how to strengthen organizational relationships and productivity by reducing conflict (Putnam, 2006). Organizational behavior and positive psychology researchers embraced studies that would improve both morality and productivity in the workplace (Luthans, 2002; Luthans & Youself, 2007; Martin, 2005; Muse, Harris, Giles, & Field, 2005). Positive Organizational Scholarship (POS) is a theoretical lens scholars have developed and utilized to understand positive practices in the workplace. Initially developed by Cameron and Caza (2002), POS describes how nonverbal and verbal behaviors are utilized to maintain positivity and optimism in the workplace. These behaviors could take the form of discussions, gestures, or actions which attempt to enhance what is already positively happening in workplace environments. Many of these actions may be naturally occurring, yet other behaviors are done out of the expected realm of job responsibilities and tasks. Besides a theoretical speculation written by Cameron (2007), the construct of forgiveness has not yet been examined through the POS framework; however, it has been viewed under the theoretical lenses of Identity Management Theory, Relational Dialectics Theory, Negotiated Morality Theory, and Uncertainty Management Theory (Kelley & Waldron, 2006; Waldron & Kelley, 2008). Moreover, no scholars working from a POS theoretical framework have explored the interpersonal process of forgiveness, making it worthy of investigation in the workplace context.

There are several other justifications for why an investigation into forgiveness practices in the workplace is warranted. According to Kelley (1998) little is known regarding the communication of forgiveness in daily interactions. Often, scholars (Kelley, 1998; Waldron, Kelley, & Harvey 2008) have been interested in how forgiveness has affected significant life

events (such as when conflicts dismantle marriages or friendships), rather than exploring its less notable occurrences in interpersonal interactions. This study will highlight such instances to guide both researchers and everyday organizational members engaging in the forgiveness process. Palanski (2012) explained that many organizations, for economic reasons, cannot fiscally afford to have relational tension in the workplace. Instead, organizational members must learn how to function on a cordial level. Workplace conflicts can cause tension to arise which disrupts the spirituality, intimacy, and closeness in a workplace when forgiveness is not employed (Worthington et al., 2010). Interpersonal relationships that suffer these sorts of disruptions will potentially notice the effects of their conflict trickling into their workplace environment, weakening their performance and professional relationships. Stone (2002) noted the effects of not extending forgiveness to an organizational member can include alienation, lower productivity, and ultimately contribute to organizational exit. Further, while managers and organizational members can choose to avoid conflict, Palanski (2012) suggests that same conflict will eventually reach a climax, which can have lasting negative effects on the relationship. Thus, it is fruitful to investigate how forgiveness manifests in the workplace to diminish negative organizational outcomes.

Though preliminary work has been conducted, there is still an academic need to explore and understand the fundamentals of how forgiveness is practiced in the organizational context. Several previous studies have assessed forgiveness utilizing quantitative measurements (Kelley, 1998; Kelley & Waldron, 2006; Thompson & Synder, 2003), however, Aquino, Grover, Goldman, and Folger (2003) suggested that multiple forms of assessment should be utilized to conceptualize the forgiveness process. Qualitative measures can expand previous contributions made by post-positivist scholars and provide unique depth to existing research findings. Fritz

(2014) argued that scholars should explore workplace relationships using qualitative research designs to better understand how and why organizational members behave the way they do. In understanding forgiveness processes, scholars and people can understand how to combat negative behavior in organizations (Cameron, 2007). This study will add to, while simultaneously highlighting new knowledge claims about forgiveness, primarily as it functions in workplace relationships. Thus, this study will be of interest to organizational scholars and who are interested in expanding current research on workplace relationships and organizational communication practices.

This study will provide several new insights to the discipline of organizational communication. First, the results of this study will raise awareness about the lesser-known communication behavior of forgiveness-seeking, and how these behaviors are enacted in organizational settings. In general, most forgiveness literature examines the perspective of the forgiveness granter, rather than the transgressor (Thompson & Synder, 2003; Waldron & Kelley, 2005). While these findings are useful, the offender's forgiveness-seeking process is also worthy of consideration. Palanski (2012) reported that emerging research should understand how people seek forgiveness by studying the antecedents of the conflict and examine the outcomes of the forgiveness process. Therefore, scholars will better understand the motives and behaviors displayed by the offending party. Second, most forgiveness research examines the forgiveness process as it pertains to dyadic communication in interpersonal relationships rather than organizations (Palanski, 2012; Waldron & Kelley, 2005). Though interpersonal relationships exist within an organization, the workplace environment establishes and upholds norms and expectations for how people should behave. Kelley and Waldron (2006) noted that organizational communication scholars could investigate organizational practices, policies, and

structures that would aid or inhibit colleagues granting and seeking forgiveness. Third, organizational scholars can integrate forgiveness processes into existent literature regarding virtuous organizations (Cameron, Bright, & Caza, 2004), forgiveness climates (Fehr & Gelfand, 2012), or forgiving cultures (Stone, 2002). These concepts suggest that positivity can have tangible effects on workplaces but have yet to be validated with expansive empirical evidence beyond Lutgen-Sandvik, Riforgiate, and Fletcher, (2011), and several meta-analyses (Cameron et al., 2004; Cameron, 2007; Fehr & Gelfand, 2012; Waldron & Kloeber, 2012). Thus, forgiveness will be of interest to the developing research on POS, which identifies relational and task processes that will help organizational members “sustain life” and flourish (Cameron & Caza, 2002; Cameron, Dutton & Quinn, 2003; Cameron et al., 2004). Therefore, exploring forgiveness-seeking behaviors in the workplace will produce many theoretical implications for scholars.

For organizational members, the results of this study will suggest several practices which can be implemented in everyday workplaces. Miller, Cupach, and Lippert (2007) noted that individuals express complex emotions regarding their organizational responsibilities and relationships. Along these lines, Kelley and colleagues (2019) suggested that an individual’s emotions are often the outcomes of their own relational experiences, which ultimately shape the way they feel in future relationships. Organizational members can utilize this knowledge to repair damaged workplace relationships by transgressions and utilize the insight to create positive future interactions. The extension of forgiveness in the workplace can also create constructive conflict experiences and provide hope to those experiencing relational damage (Waldron & Kloeber, 2012). When forgiveness is enacted, organizational members can look forward to working with their coworker, rather than avoiding them because of the conflict which occurred between them. The results will provide effective strategies for forgiveness-seeking so

that organizational members can be more informed during the forgiveness event. Stone (2002) suggests that individuals should be taught to embrace forgiveness rather than worry about the interpersonal relational cost of extending it. For some individuals, forgiveness can be challenging because the offender must deal with the emotional, social, and, at times, professional repercussions of their own negative behavior. Further, information on the forgiveness process will help inform managers and practitioners on how to create environments that are receptive to conflict and deal with it openly. Zdniuk and Bobocel (2015) asserted that leaders can have a positive impact on their workplace and be effective organizational members to facilitate forgiveness. As the heads of organizations, leaders can encourage others to practice forgiveness and, in doing so, help disputing coworkers make amends with one another. Fehr and Gelfand (2010) suggested that dedicated organizational resources, such as conflict resolution trainings, support programs and leadership behavior, can support forgiveness in the workplace. These resources can be necessary for helping organizational members recognize the best way to practice forgiveness, mediate conflict, and voice their grievances without damaging organizational relationships. Since these resources are already built into an organization's budget, they can be more feasibly accessed and accounted for. Thus, forgiveness can improve productivity and positively influence organizational members' ability to work interdependently (Waldron & Kloeber, 2012), proving beneficial to all parts of the organization.

This study will explore how organizational members seek forgiveness in the workplace. A qualitative methodology will be employed to identify how and why organizational members seek forgiveness for a transgression they committed in the workplace. Fritz (2014) stated that organizational scholars should conduct qualitative research studies in order to better understand the complexities of workplace relationships. The study will also examine the motivations,

behaviors, and outcomes of those seeking forgiveness in the workplace. Additionally, the research will discover the impact organizational practices (i.e. formal and informal processes, policies, and procedures) have on individuals who are seeking forgiveness in their workplace. To do so, this study will apply the POS theoretical framework to consider forgiveness as a positive process enacted in organization during situations of interpersonal conflict. The results of this investigation will produce knowledge integral to organizational scholars and practitioners regarding the process of forgiveness-seeking in the workplace.

## CHAPTER II

### LITERATURE REVIEW

#### **Positive Organization Scholarship**

The first writings about Positive Organizational Scholarship began in the early 2000s. With the close of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, organizational scholars were focused on understanding the Humanist perspective, which explored how employees could thrive as members of a family, rather than be treated like cogs in a corporate machine (Nicotera, 2020). Instead of focusing on static-driven efficacy, organizations began focusing on the process of how workplace success was achieved through understanding its organizational members. While much of organizational scholarship had focused on how organizations could decline because of their failures (Whetten, 1980), other researchers wanted to explore the more optimistic side of organizations. Though many organizations took failures as lessons learned, research shifted to celebrate everyday success. Similarly, Muse and colleagues (2005) and Roberts (2006) stated that academic and practical interest in organizational behavior emerged for similar reasons: to understand how employees worked to give them the best working conditions that would allow them to thrive.

Organizational behavior researchers utilized the historical significance of positive practices in the workplace to more clearly define the fundamental constructs comprising POS. Scholars began investigating how organizations manage energy, flow, moral capital, and positive deviant behaviors that would be beneficial to the organization (Cameron & Spreitzer, 2011; Quinn, Spreitzer, & Lam, 2012; Spreitzer & Sonenshein, 2004). Moving beyond the understanding of what should happen in a workplace, researchers working from a POS framework began exploring how to build and strengthen organizational capabilities utilizing the

behaviors of members to elevate practices to the utmost highest standard. These behaviors were intended to nurture positivity and produce satisfying outcomes for organizational members. For organizations, POS behaviors create a flourishing workplace environment and ultimately help the organization succeed in both in terms of task performance and social culture. Currently, POS research has continued to take shape in exploring exactly what constructs fall under the umbrella of theoretical behaviors including leadership, energy, organizational resilience, and virtuousness (Cameron et al., 2004; Cameron & Caza, 2004; McManus, Seville, Vargo, & Brunsdon, 2008; Stephens, Heaphy, & Dutton, 2012). In coining the term POS, scholars have continued discovering more positive workplace behaviors to include within the POS framework.

However, POS components are more specifically differentiated from general positive acts in the workplace. In one of the first formal articulations of POS, Cameron and Caza (2002) described POS as an approach to organizational behavior explaining the practices and processes utilized to organizations maintain happiness and positive attitudes in their coworkers. Originating in the field of positive psychology, positive organizational behaviors have been enacted to create kinder, and joyous workplaces (Muse et al., 2005; Roberts, 2006). Though organizational members may take it upon themselves to perform these behaviors, they are often performed based upon their moral obligations to the “greater good” of the organization, rather than expected as a by-line job responsibility. At the individual level, organizational members can choose to bring forth positive processes (Stephens et al., 2012) which, at the collective level can improve large-scale organizational outcomes (Roberts, 2006). As such, while one organizational member may practice positive behaviors, this individual act will have effects beyond their performance and relationships for the benefit of the whole organization. These behaviors often are created from employee self-determined attitudes which drive positive mechanisms protecting

organizations from negative outcomes (Roberts, 2006). Scholars and practitioners can find evidence of this in organizational behavior research that focusing on cultivating collaborative environments, supportive organizations, trustworthy cultures (Martin, 2005; Muse et al., 2005; Roberts, 2005), and virtuous organizations (Cameron et al., 2004). This is not to say that organizations must rely on these processes in order to survive, but rather, these processes sustain positive organizational life (Martin, 2005; Roberts, 2006). Organizational members purposefully enact POS behaviors in order to create welcoming and productive climates for themselves and others in their organization.

While positive behaviors can be enacted at the individual level, the interactive nature of work can create a catalyst among a group of organizational members. Often, organizational members collaborate and work as a collective or team to enable positive processes and reduce negative behaviors from emerging (Cameron, Dutton, & Quinn, 2003; Dutton & Glynn, 2007; Stephens et al., 2012). For example, Losada and Heaphy's (2004) investigation on positive organizational behavior in teams demonstrated that the enactment of positive processes and attitudes was directly associated with team member performance and attitude. As a result, supportive relational climates have created collaboration, optimism, and an enhanced sense of community (Martin, 2005). The communal impact of positive behavior often has positive effects driven from the improved productive workplace relationships which benefit the relational and task needs of members. Thus, POS research is integral to the development and maintenance of behaviors which create positive relational and organizational outcomes.

However, the process of creating and maintaining positivity is more complex than it may seem. Researchers of POS have noted that organizational members use both emotions and behaviors to maintain positivity (Cameron et al., 2003; Luthans, 2012). An organizational

member may intentionally enact positivity to frame a potentially negative situation and as a foreseen way to avoid a challenging situation. Organizational members' intentional implementation of courageous behaviors (Luthans & Youssef, 2007) intervene to promote vitality through verbal and nonverbal behaviors (Cameron et al., 2003). These behaviors should help goodness flourish in organizations to reduce negativity in the organization. Though POS incorporates a variety for theoretical models and constructs, empirical evidence has consistently linked positive processes with beneficial organizational outcomes (Cameron et al., 2004). For example, positivity can improve organizational relationships, organizational members' emotional states, organizational commitments, performance, and job satisfaction (Cameron et al., 2007). In an organization, positivity can help enhance the climate (Cameron et al., 2007). In contrast, negative organizational outcomes such as high turnover rates, conflict, stress, and emotional strain can also be reduced through POS processes to enable organizational members to cope with relational problems and ultimately be more productive (Cameron et al., 2007; Luthans & Youssef, 2007; Worthington et al., 2010). Therefore, in better understanding POS, organizational members can work to help their organization reap relational and task outcomes.

Many organizational members enact positive behaviors in order to maintain positivity under challenging circumstances. Positive processes can serve as mechanisms to help organizational members flourish in destructive organizational climates. POS phenomena function like inputs and outputs in an ecosystem; organizational members and their behaviors rely on verbal and nonverbal behaviors through feedback which affects the entire organization (Feldman & Khademain, 2003). This means that organizational members may change their behavior in order to change a situation from becoming too negative. Organizational members enact these positive behaviors with the intent of diminishing conflict and toxic behaviors which would

distract from organizational tasks (Luthans & Youssef, 2007; Worline & Quinn, 2003). Organizations can practice positive organizational behaviors to adapt in times of conflict (McManus, Seville, Vargo, & Brundson, 2008). Feldman and Khademain (2003) supported this sentiment, stating that organizational members may change their messages dependent upon the dynamic atmosphere of their organization. Just as people in interpersonal relationships may change their tactics when a conversation has steered in an unanticipated way, an organizational member may apply the same tactics to what is happening in their workplace. Luthans and Youssef (2017) stated that organizational members who work to maintain a state of optimism and promote hope in times of stress can also create resilient organizations. Thus, organizational members are instrumental and, even responsible for, creating optimistic environments that will benefit their personal and professional roles in an organization.

Despite previous POS research, few scholars have focused their efforts on integrating forgiveness in the workplace as a positive phenomenon. However, recently, some researchers have explored forgiveness as a form of positivity. Specifically, the work of Cameron and Caza (2002) and Cameron (2007) has explored how forgiveness is enacted as a positive process. These researchers suggested that organizational members can manage their emotions to reduce negativity and instead, respond to workplace conflicts with irregular and sometimes challenging responses of positivity which encourage them to forgive the offender in order to maintain productivity for the organization. Cameron (2007) went so far as to say that the forgiveness process requires the collective collaboration of all organizational members to engage in the sometimes-difficult processes and set aside their own selfish feelings for the benefit of the organization. Thus, forgiveness would act as a positive organizational behavior in order to maintain both morality and workplace productivity.

Employee motivations are fueled by organizational outcomes, which are determined by organizational members' attitudes and commitment. Practically, organizational members can encourage workplace beliefs, values, and norms which, when implemented, can infuse and sustain life-giving positivity into existing organizational structures. This study will consider forgiveness processes in the workplace as a behavior which can maintain positivity in times of relational conflict and negotiation in the workplace. Specifically, in seeking forgiveness, organizational members can reduce tension and restore relational damage.

### **Conceptualizing Forgiveness**

There are many commonalities agreed upon by forgiveness scholars. For example, forgiveness is viewed as a positive process meant for the goodness of individuals. Forgiveness is grounded in human action and the ability to both commit a transgression and extend mercy (Kirkup, 1993). McCullough, Fincham, and Tsang (2003) defined forgiveness as a "prosocial change regarding a transgressor on the part of the transgression recipient" (p. 540). Kirkup (1993) stated that, "Forgiveness is a positive response to a wrong-doing, in both intention and deed. Wrongdoing refers to an action that harms or humiliates another person, whether deliberately or accidentally. A positive response is one that is "neither abusive, nor neglected, but loving" (Kirkup, 1993, p. 79).

Grounded in religious origins, Kirkup's (1993) definition stresses the negativity expressed in a transgression and the juxtaposition of the positive response of forgiveness. Similarly, from the field of psychology, Worthington and colleagues (2010) classified two types of forgiveness. The first is decisional forgiveness, which is when people respond to a transgression and their transgressor through a positive behavior. The second type of forgiveness is emotional forgiveness which requires the offended party to diminish their negative emotions

and create positive emotions of empathy or sympathy toward the transgressor (Worthington et al., 2010). Forgiveness often requires repentance or self-sacrifice to openly acknowledge the offense in religious traditions (Kirkup, 1993). People are guided toward “goodness” because of their moral compass (Kelley et al., 2019). Aligning with these sentiments, Edwards, Pask, Whitbred, and Neuendorf (2018) described forgiveness as a pardoning or excusing an offense or other mistakes. Forgiveness requires both an acknowledgement of the offense by a transgressor and a pardoning of the offense from whom they have offended. Paul and Putnam’s (2017) participants stated that part of forgiveness involves “letting go,” which is the acknowledging of hurtfulness and releasing of negative emotions and cognitive thoughts. These findings suggest that people chose to participate in, and then manifest their emotional and cognitive feelings. The victims will have to face the negative emotions caused by the transgression and articulate how they feel and why they decided to put these feelings aside and show forgiveness.

Worthington and colleagues (2010) concluded that forgiveness is a positive process which can display sympathy and/or empathy for the transgressor. Many people categorize forgiveness as when a person “gets over” and accepts a transgression to let go of negative feelings (Younger, Piferi, Jobe, & Lawler, 2004). These sentiments reveal that individuals must relinquish their negative emotions or thoughts in order to participate in forgiveness. Stone’s (2002) sentiments were similar; forgiveness is how people can “give blame up. “Thus, forgiveness is the cognitive choice and communicated response which releases an offender from their wrongful choices.

Underlying all these definitions is the idea that forgiveness serves a person’s moral obligation to his or her offender. Waldron and Kelley (2008) noted that communicating forgiveness broadly emphasizes relational morality and symbolic meaning. Symbolically,

forgiveness cancels out the idea that one person is morally superior to another because one of the parties has wronged the other. behaviors they have done. Forgiveness is often enacted for moral, rather than selfish reasons (Paul & Putnam, 2017). While it is often easier for an offender to avoid the negative consequences of their transgression, they often seek forgiveness in order to clear their conscious because they feel it is “the right thing to do.” Kelley and colleagues (2019) argued that people have moral commitments to one another and utilize positive emotional processes, such as forgiveness, to maintain relationships and self-respect, as well as express remorse. Thus, forgiveness often requires a communicated confession to undo a behavioral misstep.

Aligning with what is already known, forgiveness is constructed as a relational process. Though some researchers differ in the way they conceptualize the cognitive aspect of forgiveness, Waldron and Kelley (2008) believe that forgiveness must occur between two parties through verbal and nonverbal negotiation. Individuals choose to participate in and be a part of the forgiveness process (Waldron & Kelley, 2008; Waldron & Kloeber, 2012). It is important to note that forgiveness is a relational process that is mutually beneficial once the wrong has been acknowledged and the relationship has been renegotiated (Waldron & Kelley, 2008; Waldron et al., 2008). After forgiveness is granted, interpersonal parties will work to redefine and reexamine the relational rules which have been established prior to the transgression’s occurrence. As a result of forgiveness, relationships are often change, along with each individual party’s emotion states (Cameron, 2007; Waldron & Kelley, 2008). This change can result a more positive, negative, or maintained state of the relationship. The relationship is either strengthened, deteriorated, or maintained (Waldron & Kelley, 2008). Dependent upon the transgression, the offender and the forgiveness-seeking strategy can all determine how the relationship will persist

and the extent to which it is changed. Palanski (2012) notes that forgiveness involves an examination of the transgression, a victim with the willingness to forgive, and a welcoming relational context for discussion. Thus, those exercising forgiveness often experience a transformation in attitude from a negative to a positive state (Akoyo, 2016; Cameron, 2007; Waldron & Kelley, 2008; Worthington et al., 2010). These sentiments demonstrate that forgiveness will have, in some ways, a lasting impact on the parties involved in the relationship. Though forgiveness is applicable and even originates in psychology and religion, forgiveness is grounded in relational communication behaviors.

Further, forgiveness is a communication construct which encompasses both shared and unique facets. Forgiveness is similar yet distinct from other relational processes such as reconciliation, the extension of mercy, and relational justice (Kelley & Waldron, 2006). All scholars also agree that these processes are complex and distinct from one another. While forgiveness may be the antecedent to mercy, relational justice, and reconciliation (Kelley et al., 2019), forgiveness is a process separate from these. This is because communicating forgiveness requires both relational parties to be actively involved in the process and aids them in making an informed decision through their mutual communication (Kirkup, 1999).

In their forgiveness model, Waldron and Kelley (2008) described the forgiveness episode as a time marked by the relational past, a transitional period, and then a relational future. This means that forgiveness is a process that occurs throughout multiple relational stages. Communicating forgiveness occurs over a period of time, unique to each individual conflict (Kelley, 1998; Waldron & Kelley, 2008; Waldron et al., 2008; Waldron & Kloeber, 2012). This research insinuates that the time people take to grant or seek forgiveness is unique to each relational situation, and forgiveness occurs in both short and long periods of time. Dana (2001)

stated that solving workplace conflict is contingent upon if the conflict creates a critical urgency for the organization or whether or not there is a moment to prevent conflict in the future. This once again emphasizes the relevance of time as a part of the forgiveness process. This means that the time taken to forgive is also dependent on the relevance of the relationship, as well as nature of the transgression. Waldron, Braithwaite, Oliver, Kloeber, and Marsh (2018) noted that time could be utilized to help relational parties mature and accept the forgiveness. In summary, the relational parties are often in control of how and when forgiveness occurs.

However, research does suggest that forgiveness functions as a somewhat linear process through multiple distinct stages. As a part of Waldron and Kelley's (2008) model, individuals perform seven forgiveness tasks: (1) confronting the transgression, (2) managing emotion, (3) making sense of the conflict and relational episode, (4) seeking and inviting forgiveness, (5) granting and accepting forgiveness, (6) renegotiating relational rules and values, and finally (7) monitoring the transgression. Kelley and colleagues (2019) adapted these communication tasks to depict a similar yet slightly different process of communicating forgiveness stating that in task seven, parties will engage in relational transition to either monitor, maintain, or renegotiate their relationship at the end of the forgiveness episode. In scenario one, people will monitor the relationship ending the relationship on amicable terms, but not returning to a warm and friendly state (as they had experienced prior to the transgression). Some individuals may maintain the relationship by continuing to behave in their relationship in similar ways that they did before the transgression. Or, individuals may renegotiate their relationship in establishing new relational rules and norms as a result of the transgression. The different stages of forgiveness can lead to several potential relational outcomes.

Uniquely defined by an individual's communication behaviors, some partial offerings of forgiveness can result in detrimental relational outcomes. When only conditional forgiveness is bestowed to an offender, the relationship can become tense and eventually deteriorate (Waldron & Kelley, 2005, 2008). Examples of conditional forgiveness often occur when the offended party demands that a debt be repaid and their criteria are met (Merolla, Zhang, McCullough, & Sun, 2017). This means that an offender is not fully forgiven for the offense, but rather only partially free from the transgression he or she has committed. Similarly, the offended party can choose not to forgive and harbor anger, bitterness, and resentment for transgressor (Waldron & Kelley, 2008). In this sense, forgiveness can be a negative experience for both parties. In many cases, forgiveness can lead to relational reconciliation (Kelley, 1998; Waldron & Kelley, 2008). This means that the victim can extend mercy and understanding beyond forgiveness which has already been granted to the offender. However, forgiveness does not always result in positive relational outcomes. Like reconciliation, parties can choose to forgive one another and then end the relationship. Therefore, forgiveness is a constructive process working to mend damaged relationships suffering from transgressional consequences (Kelley et al., 2019).

**Forgiveness in the workplace.** Several researchers have explored how interpersonal processes impact workplace practices. Stone (2002) described the forgiveness process utilizing a systems approach which begins intrapersonally, and then extends interpersonally, to a group, and finally to an organization. This means that individuals will exercise forgiveness, and that act will have a broader impact on the collective. Aquino and colleagues (2003, p. 212) define interpersonal workplace forgiveness as:

A process whereby an employee who perceives himself or herself to have been the target of a morally injurious offense deliberately attempts to (a) overcome negative emotions

(e.g., resentment, anger, hostility) toward his or her offender and (b) refrain from causing the offender harm even when he or she believes it is morally justifiable to do so.

This definition implies that forgiveness, while often performed for personal benefit, can also benefit the moral and ethical obligation an individual has made to others in their environment. While Aquino and colleagues (2003) focused on interpersonal forgiveness in the workplace, Cameron (2007) noted that the collective group participates in organizational forgiveness when they reframe an offense through the adoption of prosocial, positive, and learning-oriented responses to the violation. This indicates that individuals are exercising forgiveness in order to help others benefit from a challenging circumstance and work together in order to understand the impact of these behaviors. Cameron and Caza (2002) suggested that organizational forgiveness “is the capacity to foster collective abandonment of justified resentment, bitterness, and blame, and, instead it is the adoption of positive, forward-looking approaches in response to harm or damage” (p. 15). In doing so, the organizational members foster optimism for the future of their organization. Cameron and Caza (2002) also asserted that organizational forgiveness has also been described as the ways in which collective groups of organizational members respond to harmful behaviors and abandon negative emotions such as resentment in exchange for positive emotions. The intentional relinquishing of negative emotions allows organizational members to collaborate toward a positive and now attainable goal.

Additionally, Paul and Putnam (2017) found that organizational members identified forgiveness as coping mechanism which aimed to diminish lost productivity time due to conflict. Forgiveness is one way that organizational members were able to make sense of the negative act that transpired and work through their sometimes-stifling feelings. Waldron and Kloeber (2012) specified that transcendent values, such as granting forgiveness to improve morality, can

maintain or strengthen organizational goals. When applied to the workplace, organizational members can engage in forgiveness processes similarly to interpersonal forgiveness just on a collective scale.

Therefore, forgiveness functions to serve individual's personal as well as their interests as well as benefit their workplace. Aligning with previous research describing POS, Cameron and colleagues (2004) and Cameron (2007) proposed that forgiveness in organizations fosters positive behaviors and processes within an organization, while at the same time weakening negative organizational outcomes. Bisel and Messersmith (2012) also intimated that apologies in the workplace should embody positive organizational practices and, in turn, strengthen interpersonal relationships. While Bisel and Messersmith (2012) found that people are just as willing to forgive offenses from a supervisor as they are a friend. Thus, some members of the organization can be willing to practice positivity in order to have more successful relationships. Cameron (2007) asserted that forgiveness fosters a change in an organizational member's attitudes, cognitive state, and behaviors, helping to reframe sections of conflict. Forgiveness is therefore a relevant construct worthy of investigation for its positive effects on workplace climate and performance.

**Forgiveness as a positive process.** Forgiveness can create several positive implications. First, forgiveness can create positive emotions or feelings in the relationship. Kirkup (1993) noted that forgiveness demonstrates peace and a hope for a better future. Forgiveness is consistently described as a positive transactional process which requires the abandonment of negative emotions, behaviors, and thoughts related to the transgression (Thompson & Synder, 2003). Cameron (2007) proposed that forgiveness is a transformational process that can diminish consequential negative emotions of conflict such as resentment, fickleness, and judgment. As

negative feelings are released, individuals have more cognitive energy to devote to maintaining or repairing their relationship. Forgiveness has been described as an adaptive process in which people change their communication due to the circumstance of the situation (Edwards et al., 2017). As a form of relational maintenance, forgiveness can be employed to mend severe and mild relational disruptions. Additionally, Younger and colleagues (2004) stated that the overall purpose of forgiveness is to relieve the negative effects of relational conflict between individuals and in turn, restore that relationship to a prior state. Thus, forgiveness is consistently viewed as a positive process which seeks to mend a wrongful action toward another person (Kirkup, 1993).

Outside of interpersonal relationships, researchers have discovered that forgiveness alleviates conflict in smaller collective units. In a study of forgiveness in stepfamilies, Waldron and colleagues (2018) found that forgiveness can heal family relationships and allow people to respond to their vulnerabilities with compassion, acceptance, and grow their relationship. For many families, forgiveness was the channel for people to express what they were truly feeling and have a positive result, rather than a negative outcome. In order to move past the transgression, forgiveness is utilized to confront the transgression and reshape attitudes, reactions, and relational outcomes in response to the transgression (Stone, 2002). People can strive to have relational restoration and restore equilibrium in their relationship (Ren & Gray, 2009). Like POS processes, forgiveness can help restore balance to a relational system.

### **The Forgiveness Model**

#### **Transgressions**

The beginning of the forgiveness process is marked by a transgression. An important topic in the interpersonal communication literature, Worthington and colleagues (2010) defined transgressions as the violation of a symbolic boundary (psychological, moral, or physically

created). In order to make amends, the victim must first be aware that a transgression has occurred as a violation against them and then respond to their transgression. In other words, relationships are comprised of rules and boundaries, and when those rules and/or boundaries are disturbed, a transgression occurs (Metts, 1994). Distinct from other misdemeanors present in the literature, transgressions violate these relational rules and boundaries and breach the relational agreement between partners. Emotional transgressions are often caused by incivility which can strain relationships and trust (Metts et al., 2006). Emotional transgressions aim at damaging an individual's self-concept, which can have long-lasting repercussions on the relationship. Cameron (2007) noted that transgressions occur after expectations of a behavior are violated. Metts and colleagues (2006) discovered that the most common transgressions are acts of uncivility, which include disrespect, spreading rumors, and malicious acts which strain relationships and trust. In the workplace, transgressions often occur after an organizational member has manipulated or ignored the moral code of an organization (Waldron & Kloeber, 2012). Kelley and colleagues (2019) suggested that transgressions function to attack an individual's identity, violate relational agreements, or serve as an injustice to others. For many individuals, transgressions are the means by which an offender can hurt the victim's emotions and break relational rules that have already been established in order to serve their own selfish means. The offender may try to break these relational norms to intentionally harm the self-construct of others to do damage to the relationship. Thus, transgressions are often toxic to interpersonal relationships.

Confronting the transgression is the first task in Waldron and Kelley's (2008) tasks of forgiveness. Individuals will often self-disclose the transgression through confession and later discuss the violated moral and relational rules. The social confrontation episode occurs once the

transgressor has explicitly stated what they did or once their behavior was discovered by the other party (Metts, 1994; Metts et al., 2006). In the second communication task of forgiveness, the offended individual will manage his or her negative emotions caused by the transgression in listening to the emotions and assessing verbal and nonverbal cues of the offender (Waldron & Kelley, 2008). However, people can respond to transgressions through moral negotiation to discuss the offense and decide how to respond (Kelley et al., 2019). Transgressions are often negatively related to the transgressor's attachment style (Thompson & Synder, 2003). Further, transgression severity can determine the type of forgiveness strategy utilized by the offender (Sheldon & Anthony, 2019). The transgression severity can also determine if forgiveness is granted (Morse & Metts, 2011), and often severe transgressions can result in negative perceptions of the relational change (Waldron & Kelley, 2005). Individuals will often employ forgiveness task three, which is where they engage in sense-making efforts to reduce their uncertainty about the current state of their relationship (Waldron & Kelley, 2008).

After the transgression, the victim will forgive the transgressor or disband the relationship because of relational constraints (Metts, 1994). Individuals may engage in sensemaking, ask open-ended questions, and discuss the context of their transgression (Waldron & Kelley, 2008). The presentation of the transgression can also impact the offender's ability to grant forgiveness (Metts, 1994). Once the transgression has been acknowledged and confronted, the victim will engage in forgiveness-granting.

### **Forgiveness-Granting**

Waldron and Kelley's (2008) fifth forgiveness task is granting forgiveness. When granting forgiveness, individuals will release their negative feelings toward the offender and their transgression through their direct or indirect strategies. Individuals will reexamine their

values when deciding whether to grant forgiveness. After the transgression has occurred, the individual may engage in forgiveness-granting as an attempt to rid themselves of resentment and move more confidently toward a relational future to make peace (Kelley et al., 2019).

Individuals will grant forgiveness based upon their motivations and personal dispositions and do so through a specific forgiveness-granting strategy.

**Motivations to grant forgiveness.** Several other factors can impact an individual's motivation to forgive a transgression. Both the content and the presentation of the apology can impact an individual's decision to grant forgiveness (Fehr & Gelfand, 2010). Time also plays an integral role in the forgiveness process; however, it is less clear as to the extent and scope of its impact (Waldron & Kelley, 2008). McCullough and colleagues (2003) argued that the forgiveness process takes time because the offended party must make sense of complex emotions and then extend a decision to the offender. Individuals often engage in meaning-making processes where they analyze their cognitive thoughts and emotions regarding the relational turbulence which has occurred (Kelley et al., 2019). Transgressions are less likely to be forgiven when an offense is frequently or repeatedly committed by the offender and/or if the victim had committed a similar transgression (Morse & Metts, 2011). In line with these findings, participants of another study also noted that they were less likely to forgive if the transgressor was a repeat offender (Younger et al., 2004). However, Bradfield and Aquino (1998) discovered that victims are less likely to forgive a transgressor if the offended party considers the possibility of revenge.

In some cases, the offended party may emotionally reframe the way they perceive their transgressor, no longer holding the individual accountable for his or her actions (Kelley, 1998). Victims tended to be less motivated to take revenge on their offender after longer periods of time

following the transgression. In these cases, the transgressor may be more likely to "get away" with minor offenses if the victim had a less negative representation of the experience. Thus, the victim is more likely to grant forgiveness and less likely to be motivated to seek revenge or not participate in the forgiveness process.

Further, the behaviors an individual displays post-forgiveness-seeking can affect the victim's decision to grant forgiveness (Kelley, 1998). In some cases, the transgression severity can impact the victim's willingness to forgive the offender (Metts et al., 2006). This is a counter finding to Kelley (1998), which originally found that transgression severity was a less significant motive to participate in the forgiveness process. Younger and colleagues (2004) found that individuals are often self-motivated to forgive transgressions if they were once an offender themselves. Further, victims who often are self-motivated to grant forgiveness hope to reduce the physical and emotional boundary against the offender (Younger et al., 2004). In the workplace, individuals are often motivated to forgive others for relational maintenance purposes in order to achieve collaboration towards high task performance (Paul & Putnam, 2017). Thus, the motives of the victim have a large impact on an individual's willingness to bestow forgiveness to an offender.

**Personal characteristics motivating forgiveness-granting.** The personality characteristics of the victim can also impact their willingness to grant forgiveness (Palanski, 2012). For example, people who are more willing to cooperate with others in moments of conflict are more willing to forgive others (Akoyo, 2015). Takaku (2001) resolved that, in understanding their own imperfect nature, people are more likely to understand an offender's reasons for committing an offense and forgive others for their transgressions. Thus, perspective-taking can yield positive benefits for both the transgressor and the offended party. In contrast,

some individuals may naturally tend to be less willing to forgive transgressions (Metts et al. 2006). Religion can be a motive for the offended party to grant forgiveness (Kirkup, 1993; Younger et al., 2004). Further, individuals who engaged in the forgiveness process were less likely to have relational conflict (Akoyo, 2016). Those who experience empathy are more likely to forgive others and create relational closeness (Metts et al., 2006; McCullough, 2000). Forgiveness granters may experience empathy and, as a result, view the offender as less responsible for their actions (McCullough et al., 2003). Marler, Cox, Simmering, Bennett, and Fuller (2011) also suggested that people who are more agreeable are more likely to forgive. Psychology researchers have also discovered several predispositions can aid in forgiveness-granting. For example, Mudgal and Tiwari (2017) found that both males and females are willing to participate in forgiveness. However, men are less forgiving (Miller, Worthington, & McDaniel, 2008) and more vengeful (Brown, 2003) than women during the forgiveness process. Females and older individuals are more likely to have forgiving attitudes (Akoyo, 2016). People who fear intimacy often utilize the nonverbal and conditional forgiveness-granting strategies to maintain distance with their partners (Edwards et al., 2001). These indirect strategies are often utilized because they require less emotional conversation with the person they have offended. In contrast, people with lower self-esteem are more likely to seek forgiveness in order to compensate for their low self-efficacy (Schlenker & Darby, 1981).

**Relational nature motivating forgiveness-granting.** The nature or category of the relationship may contribute to an offender's motivation on whether to grant forgiveness. For example, the quality of the relationship, the experiences, and tendencies of the relational parties prior to the transgression all help describe the relational nature. Palanski (2012) states that people may be more willing to forgive based on their relational satisfaction. For example, people

unhappy in their relationships may be less likely to forgive their offender because they were already dissatisfied with the other party. People in voluntary relationships are more motivated to forgive others, and often work to create or restore relational stability (Kelley, 1998). This is because people in voluntary relationships can move out of them quickly without experiencing significant social pressure. As such, a partner in an extremely intimate relationships is often motivated to forgive their offender (Younger et al., 2004).

Individuals in task six of the forgiveness episode will renegotiate relational values and rules after the transgression has occurred to create a mutual plan (Waldron & Kelley, 2008). The relational nature can impact an individual's willingness to grant forgiveness. Those with higher relational satisfaction are more willing to forgive others of a transgression (Allemand, Amerg, Zimprich, & Finchman, 2007). Kelley (1998) found that an individual's motivation to grant forgiveness may depend on the longevity and depth of intimacy in their relationship.

Leaders are integral to facilitating workplace forgiveness. In the workplace, leaders are less likely to display avoidant behaviors towards their transgressor and seek revenge (Zhedaniuk & Bobcel, 2015). Zheng Can Dijke, Lenissen, Giurge, and Gremer (2016) found that people in high-level positions are less likely to be forgiven by their subordinates due to both power distance and cynicism of their subordinates. Dana (2001) stated that the level of negotiated authority in a conflict can affect the willingness to get resolved. A resolution to the conflict can be easily achieved if the negotiated authority level is high (Dana, 2001). While there is less research of forgiveness conducted in the organizational context, given the relationships between peers, this study offers the insight that forgiveness-granting occurs in similar ways in organizational relationships.

### **Forgiveness-Granting Strategies**

Individuals use a variety of tactics to grant forgiveness, with several factors impacting the strategy's effect on the offended party. Merolla and colleagues (2017) reasoned that some parties can grant forgiveness psychologically, but do not articulate their feelings to the transgressor. In forgiveness-granting, the offended party may use explicated statements of forgiveness, conditional offers of forgiveness, nonverbal displays of emotion, and/or a discussion of the offense with the transgressor to create positive relational outcomes (Waldron & Kelley, 2008). The offended party will also extend forgiveness using strategies (direct or indirect) like those used by the offender (Kelley, 1998)

**Direct forgiveness-granting strategies.** There are several ways in which individuals can grant forgiveness. Individuals can utilize explicit strategies which extend forgiveness to the offender with verbal phrases such as, "You are forgiven" (Kelley et al., 2019; Merolla et al., 2017; Waldron & Kelley, 2005; 2008). In some cases, direct forgiveness may function to avoid fostering further discussion about the transgression in the future (Kelley et al., 2019; Waldron & Kelley, 2008). Ultimately, explicit forgiveness-granting have resulted in positive relational outcomes, such as maintaining and enhancing the quality of the relationship (Kelley & Waldron, 2006; Waldron & Kelley, 2006). Discussion is another way that the offended party may directly grant forgiveness. Individuals may talk about their relationship (directly stating the problem) and attempt to understand why the transgression occurred and then ultimately grant forgiveness to the offender (Kelley & Waldron, 2006; Kelley et al., 2019).

**Indirect forgiveness-granting strategies.** Individuals can also grant forgiveness through indirect strategies. According to Waldron and Kelley (2008), indirect strategies communicate that forgiveness has been granted without verbally or explicitly expressing it in saying "I forgive you" or "You are forgiven." For example, individuals can display nonverbal signs which grant

forgiveness such as displaying facial expressions, or touching the transgressor (Kelley & Waldron, 2006; Kelley et al., 2019; Waldron & Kelley, 2008). The forgiving party may choose this strategy in order to save face and even demonstrate authenticity. Nonverbal displays of emotion often result in positive relational outcomes (Kelley & Waldron, 2006; Waldron & Kelley, 2008). In an investigation about the impact of touch in workplace settings, offended individuals viewed an apology as more effective if touch were utilized (Marler et al., 2011). In the workplace, managers who utilize touch in an apology are viewed as more effective in granting-forgiveness to their subordinates (Marler et al., 2011).

Further, conditional forgiveness also serves as a forgiveness-granting strategy and functions as a way to potentially control the offender (Kelley et al., 2019; Waldron & Kelley, 2008). Because the offender did not fully forgive their transgressor, they as the victim hold the power in the relationship. Some strategies, however, can have negative relational outcomes, such as loss of trust, intimacy, and even relational dissolution. Minimizing is a strategy in which the offended party may seem to view the transgression as less severe (Kelley & Waldron, 2006; Kelley et al., 2019; Waldron & Kelley, 2008). However, in many cases, this strategy is used to avoid a healthy conversation about the transgression and the emotions it brought on (Kelley et al., 2019; Waldron & Kelley, 2005). Individuals clearly navigate the forgiveness episode using forgiveness-granting strategies because both parties understand that the forgiveness has been granted because of communication.

### **New Interests in Communicating Forgiveness**

Forgiveness-granting has been of great interest to interpersonal communication scholars. As previously mentioned, researchers have devoted much of their attention in exploring forgiveness on the forgiveness-granting process (Kelley & Waldron, 2006; Merolla et al., 2017;

Waldron & Kelley, 2008; Waldron et al., 2008). However, there is less known about the forgiveness-seeking process of communication. Forgiveness seekers are offenders, and therefore, they have higher risks associated with participating in the process. For example, forgiveness seekers must risk losing face (Kelley & Waldron, 2006), facing the negative emotions associated with their transgressions (Kelley & Waldron, 2006; Waldron & Kelley, 2008), dealing with their choices and the negative repercussions on the relationship, as well as their choice to sometimes go against their own morality (Waldron & Kelley, 2008).

Further, as previously mentioned, most of the research conducted about forgiveness has been informed by post-positivism (Aquino et al., 2003; Kelley & Waldron, 2006; Thompson & Synder, 2003). Though post-positivist studies provide an overview of the relationships between the forgiveness process and individual behaviors, motivations, and outcomes, they fail to provide insight as to *why* these relationships exist. Or, along similar lines, post-positivist studies rely on measurements on how individuals seek and grant forgiveness, rather than enable participants to describe these processes according to their experiences. For many scholars, the forgiveness-seeking behaviors have not been researched and instead scholars have utilized quantitative methods to measure the outcomes of forgiveness-seeking behaviors. Waldron and Kloeber (2012) reasoned that the forgiveness tasks and components are consistent in the workplace setting, only mentioning that the forgiveness process is under the influence of the organizational climate. Thus, in exploring the relational forgiveness process utilizing the academic literature, it seems appropriate to apply interpersonal forgiveness knowledge to the organizational context. Therefore, it is of interest in this investigation to explore individuals' motivations and behaviors for seeking forgiveness in the workplace in order to determine their impact on personal, professional, and organizational outcomes.

## **Forgiveness-Seeking**

As the fourth task in the forgiveness process, individuals will seek forgiveness (Waldron & Kelley, 2008). To do this, individuals often utilize various strategies which lead to relational consequences (Kelley, 1998). There are several reasons leading an individual to seek forgiveness from the person they have offended. Several scholars (Kelley, 1998, Kelley & Waldron, 2006; Sandage et al., 2011), summarized these reasons, finding that individuals often seek forgiveness based on the situational context of the transgression, their motivations, and their personal characteristics.

**Motivations to seek forgiveness.** Individuals may be motivated to seek forgiveness in order to benefit themselves, as well as the other party in their relationships. Offenders seek forgiveness to protect the “well-being” of themselves or others (Kelley, 1998). Madsen, Gygi, and Hammond (2009) asserted that the forgiveness process depends on the transgressor’s motivation to restore relational trust and harmony as well as their willingness to take responsibility for their action. Individuals may be motivated to seek forgiveness in hopes of fulfilling their moral obligations (Sandage et al., 2001). Reflecting on the religious roots of forgiveness, Kirkup (1993) reasoned that individuals seeking forgiveness do so as a means of and self-sacrifice. That is, in order to free their moral obligations from guilt caused by their transgression, offenders must be willing to damage their own self-concept to help others recover from the offense. Offenders may have to swallow their pride and sacrifice their selfish ambitions for the betterment of the relationship. Individuals may also be more motivated to seek forgiveness if they have high relational satisfaction and are looking to restore that relationship to its previous or an otherwise heightened state in the future (Madsen et al., 2006; Waldron & Kelley, 2008; Westerman, 2013). Successful relationships prior to the transgression would have

produced positive outcomes, the offender will be motivated to return the relationship back to its previously positive state. As such, effective forgiveness-seeking can also have positive impacts on the offender's emotions and the *future* relationship between both parties (Madsen et al., 2009; Waldron & Kelley, 2008, Waldron et al., 2008).

In one of only two studies in the realm of seeking forgiveness in the workplace, Zdanuik & Bobcel (2015) found that supervisors who worked toward collective goals have increased motivation to forgive their employees. In addition to this, only Metts and colleagues (2006) have looked at the motivations to seek forgiveness in the context of workplace relationships. However, due to the similar nature of interpersonal relationships and workplace relationships (Rawlins, 1992; Sias & Cahill, 1998), it is reasonable to presume that motivations to seek forgiveness may function similarly in workplace relationships. Thus, this investigation will provide fruitful insights to determine if these motivations are similar in seeking forgiveness in the workplace.

**Personal characteristics motivating forgiveness-seeking.** Forgiveness researchers have discovered that individuals' personal dispositions and communication tendencies play a role in their forgiveness-seeking. Specifically, an individual's personal attributes can also impact their motivation to seek forgiveness. People who are motivated to seek forgiveness are not afraid of experiencing shame as a result of the transgression (Edwards, Pas, Whitbread & Neuendorf, 2018; Palanski, 2012; Sandage et al., 2001). In some situations, individuals seeking forgiveness may be risking damage to their own image in the perception of others. Those seeking forgiveness also have developed a cognitive reasoning about forgiveness (Sandage et al., 2001). This means that individuals who engage in forgiveness-seeking have done so because they have the cognitive

ability to process their transgression and will take the necessary steps to repair the relational damage.

Additionally, offenders with likable dispositions are more likely to be forgiven (Bradfield & Aquino, 1998). This is because individuals who are more agreeable are often competent communicators and can form favorable impressions on others. However, people with narcissistic tendencies are less likely to seek forgiveness because they do not participate in self-monitoring (Sandage et al., 2001). Narcissism, a person's tendency to possess an inflated ego and demonstrate apathy toward others, impedes their ability to practice empathy (Sandage et al., 2001). That is, individuals who are narcissistic are less likely to be concerned about what others think of them and are, therefore, less worried about saving face with the individual they have offended. Sandage and colleagues (2001) reasoned that narcissists are less worried about saving face because they do not exercise empathy or shame in the normal (healthy) way that people perceive right and wrong as it relates to committing transgressions.

Further, individuals seeking forgiveness must be willing to sacrifice their power in the relationship in order to acknowledge the transgression (Waldron & Kloeber, 2012). In some cases, an individual with low self-efficacy may be more prone to seek forgiveness, even in non-severe situations, because they believe that any behavior may offend someone (as a result of their lack of confidence in their decision-making). At times this is determinantal because the offender may believe that they have committed an offense that was minor but that they perceive as major in the realm of the situation and/or the relationship.

The personal characteristic of biological sex may also be an indicator for who is more likely to seek forgiveness. Males are perceived to have more sincere apologies than females, although females are more likely to apologize (Akoyo, 2016). While there is some research on

how an individual's personality characteristics impact their ability to seek forgiveness, these interpersonal findings have yet to be explored for an organizational member, warranting its investigation in this study.

**Relational nature in motivating forgiveness-seeking.** The nature of the relationship may contribute to the offending party's motivation to employ forgiveness to protect the well-being of both parties (Kelley, 1998; Waldron & Kelly, 2008). Because relationships are mutually beneficial, people often seek forgiveness to create more positive relational outcomes for themselves and others. Similarly, many offenders want to restore the relationship they had with the person whom they caused harm (Kelley, 1998). This is often because the within secure relationships had high levels of trust associated with their partner and they would ideally like to maintain that. Based upon these motivations to grant forgiveness; the following research question asked:

RQ1: What are an individual's motives to seek forgiveness in their workplace?

### **Forgiveness-Seeking Strategies**

**Direct forgiveness-seeking strategies.** Direct forgiveness-seeking-strategies are often the most commonly exercised of the forgiveness components. Kelley (1998) found that most offenders utilized direct strategizing in seeking forgiveness. Direct strategies include apologizing, taking responsibility, and showing remorse for an action (Edward et al., 2018; Kelley, 1998; Waldron & Kelley, 2008; Waldron, et al., 2008, Waldron et al., 2018). Direct forgiveness-seeking strategies are most often what people think of when an individual seeks forgiveness, with phrases uttered such as "I'm sorry." Explicit acknowledgment of the transgressions occurs the most in forgiveness-seeking (Kelley & Waldron, 2006; Kelley et al.,

2019). This most often occurs because people with high relational satisfaction want to repair their broken relationship and will therefore chose an explicit strategy (Edwards et al., 2018).

Through direct strategies, individuals may discuss their transgression to facilitate a conversation regarding the transgression and the consequences (Merolla et al., 2017; Sheldon & Anthony, 2019). Offenders are more likely to assume high responsibility for their actions in severe transgressions (Schlenker & Darby, 1981). When severe transgressions occur, offenders often choose direct strategies in order to make amends because they are highly effective in expressing responsibility. Waldron and colleagues (2008) prescribed that offenders should explicitly acknowledge what has happened in order to clarify relational rules for a more positive relational future. The engaging strategy was most often utilized to lead to open discussions in which parties could have conversations about the transgression and their relationship (Merolla et al., 2017).

Individuals who are willing to clearly and openly discuss their transgressions can more easily navigate an otherwise challenging relational incident. Explicit strategies can also aid in relationship negotiation because the parties have already been willing to have a difficult discussion (Waldron et al., 2018). Clearly, explicit strategies are extremely important to the individuals seeking forgiveness with a person they have offended. Explicit strategies provide positive relational outcomes such as weakened relational consequences, and a more profitable relational future for all parties. For example, an offender may commit a transgression, which would ordinarily have long-lasting impacts on the relationship such as altered relational rules, or even, despite practicing forgiveness, have the relationship end in relational dissolution. However, the use of explicit strategies can result in reduced negative relational consequences and enable the relationship to continue despite the transgression or return the relationship to normalcy.

Therefore, it is reasonable to consider how explicit forgiveness-seeking strategies will impact individuals seeking forgiveness in the workplace.

Compensating for a transgression is also a direct forgiveness-seeking strategy. Compensation styles are less likely to be utilized by individuals seeking forgiveness (Kelley & Waldron, 2006). Compensation strategies occur when offenders try and invest time or resources in the relationship to restore motivation for the other person to forgive them (Kelley & Waldron, 2006; Waldron & Kelley, 2008). Transgressors may try and provide something in exchange for what relational transgression they caused. Although, Fehr and Gelfand (2010) found that individuals who utilized compensation strategies in forgiveness-seeking and connect (mirror) the self-construal of the victim to inspire empathy within the person whom they have offended. In selecting the strategies that the victim would expect in forgiveness seeker, the offender is likely to be successful in creating a more positive communication response. In some instances, the offender may provide tangible gifts when apologizing and attempt to seek forgiveness multiple times (Waldron & Kelley, 2008). This is done to entice the victim into forgetting the transgression. Apologies that display remorse demonstrate that the transgressor has acknowledged their offense and has an intent on altering their behavior in the future (Kelley, 1998; Morse & Metts, 2011; Schlenker & Darby, 1981). These findings indicate that after a severe transgression has occurred, people desiring forgiveness and relational continuity, and/or improvement should assume high levels of responsibility for their behavior and explicitly apologize to their victim. While compensation strategies can be utilized, the research has shown that people find more success seeking forgiveness when utilizing explicating strategies.

**Effective apologies in seeking forgiveness.** An apology is an example of an explicit acknowledgment of the transgression which occurs as a direct form of communication (Kelley,

1998; Kelley & Waldron, 2006; Waldron & Kelly, 2008). The use of an apology can have positive effects on the forgiveness episode (Kelley & Waldron, 2006). Apologies can help recover relational damage caused by transgressions and facilitate forgiveness (Metts et al., 2006). Apologies are often the first step toward creating relational restoration and reconciliation. Apologies can also motivate forgiveness-granting if the transgressor demonstrates remorse and acknowledges the offense (Morse & Metts, 2011). The transgressor must select the proper language in order to demonstrate their feelings of repentance.

Some scholars (i.e. Bisel & Messersmith, 2012; Waldron et al., 2008) have constructed models for delivering an effective apology. For example, Bisel and Messersmith (2012) created the OOPS (Explain your errOr, Say you're sOrry, Promise of Forbearance, Offer to reStore) model which requires people seeking forgiveness to make effective apologies to: (1) state a narrative of the transgression, (2) express regret, (3) explicitly apologize to the victim, and (4) describe their feelings of remorse. The results of this study suggest that people who are trained on how to deliver an OOPS apology can more efficiently seek forgiveness. Cameron (2007) stated that the offender must not simply accept the transgression or attempt to rationalize it, the offender must take full responsibility for his or her actions. Thus, the apology must include a sentiment of acknowledgment in order to take responsibility and demonstrate best practices in forgiveness-seeking. Effective apologies can repair the emotional damage and strengthen interpersonal relationships for the future (Bisel & Messersmith, 2012; Fehr & Gelfand, 2010; Waldron et al., 2008). Therefore, this study will explore how forgiveness behaviors are effectively enacted in the workplace. In order to better examine how these behaviors are manifested when an organizational member seeks forgiveness, further exploration can determine the effectiveness of direct strategies in the workplace.

**Indirect forgiveness-seeking strategies.** Indirect strategies are the ways an individual will seek forgiveness without explicitly saying “I’m sorry.” Indirect strategies are utilized in seeking forgiveness and include employing the use of humor, nonverbal assurances, social network tools, communicating remorse, and simply returning the relationship to normalcy (Edwards et al., 2018; Kelley, 1998; Kelley & Waldron, 2006, Waldron & Kelley, 2008). Marler and colleagues (2011) found that nonverbal displays of touch can facilitate positive emotions and forgiveness. Nonverbal assurances can demonstrate and validate an offender’s authenticity of emotion and mitigate emotional distress which will improve relational intimacy (Waldron & Kelley, 2005). This strategy may be utilized to build confidence in the offended party and can be the transgressor’s way of showing that they have no intentions to repeat the offense (Waldron & Kelley, 2005; 2008; Waldron et al., 2018). Offenders who perceive their relationship as equitable often utilize nonverbal strategies (Edwards et al., 2018). However, Waldron and Kelley (2005) suggest that when individuals implement multiple forgiveness-seeking strategies, they are more likely to create more positive relational outcomes.

Researchers have prescribed several ways an individual can effectively seek forgiveness. Fehr and Gelfand (2010) suggest that the transgressor should keep the audience in mind before apologizing and acknowledge the violation of the relationship’s rules. Thus, individuals should take great care in selecting their forgiveness-seeking strategies (Kelley, 1998). Individuals are more likely to be forgiven when they present an apology than when they choose not to apologize (Morse & Metts, 2011). Waldron and colleagues (2008) determined the forgiveness-seeking strategies of explicit acknowledgement of the transgression, the use of nonverbal assurances, compensation offers, and humor can create more positive forgiveness outcomes which ultimately can improve the relationship.

According to Waldron and Kelley (2008), individuals can experience more open communication about their relationship, restored morality, relational recovery after the transgression, and an overall positive feeling about the relationship. When humor is employed, individuals can joke about the transgression as an attempt to lighten the mood after an offense has occurred. Though there are several forgiveness-seeking strategies for consideration of the offender, Kelley and Waldron (2005) also found that exploring a multitude of forgiveness tactics can create more positive relational outcomes. Further, Kelley and Waldron (2005) discovered these strategies allowed for positive relational change in terms of improving the quality of the relationship. So, while indirect forgiveness-seeking strategies are sometimes viewed as less effective, they can still have positive implications on the relationships.

### **Misuse of Forgiveness-Seeking Strategies**

However, individuals do not always select the best strategies when seeking forgiveness. Ineffective apologies blame the victim for the transgression (Waldron et al., 2008). Initially, offenders may attempt to justify their offense and convince the victim that they had grounds for committing the transgression (Metts et al., 2006). The more severe the transgression is, the more likely the offender is to shift blame onto another individual when seeking forgiveness (Bradford & Aquino, 1999). This may be a strategy utilized to save-face to the offender, even though it has negative implications. Individuals may attempt to make excuses for their offense instead of taking responsibility for it (Metts et al., 2006) or act in retaliation or defense of their actions (Madsen et al., 2009). These mechanisms can deter the forgiveness process and create relational damage.

People who act more dismissive in conflict utilize minimizing strategies and often suffer relational dissatisfaction (Edwards et al., 2018). Minimizing the transgression will discount its

severity and, in some cases, discount the emotions the victim has experienced. In other cases, offenders may seek forgiveness through explaining their offense and discuss the reason it transpired (Waldron & Kelley, 2008). Offenders can also make the mistake of employing the wrong apology based on cultural norms and practices (Len & Gray, 2009), which can be detrimental to an already tense relational situation.

However, forgiveness-seeking is still a complex process that needs to be handled with care and carefully crafted communication. While individuals seek forgiveness, there are some instances where people may not accept the forgiveness they have sought in order to keep their moral conscience clear (Waldron & Kloeber, 2012). In these cases, forgiveness is expressed as a gift to the offender as a means of repairing the relationship for the collective parties. However, this does not discount the strategies which influenced the individual to seek forgiveness in the first place. This research underscores the importance of choosing effective forgiveness-seeking strategies in order to maintain the relationship, reduce relational damage, maintain moral values, and sustain the self-concept of the offender. However, because most of the research has explored the forgiveness-seeking strategies between individuals in interpersonal relationships, more research needs to be done to explore workplace relationships. While interpersonal relationships are, in many cases, voluntary, workplace relationships are relationships of convivence. Thus, the impact of forgiveness-seeking has the potential to be magnified by not only interpersonal, but also organizational factors. In order to explore the impact of forgiveness-seeking strategies, the following research question reads:

RQ2: What behaviors do individuals use to seek forgiveness in their workplace?

### **Organizational Conditions for Forgiveness**

Organizations can take several measures to reinforce and ensure that formal and informal behaviors, practices, and policies are enacted by their organizational members. Formally, organizations may have established policies and expectations which encourage forgiveness. Informally, organizations may create or encourage their members to establish a positive organizational climate based upon forgiveness. Through sustained communication behaviors, organizational members can manage conflict, emotion, and interact with one another based upon the established behavioral expectations by the organization.

Almost daily, organizational members informally attempt to manage how they respond to challenging situations of conflict. Organizational members then must make sense of their daily interactions, including those that may cause them conflict. Formal organizational processes can help organizational members practice forgiveness within their workplace. In order to reduce changes in organizational climate and culture, forgiveness is best enacted if it is introduced as an organizational process prior to conflict occurring (Palanski, 2012). Paul and Putnam (2017) found that task completion was a secondary motivation for organizational members employing forgiveness in the workplace. Further, Aquino and colleagues (2003) discovered that organizational norms and values can impact the forgiveness process. Virtuous organizations develop practices (such as forgiveness) that are committed to moral goodness, social betterment (Cameron et al., 2004). These organizations are created when organizational members employ positivity deviant behaviors that utilize forgiveness and help optimism flourish in their organization (Cameron & Caza, 2002). For example, an organizational member could purposefully choose to apologize to their coworker publicly in order to reduce the tension within the workplace created from the transgression.

Similarly, Fehr and Gelfand (2012) suggested that forgiveness climates can be developed within organizations. Forgiveness climates encourage organizational members to share empathetic and benevolent responses which will diminish conflict before and after it arises. Forgiveness climates are comprised of dyadic relationships in which the offender receives benevolence as a result of conflict. Forgiveness climates are created through three developmental phases: emergence, sensemaking, and action. First, the emergence phase enacts forgiveness through emphasizing the values of justice, compassion, and temperance in the organization. The second phase is called sensemaking where employees practice discussing conflict-management strategies such as empathy and perspective taking in their day-to-day discussions. The third phase is oriented around action where individuals reestablish their relational commitments and citizenship with one another after the conflict (Fehr & Gelfand, 2012). This model creates tangible strategies for instilling forgiveness in a workplace.

Organizational structure or hierarchy can also influence forgiveness in the workplace; an offender's role in an organization can impact their relationships with their subordinates in moments of conflict (Zhen et al., 2016). Leaders who employ forgiveness in their organization can help increase their follower's motivations to forgive and work toward collective forgiveness goals (Zdaniuk & Bobocel, 2015). Often, organizational members may feel that organizational justice should be repaired after a transgression has been committed in the workplace (Okimoto & Wenzel, 2014; Waldron & Kloeber, 2012).

However, in the workplace, it is less common for someone to advocate for forgiveness and have this behavior recognized as an act which should be valued (Cameron, 2007). Individuals participate in perspective-taking to facilitate social learning and consider all viewpoints during moments of conflict. Task seven in Waldron and Kelley's (2008) forgiveness

event describes how individuals monitor, maintain, and rebuild trust. Thus, an organization's conditions prior to the conflict can affect how individuals reconstruct their relationships in the workplace. To further explore the impact of forgiveness in organization, this study will attempt to answer the following question:

RQ3: What organizational practices, both informal and formal occurrences, that encourage forgiveness in the workplace?

### **Outcomes of Forgiveness**

Forgiveness can have several positive outcomes for an individual who either seeks or grants forgiveness. Instead of forgetting about the transgressions, individuals can choose to remember the transgression and forgiveness event in order to create more positive relational outcomes in the future (Kelley et al., 2019; Waldron & Kelley, 2008). Individuals who participate in forgiveness often develop a positive sense of humility (Kelley et al., 2019). Also, people can develop a greater sense of both self-control and mindfulness (Aquino et al., 2003; Fehr & Gelfand, 2012). Forgiveness can lead to reconciliation and help the transgressor feel more connected to the person whom they have offended (Aquino et al., 2003).

**Individuals can experience multiple outcomes as a result of forgiveness.** In interpersonal relationships, Waldron and Kelley (2008) noted that there are five reasons individual should be motivated to forgive one another: forgiveness can (1) repair broken relationships, (2) benefit an individual's well-being, (3) express sentiments of love or forgiveness to the offender, (4) can recognize relational damage and counsel the offender encouraging collaboration, and (5) recreate a sense of justice in relationships. First, individuals can forgive one another and mend their relationships which have been damaged by the transgression. Second, individuals benefit from feeling a sense of morality in forgiveness and return their

relationship to normalcy. Third, people can display the positive feelings they are experiencing through exchanging affection. Fourth, collaboration can be fostered in working through the forgiveness episode. Fifth, individuals experience a sense of fairness once forgiveness has been restored because individuals have reestablished rules to affirm relational equality after the transgression has occurred.

Relational outcomes are determined based upon the parties' initial feelings after the transgression, how they felt during the forgiveness process, and after the forgiveness episode has occurred. Kelley (1998) found that people will experience some sort of relational outcome as a result of forgiveness including their relationship changing, strengthening, or deteriorating. In most cases, individuals will experience some sort of change to their relationship (Kelley, 1998). People can engage in relational restoration after the transgression has occurred as a result of forgiveness (Ren & Gray, 2009).

Further, forgiveness can create relational harmony (Worthington et al., 2010) and higher relational satisfaction (Aquino, Tripp, & Bies, 2001). Kelley and Waldron (2005) found that when forgiveness is granted, relationships can significantly recover from the transgression that caused the conflict. In times of conflict, relational parties can utilize imaginative forgiveness to hypothetically role-play a forgiveness situation where they acknowledge the harmful action, make sense of their response, and then transform the destructive event into a constructive one (Kelley et al., 2019). Similarly, Waldron and colleagues (2018) found that forgiveness can lead to positive relational change by improving trust and reciprocity between relational parties. Often, forgiveness will affect the relationship's longevity because people have examined and renegotiated their values to ensure a better future for the relationship (Waldron et al., 2008). Even if the parties choose not to continue the relationship long-term, communicating forgiveness

can result in friendlier attitudes surrounding the transgression in question (Kelley et al., 2019). Younger and colleagues (2004) also reinforced that the forgiveness process is to help relieve the negative effects of forgiveness to restore relationships to a state before the transgression. Individuals adapt and cope with the transgression and practice relational maintenance as they engage in the forgiveness process (Aquino et al., 2003; Waldron & Kloeber, 2012). Forgiveness can help relational parties save face and reduce uncertainty in their relationship (Merolla et al., 2017).

However, individuals may choose not to grant forgiveness because of the costs associated with the forgiveness process such as embarrassment and loss of face (Stone, 2012). In less desirable circumstances, conditional forgiveness can create emotional distance between parties and distort power dynamics (Edwards et al., 2018). After relational transgressions have been committed, individuals will also have to evaluate the trust-risk dynamic in their relationship and determine whether to continue their relationship despite the damage and renegotiation (Kelley et al., 2019; Waldron & Kelley, 2008). Further, individuals can experience relational restoration after they have assessed the violation, chosen the correct restoration mechanisms, and utilized forgiveness to restore their relationship (Ren & Gray, 2009). When individuals choose to not grant forgiveness, they may continue to attribute blame to the transgressor which can lead to relational deterioration (Kelley et al., 2019). Further, individuals may suffer spiritual tension when people do not practice forgiveness (Waldron et al., 2018). Also, people who are transgressed against may choose not to forgive the other individual yet remain in that relationships due to the involuntary nature of that relationship and the organizational structure (Metts et al., 2006).

Forgiveness can have long-term social, emotional, and health benefits on an organizational member (Cameron & Caza, 2002; Toussaint et al., 2018). Specifically, the

granting of forgiveness can reduce an individual's stress in the workplace (Stone, 2002). Fehr and Gelfand (2012) noted that individuals participating in forgiveness will often continue to engage in social learning and exhibit prosocial behaviors that align with organizational practices. Communicating forgiveness can also have implications on organizational relationships. Miller and colleagues (2007) discovered coworkers who support one another often can create positive emotions about their workplace. Muse and colleagues (2005) found that people who have high emotional intelligence can have more productive organizational behaviors such as higher organizational commitment and foster altruistic behaviors. In reducing emotional stress through forgiveness, organizational members can utilize their cognitive space to take risks and express creativity in their workplace (Stone, 2002).

The study of forgiveness can be practically implemented to mend workplace relationships and create environments receptive to conflict reduction (Aquino et al., 2003). Organizational members who choose to participate in the forgiveness process can express their feelings openly and more easily renegotiate their relationship after a transgression has transpired (Waldron & Kloeber, 2012). Instead of feeling alienated and slowing productivity through avoidant communication, individuals who forgive others can relieve tension in relationships that formed due to conflict (Stone, 2002). Forgiveness can serve as an integral process in overcoming interpersonal injuries which have left victims' cognitive and emotional states debilitated (Aquino et al., 2003). The decision to grant forgiveness can decrease tension in work groups which would otherwise create spiritual disruption between organizational members (Worthington and colleagues, 2010). When organizational members forgive one another, they will have more positive attitudes and cooperate with their coworkers (Akoyo, 2016). Other relational benefits of forgiveness in the workplace is that it creates passionate feelings of gratitude (Stone, 2012).

Often, the relational context may change after a forgiveness event has occurred, especially in blended organizational relationships (Waldron & Kloeber, 2012). Followers will benefit from forgiving leadership practices, aligning with the emphasis on collective organizational identity (Zdaniuk & Bobcel, 2015). Leaders can display respect for employees through the forgiveness process (Miller et al., 2007). Altogether, forgiveness is valuable for helping organizational members on all levels of the organizational system let go of the past and feel fulfilled and empowered (Stone, 2002).

Other outcomes of organizational forgiveness, specifically within virtuous organizations, help positivity and productivity flourish, demonstrated through increased innovation, customer retention, quality enhancement, as well as lower rates of turnover (Cameron et al., 2004). In forgiveness climates, Fehr and Gelfand (2012) projected that organizational members can reduce their anger and participate in self-control and mindfulness to foster forgiveness. Toussaint and colleague's (2018) series of studies showed that employees reported less distress and tension in their relationships as a result of forgiveness. The granting of forgiveness after a transgression can potentially elevate tension if something goes wrong during the process, defuse conflicts, maintain relationships, and create more positive environments (Metts et al., 2006; Toussaint et al., 2018; Waldron & Kloeber, 2012). The promotion of forgiveness in the workplace can increase positivity and reduce negative outcomes such as turnover and organizational exit (Palanski, 2012; Stone, 2002). Toussaint and colleagues (2018) noted that organizational members produced higher qualities of work when forgiveness processes were present in their workplace relationships. Forgiveness can result in positive working environments with less relational damage (Metts et al., 2005). When organizational members practiced unforgiveness, organizational members had negative feelings in their workplace which led to low productivity

and job satisfaction. In conclusion, the promotion of forgiveness in the workplace can have positive effects in an individual's personal, professional, and organizational life. Based upon this knowledge, the investigation will also examine the phenomena of forgiveness-seeking outcomes:

RQ4: What are the outcomes of forgiveness-seeking in the organizational context?

## CHAPTER III

### METHODOLOGY

This investigation utilized Boyatzis' (1998) as well as Braun and Clark's (2006) thematic analysis process for qualitative data. To gain the utmost breadth and depth from the data (Boyatzis, 1998; Braun & Clark, 2006), the researcher employed a thematic analysis method aligning with the interpretivist research paradigm. The thematic analysis process involved three stages: (1) determine the sample and design issues, (2) create thematic coding scheme to analyze the summation of the data, and (3) validate the findings through a rigorous process.

#### **Data Collection and Participants**

The researcher collected data by conducting semi-structured in-depth video interviews. Participants were recruited from a convenience snowball sample, beginning with the personal and professional network of the researcher. Additionally, participants were recruited via an email from graduate and undergraduate communication course at a mid-sized southwestern university. The researcher also recruited participants via a message posted on her social media platforms of Facebook, Instagram, and Twitter. The message asked participants to contact the researcher or the principle investigator if they would be interested in discussing an experience where they sought forgiveness in their workplace. If the organizational member was interested in participating, he or she would then email the principle investigator or the researcher to schedule a time for an interview. Participants were only included in the sample if they met the inclusion criteria to (1) be 18 years or older and (2) be employed full-time (35 hours or more a week) at an organization.

Once the organizational members decided to participate, they scheduled a time with the researcher to discuss their experience. Participants were interviewed via Zoom or WebEx. The

researcher provided the participant with an information sheet (regarding their rights as a participant) and got both verbal and written consent to participate in the study. The interviews were recorded so the data could be analyzed and transcribed. The interviewer asked participants to consider the following general questions inspired by Waldron and Kelley (2008): (1) Can you describe your relationship with your colleague prior to the transgression? (2) Can you describe the nature of the transgression? (3) What was the reaction by your colleague after you committed the transgression? (4) Can you describe why you decided to seek forgiveness? (5) Can you describe what you did to seek forgiveness? (6) Can you describe the nature of your relationship with your colleague after you sought forgiveness? (7) Can you describe what happened as an outcome to you seeking forgiveness: Did your professional or personal life change as a result of your behavior to seek forgiveness? (8) Can you describe the nature of your relationship with your colleague after you asked for sought forgiveness?

With permission from the participant, the researcher recorded the interviews utilizing the record feature on either the Zoom or Webex platform utilized in that specific interview. The recording was stored on the researcher's personal password-protected computer. Afterward, the researcher transcribed the data utilizing an online software entitled "Otter.ai," as well as her own exploration of the data. Otter.ai is an online transcription software that is publicly available. The service has three tiers of plans that can be paid monthly or annually, each tier increasing with features and transcription-sharing capabilities. The basic plan is free, the premium plan costs \$8.33 a month, and the team plan costs \$20.00. The researcher selected the premium plan and received a monthly discount as member of the research community. The online software allowed the researcher to upload to the audio from the WebEx and Zoom interviews and transcribe the audio into text. The service enabled the researcher to play back the audio and follow the text on

the transcript according to time stamps and follow the text along with the audio. Once the online software had completed an initial round of transcription, the researcher went back and listened to the audio and made the appropriate changes to each interview. In total, the researcher collected 123 pages of transcribed interviews.

The researcher also collected demographic information from the participants including their biological sex, background, occupation, age, work experience, and work role. The sample included 10 participants (2 men, and 8 women). Participants were between the ages of 23 and 60 years old ( $M = 40.06$   $SD = 14.49$ ). In terms of background, the sample included Caucasian participants ( $n = 8$ ), a Hispanic participant ( $n = 1$ ), and an African American participant ( $n = 1$ ). Regarding the participant's role in the organization, most of the sample consisted of non-management ( $n = 9$ ) and management ( $n = 1$ ). Top occupations reported in the sample were in the professional fields of Education ( $n = 7$ ), Information Technology ( $n = 1$ ), Advertising/Marketing ( $n = 1$ ), and Government /Public Services ( $n = 1$ ). Participants reported an average of 20.71 years of overall work experience ( $SD = 12.81$ ), 10.9 years of employment at their current organization ( $SD = 9.33$ ), and an average of 4.83 years of employment in their current position ( $SD = 4.44$ ).

### **Data Analysis**

Braun and Clarke (2006) described that a thematic analysis is utilized to discover similarities of ideas prevalent in the data. Thematic analysis is an analytic tool that allows researchers to assign meaning to the patterns and consistencies present in participant narratives and then make sense of those connections according to the inquiry of the research (Boyatzis, 1998). These similarities in participant experiences will be showcased in repetitive phrases which reoccur within the transcript or through words nonverbally emphasized by the

interviewee. In conducting the thematic analysis, the researcher first, thoroughly read all the transcribed responses. Next, the researcher searched for key units of analysis in the taking the form of words, phrases, and experiences which describe how they sought forgiveness. This was done by utilizing different color pens for each code within the transcript. The researcher then began to code the data looking at the personal and professional relationships of coworkers, any content having to do with positivity, transgression, reactions to the forgiveness, how the forgiveness was viewed, and comments on organizational life. Additionally, the researcher coded for the researcher coded for the type of transgression that was committed, the motivation of that transgression, as well as both the offender and the victim's reaction to the transgression. It was also integral to code for the transgressor's perception of any personal and professional impact resulting from their reaction. The researcher specifically was interested in the ways in which participants expressed why and how people sought forgiveness, as well as the outcome of their forgiveness-seeking efforts. The identified codes were then used to perform themes. Following this, the researcher reread the transcripts again and utilized a constant comparison method to determine if the themes were holding together.

The researcher then the displayed the patterns and commonalities identified within the transcript and transferred these ideas onto another sheet of paper. The units of analysis were then sorted into categories, formed from their similarities and differences in relation to one another. If the participant's experience aligned with that category, the researcher placed the units of analysis, a specific phrase or section of the transcript, into that theme. The researcher used the previously posed research question to identify themes which answered the questions involving forgiveness motives (RQ1), behaviors utilized to seek forgiveness (RQ2), conditions which enabled the organizational member to seek forgiveness (RQ3), and the outcomes that are the

result of forgiveness-seeking behaviors in an organization (RQ4). Once the units of analysis were grouped, they were once again evaluated for their relevance as well as their connection to the themes. However, the researcher assured that the themes formed were made up of both wholistic, yet still complex components and conventions. The themes then became saturated with data, allowing the researcher to better define each theme as it related to the study (Braun & Clark, 2006). After the themes became coherent, the transcript then was read once again to code the data according to the created themes.

Finally, the researcher began to validate the analysis through a peer group. The peer group was tasked with checking the data and verifying their legitimacy. The researcher facilitated a peer group that discussed the content and the themes that that were represented to determine if the themes were created without bias or assumptions (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). After reviewing each theme, the participants reinforced the ideas conceived by the researcher in the data analysis. However, the peer group did suggest that one description of the themes be clarified in order to more decisively clarify the theme of forgiveness as a learning experience. The peer group suggested that the final theme needed to be better defined and connected to the research so the audience could more clearly understand its significance. The researcher then made the necessary adjustments to meet the suggestions of the peer group. Thus, after several adaptations the participants of the peer group confirmed the conceptualizations are relevant to the themes according to the data presented in the transcript. All themes relating to seeking forgiveness in the workplace proved salient after review by the peer group and revisal by the researcher.

## CHAPTER IV

### RESULTS

#### **Motives for Seeking Forgiveness**

In answering RQ1, two motives for seeking forgiveness emerged from the data: *maintaining positive relationships* and *maintaining personal and professional image*. When organizational members expressed their desire for *maintaining positive relationships*, they were motivated to seek forgiveness in their workplace because they wanted to keep their relationship with their coworker positive or satisfactory. In their experiences, participants described different transgressions that occurred in the workplace with their supervisors, subordinates, coworkers, and clients. Within their relationship, individuals were motivated to rectify a wrong that had occurred in the relationship because of their transgression. The transgressions which occurred in the workplace between coworkers were split evenly between a workplace mistake that caused harm or an interpersonal dispute between coworkers. All of the participants who committed mistakes said, “it was an honest mistake,” like Maria the assistant art teacher who cut an entire series of paper wrong for her students’ project. Other “innocent mistake[s]” included when Marcus accidentally booted the wrong version of an Access Database.

Some mistakes were more severe, like when Crystal, a university housing official, “misunderstood directions. . . had to redo everything that [she] did, but in a different format and different way” during a university housing checkout. Or another severe mistake was when Matthew, a university admissions counselor “made a mistake of reading the transcript wrong and accepted somebody that probably shouldn’t have been accepted or would have gone to committee.”

In contrast, the other five participants cited that an interpersonal altercation or dispute was the source of their transgression at work. For example, Melissa, a high-ranking university department head “snapped” in a meeting. Melissa said, “I let all emotions show. And I got a little bit, I was a little unprofessional to this person in the meeting because I had pretty much had it. And so that was the transgression and then after that, I felt like I needed to apologize.” This transgression happened after she said there was “this particular department head not wanting to progress, not wanting to do things, the way things were done 20 years ago, and there was a tendency to dig in and really, um, air quote, fight me.” Another interpersonal altercation that led to a transgression in the workplace occurred when Alyssa, a Kindergarten teacher. Alyssa detailed an experience where:

. . . there were some like head butting between myself and like another coworker. So I had called that coworker out for some of the things that they were saying and doing within my classroom. And after like the situation occurred I kind of felt like I handled it. So I went to that principal I and just like apologize, like, for the way I acted and bringing upon that conversation and how it could have been handled differently.

Thus, there were two types of transgressions expressed by participants in this study: workplace mistakes and interpersonal altercations.

Within this theme, participants described how parties with mutually positive relationships prior to the transgression were able to benefit from the forgiveness process. Participants in this theme discussed the good things about their working relationship with their fellow organizational member which allowed them to more easily navigate their process of seeking forgiveness when something went wrong. For example, Crystal, the university housing official stated that her

relationship with her supervisor was, “. . . a good relationship. Like we had a communication, there was a lot of trust in our relationship. . .and we were pretty close.” Once the transgression happened Crystal said, “. . . it was a pretty minor offense and I felt like we already had such a good working relationship in the way that it would have taken a lot to make it [relationship] bad.” This shows how Crystal was able to feel comfortable seeking forgiveness after she had made a mistake because she felt secure in her relationship with her supervisor.

Similarly, Maria the assistant art teacher described her new relationship with her supervisor as “complimenting each other in terms of like our lessons. . .” and she “felt like it [the relationship] was developing really really well.” When Maria made a task mistake, she described her supervisor’s reaction to her transgression this way:

At first it was kind of like, you can see like, ‘oh man, like this girl messed up,’ but she was really, like, cool with it. And I was very surprised. . .she [my supervisor]’s like, ‘. . . I gave you a lot to do.’ And she’s like, ‘I have to remember that you are new, like, this is a new schedule.’ So, I feel like she was very, like sympathetic or even empathetic at that point, because she’s had many assistants before.

This shows that Maria’s relationship with her supervisor allowed her to feel comfortable seeking forgiveness because her supervisor did not react negatively toward her after the transgression. Maria’s supervisor had worked on developing the relationship prior to Maria’s mistake, which created the sense of security Maria described above.

Matthew, a university admissions official stated that his boss was

. . . so open and so friendly and somebody that, you know, when I was kind of first starting out at [work] I'm in kind of a weird situation being that I went to [the university] for four years, and so I knew everyone already [including my boss].”

Matthew’s supervisor’s openness enabled him to feel more comfortable seeking forgiveness from her. Matthew stated that he and his boss “. . .have a lot of similarities and things that we want to do” which had helped their relationship flourish. Thus, within this theme, participants asserted that they were able to more easily and comfortably navigate the forgiveness process because of their positive pre-existing relationship with the person they offended.

After Marcus made his task mistake, he was motivated to seek forgiveness in order to continue to have a positive relationship with his boss. He stated, “. . .my boss had faith in me and I kind of like inadvertently, you know, violated the trust that was there by making a mistake, so I also wanted like to restore that.” This shows that Marcus wanted to ensure that his relationship with his boss would not be affected by the transgression he had made, and he wanted to work to maintain the relationship post transgression.

Along the same lines, Lynn, a university librarian, discussed how her motivation to seek forgiveness was also to ensure that she would not damage a relationship with a coworker she had an interpersonal conflict with. Lynn said,

She [the victim] was kind of intimidated by and made uncomfortable by. . . me. . . and so I want to like keep a good working relationship with her. . . So yeah, so that's why I wanted to apologize. . . I didn't want to make her any more uncomfortable with me than I think it is.

Thus, participants within this theme wanted to seek forgiveness to ensure that their working relationship with their coworkers or clients would stay in-tact and not deteriorate.

Participants had a range of experiences committing their transgression, but they were always motivated to preserve the previously positive relationships they had made with their colleagues in the workplace so that they could also be sustained for the future interactions in their workplace.

When organizational members expressed their desire for *maintaining personal and professional image*, they were motivated to seek forgiveness because they wanted to be viewed by others as professional and socially competent. This theme deals specially with how participants decided to save face for their personal benefit, their professional gain, or at times both scenarios in one. For example, Kara, a representative of university leadership noted that she wanted to seek forgiveness because:

my professional motivation was that [of] a colleague . . . with my position and that that would be my professional ethics even when you don't so it was my desire was to show her [the victim] that a member of the member of the organization that was hurting her did care for her and will care for her [the person she had transgressed against].

Kara's motivation to seek forgiveness was strictly related to her professional reputation as a high-level leader of the university. To maintain a good reputation with her status, Kara realized she must apologize to the colleague she had wronged in order to have positive future professional interactions with her victim.

Lynn, a university librarian, was also only motivated to seek forgiveness to maintain a positive working relationship with the coworker she had wronged. For example, Lynn said:

I [don't] care if I apologize. Like it doesn't hurt my pride in any way. . .  
the apology was like to satisfy my professional self. . . and I want to  
like keep a good working relationship with her [the victim].

This shows that Lynn was motivated to seek forgiveness in order to protect her professional image with her coworker. Personally, Lynn notes that she felt no personal inclination to apologize to her coworker, but rather it was their relationship in the workplace that she wanted to uphold in order to successfully and peacefully do her job.

Some participants were both personally and professionally motivated to seek forgiveness from their coworkers. For example, after having disagreement about how to complete a workplace task, John discussed how he was personally and professionally motivated to seek forgiveness from his coworker. First, John stated that his colleagues asked him, ““Why are you letting her [the victim] talk to you that way?”” This shows that John wanted to apologize in order to maintain his strong professional image with his coworkers. Also, in his personal life, John shared that he was a pastor of an in-home church and he knew that “[his] relationship with religion [motivated me to seek forgiveness]. I can't say I'm Christian if I don't make sure that I'm at peace with everybody, right?” Thus, some participants wanted to participate in forgiveness in order to rectify both their personal and professional needs.

Additionally, Lizbeth, the independent contractor at an advertising company stated that if she did not seek forgiveness from her client for misquoting him a price, she believes “he would have been upset. . . and I think I would have lost my credibility.” She said that:

Through the years, I think we have a very good relationship. I think our

relationship is based on trust. And I believe because he has a principle [company owner] working and other team members working with him, he knows that, at least with me, will get the truth.

Therefore, Lizbeth was motivated to seek forgiveness for her mistake to maintain the professional image she has always had with her client.

However, Lizbeth also stated that she “felt bad” for misquoting the price of an ad to her client and the reason she wanted to seek forgiveness she said was “Because I made a mistake and I strive for perfection. I didn’t want it wearing on my conscience and I don’t like to blame other people for my mistakes” This shows Lizbeth was not concerned with repairing her personal relationship with her colleague, but she did want to ensure that her workplace reputation would be maintained by seeking forgiveness from the coworker whom she had wronged. This shows that Lizbeth was professionally motivated to seek forgiveness for both personal and professional reasons.

### **Forgiveness-Seeking Strategies**

In answering RQ2, two themes emerged describing the behaviors individuals use to seek forgiveness in the workplace: *direct forgiveness-seeking strategies* and *indirect forgiveness-seeking strategies*. When organizational members employed *direct forgiveness-seeking strategies* they used face-to-face verbal communication to seek forgiveness from the people they offended. Participants who utilized direct forgiveness-seeking strategies may have said “I’m sorry” to their victim, verbally and explicitly acknowledging the offense. As described by Edward and colleagues (2018), Kelley (1998), Waldron and Kelley (2008), Waldron and colleagues (2018), and Kelley and colleagues (2019), people use direct forgiveness-seeking strategies including verbal apologies, showing remorse, and/or expressing responsibility for their actions. Aligning

with previous research, most participants were able and willing to apologize to their offender in-person and deliver a direct apology face-to-face. For example, Melissa, a high-ranking university department head “scheduled a one on one meeting with him [whom she had offended].” Melissa then noted,

in my meeting with him, step one was me apologizing . . . And then step two was to say, ‘I apologize. It happened because I'm frustrated because this is what this is what's you know, so how do we together come to a resolution here? So where are we so we can work better together?’

This shows that Melissa was clearly trying to express her that she regretted her action and would work to fix it.

Similarly, John asked his offender “‘Hey could we go to lunch and sit down and talk about what happened?’” and then at the meeting said “. . .what I did was wrong, and it wasn’t right, it could have been done better.” John’s behavior demonstrates that he did everything in his power to make amends with the coworker he harmed. To do so, he took responsibility for his actions by delivering a face-to-face apology.

Additionally, Mathew’s behaviors were classified by his ability to utilize indirect forgiveness-seeking strategies. In his efforts to directly seek forgiveness, Matthew decided, “. . . to bring this to my boss and then I had to go talk to my boss's boss, just to explain the situation. . . one of the first things that I said when I walked in was ‘I messed up. I'm sorry.’” Matthew’s efforts to go straight to his boss once he had committed a mistake and apologize demonstrate his direct forgiveness-seeking strategies.

For other participants, even though they were not seeking forgiveness in-person, they still utilized direct forgiveness-seeking strategies. In some cases, the parties were either not able to

seek forgiveness in-person because of inconvenience of distance, or, in one case, because it would worsen the conflict between parties. In the case of distance, due to COVID-19 telecommuting constraints, Lynn, a university library decided to seek forgiveness indirectly by sending an email to the coworker she had offended that read:

Hey, so and so, I just thought I might have sounded abrupt when I asked you to delete your recurring WebEx meetings. So, I want to apologize, I sometimes get in a mood of keep things going and it makes me, well, snappy. So, I'm sorry if I came across like that this morning.

Thus, even though it was done over email, Lynn was able to apologize to her coworker utilizing direct forgiveness-seeking strategies.

In the case of Kara, a representative of university leadership, she also decided to pursue a direct strategy via email in order to respect the privacy of the person she transgressed against and reduce the possibility of escalating the conflict. Kara said:

. . .when I'm in that building to talk to her, I'm in one of the more public spaces because we're working with our students or we had done a couple of other projects together and she was doing part of the data on them and I was doing something else. So, all it would have looked it would have been visible to anybody that this was not just me stopping by chat. So, in person, I had not been able to catch her. So, I had sent her an email in that case, just saying that I had not intended to, and I didn't understand what it was that she was doing. And so, my attempts to show empathy were not well timed, I had that I still felt those things and that I just I had not understood the situation, and that I was sorry this was something she was experiencing.

Thus, even though Kara decided that it was more appropriate to apologize and express professional empathy over email, she utilized a direct forgiveness-seeking strategy. Kara's apology and admission of remorse qualified her behavior as a direct forgiveness-seeking strategy.

Further, in answering RQ2, some participants utilized *indirect forgiveness-seeking strategies* to seek forgiveness from their coworkers. In this theme, participants utilized indirect forgiveness-seeking strategies including humor, nonverbal assurances, and simply returning the relationship to normalcy (Edward et al., 2018; Kelley, 1998; Kelley et al., 2019; Waldron & Kelley, 2008; Waldron et al., 2018). Indirect strategies do not include verbal expressions of remorse, saying "I'm sorry," or require forgiveness-seekers to take responsibility for their actions. Instead, the offender may choose to make a joke, alter their nonverbal behavior to show affection toward the aggrieved party for their actions, or do nothing and wait for the relationship to reinstate with the passage of time. Often, offenders utilize nonverbal assurances, such as extending a hug or affectionate touch in order to effectively seek forgiveness from their victim (Marler et al., 2011; Waldron & Kelley, 2005).

An example of the ways in which participants utilized indirect forgiveness-seeking strategies can be found in Marcus's narrative. When Marcus was seeking forgiveness from his boss he said,

It [the apology] was explicit, just saying, you know, because it was, I started apologizing [and] in the same sentence that I told him [the victim] what had happened. . . My mouth [got] really like wide and long and you kind of, like, talk through your teeth when you're like apologizing to I think it's like to show that you feel bad and you like, would rather not be saying it, you know? So like, yeah,

when I was apologizing, I guess I kind of made that face. And, you know, maybe a softer tone, just like, you know, I didn't yell like, 'Hey, I screwed up!' but kind of like, 'Hey, just so you know, I messed up' so you know, that kind of softer tone maybe.

Marcus decided to tell his boss what he did wrong and adapt his nonverbal behavior in order to make himself more presentable to his boss. In altering his behavior, Marcus was attempting to show that he regretted his mistake. Marcus utilized nonverbal assurances to support his verbal apology.

Further, Matthew utilized several indirect forgiveness-seeking strategies including humor as well as a justification for his task mistake. Matthew said:

. . . I did try to use justification a little I tried to be like, "'Oh, well, you put the T-shirt on during the one on one. So yeah, I think he will come here." Um, so hopefully, this is a small mistake that will kind of help us on the long run. So that was kind of where it came from. I just wanted her to know that like, it's not gonna happen again. . . And I, of course, do it with the touch of comedy.

Matthew's actions here show that he at first tried to brush off his transgression and then he used humor to deal with his transgression and seek forgiveness. These two behaviors show that Matthew was using indirect strategies to seek forgiveness. Therefore, it is clear that participants often utilized indirect forgiveness-seeking strategies to amend their workplace transgressions.

### **Organizational Practices**

In answering RQ3, two themes emerged describing the informal and/or formal occurrences encouraging forgiveness in the workplace: *leadership participation* and *open communication climate*. Participants stated that their leaders' participation encouraged

forgiveness-seeking and it was their supervisors that were the mechanism by which organizational members sought forgiveness from those that they offended. Within this theme, participants stated that forgiveness-seeking and conflict resolution could be encouraged in the workplace, and leaders are integral in shaping the interactions of their organizational members. For example, Maria the assistant art teacher said that her organization encourages organizational members to be “open with their supervisor.” She also believes that for forgiveness to be supported, organizational leadership staff must also “come clean” about their mistakes. These organizational conditions, in addition to her personal motivation, helped her feel more supported seeking forgiveness from her supervisor. Similarly, Crystal the university housing official stated that “if there was a complaint, we would just address it immediately.” She credits the department’s strong conflict resolution skills to her supervisor’s efforts to create a tight-knit organizational culture by taking the organizational members on a “staff retreat” to do “teamwork bonding. . . once or twice a semester.” Crystal said her boss was great at “building relationships, establishing clear expectations and having a good meaningful recognition program. . .to create an arena in which people can seek forgiveness.”

Kara, a representative of university leadership also believed that if “[forgiveness-seeking] . . .was regularly modeled from senior leadership. . . then I think you have the best and fastest chance to help people believe that it’s real.” Lizbeth, the independent contractor at an advertising agency also stated that dealing with conflict and encouraging forgiveness “should not rely on headship. . . but be encouraged by leadership. . . I think successful companies encourage open communication and ideas and other strategies to nurture these values.” As a member of senior leadership herself, Melissa the high-ranking university department head said that she does not “. . . believe in playing middleman” and will “put Person A and Person B and myself in a room” to

“talk this out.” She also stated that in her experience, as a senior leader, she needed to “admit that I had stuff to apologize for and that I did not act appropriately.” This theme showed that supervisory or authority figure model and provide opportunities for forgiveness-seeking behavior for other members.

Participants discussed the ways that people can informally disclose feelings and talk about what’s happening in the organization, they practiced having an *open communication climate*. Within this theme, participants stated that they felt comfortable seeking forgiveness with one another because they were developing relationships through an open communication climate. Matthew, a university admissions counselor said that:

I also just know that the nature of our office and the nature of everyone in it is that we're all very open. If people make mistakes, you know, no one really tries to hide it or sneak behind anyone's back to not talk about it.

Matthew’s statements show that his relationships with his coworkers, as well as the climate in the workplace enabled him to feel secure in seeking forgiveness in his workplace.

Moreover, other participants also stated that the open communication in their workplace helped foster forgiveness-seeking in the workplace. Crystal, the university housing official stated that, in her office, “there weren't a whole lot of conflicts because a real small team of four and we were all we all had pretty good working relationship.” The tight-knit relationships that had formed from developing beneficial relationships made Crystal feel like she could seek forgiveness when she committed a transgression.

Likewise, Melissa, a high-ranking university department head stated the climate between her employees is the perfect balance of communication which allowed for employees to get along while still dealing with conflict. Melissa relayed,

I think you need an environment where you feel like you can get a little if you have an environment where you all just sing Kumbaya. . . [organizational members need to] challenge each other in the process.

This shows that Melissa believes that organizations need to have a delicate communication that can support discussing difficult topics, such as forgiveness, as well as the positive moments.

Maria, the assistant art teacher also discussed that she felt like her workplace created a welcoming environment to discuss conflict. Maria stated that her organization's way of dealing with conflict resolution is "a lot on focusing on communication and being open with that." She even described a time when she and her supervisor had a difficult conversation. She said:

'Hey, I need to talk to you. I did not appreciate what you said or like how you said, and like, I totally understand it was like under stressful moments, but like, I'm just letting you know, like, that's how I reciprocated it. How do you feel about it?' And she responded to that, 'Well, and just us having a more open communication' with like, how she says things. I feel like I was able to handle it.

This shows that, because of their open and honest relationship in their workplace, Maria was able to deal with conflict in the workplace through communication. Consequently, the responses of these participants show that many organizational members felt like their colleagues created organization climates, cultures, and cultivated open communication practices.

### **Outcomes of Forgiveness-Seeking in the Organization**

In answering RQ4, three themes emerged describing the outcomes of forgiveness-seeking in the workplace: *forgiveness as a learning experience*, *positive organizational climate*, and *strengthened positive relationships*. When organizational members described forgiveness-seeking as a learning experience, they explained how their experience with forgiveness-seeking

benefited their ability to learn from the mistake they had made. For example, Maria the assistant art teacher stated that, because she had the experience of seeking forgiveness:

I was like, you know what I'm gonna take the time to like whenever she tells me something, I would write it down a little post and I put it on the wall and then I'm able to cut as many like dimension papers as I needed to do. . . But this particular mistake did help me or did impact me with [my] future organization, tactics or techniques, sharing so every time she [my supervisor] wants me to make the dimensions [for the craft paper], like I right away I have my post-it [note]. I have like my notebook [so I can take notes].

Similarly, Marcus stated that he believed the forgiveness-seeking process was beneficial to his productivity as an employee. Marcus stated:

I think like, the whole kind of process of the forgiveness was actually productive in the end, because we started kind of learning, you know, where was I prone to making mistakes, like, what kind of task am I good at, and what am I not and when do I need to focus more, because like, a lot of my mistakes come up in the same sort of thing . . . And so like, we kind of came to realize that and so as like a partnership, my boss and I, we were able to, you know, kind of decide, how can we avoid this? or How can I avoid it? And, you know, kind of recognizing, okay, this is a situation where historically I've been prone to making mistakes. How can I make sure I don't do that again?

This shows that because Marcus had the experience of seeking forgiveness with his boss, he was able to be more productive and learn from the experience as well as the transgression he had made.

Crystal, the university housing official had a similar experience in learning from her mistake. Crystal stated that, because of her transgression and forgiveness-seeking, her supervisor “. . . would always come to me after me [and ask], ‘Does this make sense? Do you get what I was talking about?’ I would just kind of reaffirm her instruction. . . She did say something like, ‘You know, you can always, you know, reach out to me if you [have] questions about things.’” Therefore, Crystal’s supervisor adapted her techniques after Crystal made the mistake in order to ensure that Crystal did not make the mistake again. Crystal had more communication with her supervisor after she sought forgiveness and her boss was able to check whether she was clear on how to complete the task.

Matthew, the university admissions counselor asserted, “Yeah, um, I would say like I said, I’ve definitely been more careful. . . I would say even more so talking to my boss’s boss [to seek forgiveness].” In fact, Matthew learned about how his task mistake was dealt with by his institution; his supervisor told him “‘Don’t worry, we have plans for things like when this happens. . . [we will] make notes on the student’s profile, make financial aid aware of it.’” Matthew knew that he did not want to make the same mistake again because he wanted to show that he had learned from what had happened and continue to become better at his job. Thus, this theme shows that forgiveness-seeking allowed both the offended and the offender to reestablish ways that both parties could be effective in their workplace relationships and learn from the experience.

Organizational members expressed that their forgiveness-seeking resulted in a *positive organizational climate*, when their workplaces became a more welcoming, open, and productive workplace communication environment. Many participants noted that they their workplace to became “less toxic” or “cold.” Melissa, a high-ranking university department head stated that:

I wanted to try to I wanted to stop it [the conflict] before it ever went down a road where it could become overly negative or overly toxic. Like I really think it in the back of your head ever there's something where you're thinking, ooh, this could this could smolder this could, yeah, this could grow and fester. You know you're not doing yourself or anyone else any good to wait and see if that happens. Just stop it as you know, kill the first mold spores so that more mold doesn't grow. . . . By not forgiving you, you are now, you know, they go back to their office and they're negative and they become less productive. And, you know, I've seen that happen. It just it plays out in a way that's very detrimental when you hold on to that much animosity.

Melissa clearly felt that by seeking forgiveness she was creating an environment that would better allow her employees to prosper and have open communication. Without the added tension due to the transgression, she was able to prevent another transgression from reoccurring.

Another participant, John stated that after he sought forgiveness from his coworker: Yeah, I think the atmosphere changed for the better. . . . It was no more walking around on eggshells. Everything's out in the open, you know, and once we talked and, you know, made up friends again, like everyone is more relaxed, you know, because they can see us, you know, like working together.

This shows that the forgiveness-seeking experience had a positive impact for everyone in the office, not just the two parties involved in the transgression.

Further, Lizbeth the independent contractor for the advertising agency, stated that when forgiveness is not granted it can “[have an] impact as far as bad attitudes [of employees,” make “productivity go down,” and that people “want to resolve the issue quickly. Otherwise you

wouldn't have a happy working environment.” Similarly, Kara, a representative of university leadership said that her experience seeking forgiveness had “a positive cumulative effect” on the relationship with the person whom she offended. Overall, this theme depicted how offenders believed that the outcome of their forgiveness-seeking behavior had overall positive effects on their workplace climate.

Organizational members described that their forgiveness-seeking *strengthened positive relationships* when they realized that their behavior resulted in an overall positive effect on their relationship. Because Maria had the experience of seeking forgiveness from her supervisor, she stated:

I feel like from there on our relationship grew more genuine and kind of like a close bond just because I was able to be vulnerable, and not have a facade of like, ‘Oh, I am this assistant. nothing could go wrong with me.’ I want to control where it's like, ‘Hey, I'm human too’. . .So like, from there, she was actually more understanding of like, where all came from, I understood where she was coming from, and just be able to rely each other more and share through the mistake. Um, I feel like it [the forgiveness experience] kind of made us bond better, actually.”

While the forgiveness-seeking process can be painful and require the transgressor to save face, admit their mistakes, and ultimately have a difficult conversation with the person whom they have offended. This shows there are many benefits to the process. Maria was able to better connect with her boss and feel more at ease in her workplace.

Another example of the outcome of forgiveness-seeking strengthening a relationship occurred with John and his coworker. John asserted that after he had sought forgiveness:

We [him and his coworker] actually became pretty good friends, you know, talking about personal things like, home life, you know, you know, share pictures of her family. . . She started using words like 'please,' 'thank you,' 'you're welcome, 'excuse me'. . . I feel like our relationship improved.”

Because he was able to discuss the transgression and have an honest conversation, John was able to have a more pleasant relationship with his coworker.

Alyssa, a Kindergarten teacher who had a personal dispute with her coworker in front of her supervisor said:

It [the forgiveness-seeking] had a very positive, like, impact on the rest of my school year with that principle, like, and she's told multiple people like how she has, like, really accepted me as being like an independent person and understanding that I can have tough conversations with other coworkers in the building.

Though Alyssa had to go through the process of apologizing to her supervisor for her transgression, she believes her experience was beneficial to her professional relationship that year with her supervisor. Thus, it is clear to see within this theme that participants were grateful to have the experience of seeking forgiveness because it enhanced the quality of their relationship.

## Description of Themes

TABLE 1

RQ1: What are an individual's motives to seek forgiveness in their workplace?

<b>Theme Title</b>	<b>Theme Description</b>	<b>Example Quote</b>
Maintaining Positive Relationships	Participants were motivated to seek forgiveness in their workplace because of their desire to maintain positive relationships.	Marcus: “. . .my boss had faith in me and I kind of like inadvertently, you know, violated the trust that was there by making a mistake, so I also wanted like to restore that.”
Maintaining Personal and Professional Image	Participants were motivated to seek forgiveness because of their desire to maintain professional image in the workplace or maintain both their personal and professional image in the workplace.	Lizabeth: “I made a mistake and I strive for perfection. I didn't want it wearing on my conscience and I don't like to blame other people for my mistakes.”

TABLE 2

RQ2: What behaviors do individuals use to seek forgiveness in their workplace?

<b>Theme Title</b>	<b>Theme Description</b>	<b>Example Quote</b>
Direct Forgiveness-Seeking Strategies	Participants sought forgiveness using direct forgiveness-seeking strategies.	Kara: “in my meeting with him step one was me apologizing . . . And then step two was to say, I apologize. It happened because I'm together frustrated . . . how do we come to a resolution here?”
Indirect Forgiveness- Seeking Strategies	Participants sought forgiveness using indirect forgiveness-seeking Strategies.	Matthew: “. . . I said. . . ‘I messed up. I'm sorry. . . And I, of course, do it with the touch of comedy.’”

TABLE 3

RQ3: What organizational practices, both informal and formal occurrences encourage forgiveness in the workplace?

<b>Theme Title</b>	<b>Theme Description</b>	<b>Example Quote</b>
Leadership Participation	Participants stated that it was their supervisors who facilitated forgiveness-seeking.	Melissa: “[As a Senior Leader, I need to] admit that I had stuff to apologize for and that I did not act appropriately.”
Open Communication Climate	Participants stated that they felt comfortable seeking forgiveness with one another because they were developing relationships through the open communication climate in their workplace.	Matthew: “. . .the nature of our office and the nature of everyone in it is that we're all very open. If people make mistakes, you know, no one really tries to hide it or sneak behind anyone's back to not talk about it. “

TABLE 4

RQ4: What are the outcomes of forgiveness-seeking in the organizational context?

<b>Theme Title</b>	<b>Theme Description</b>	<b>Example Quote</b>
Forgiveness as a Learning Experience	Participants stated the effects of forgiveness-seeking was they were able to learn from their transgression.	Marcus: “. . . the whole process of the forgiveness was actually productive in the end, because we started kind of learning. . . where was I prone to making mistakes. . .what kind of task am I good at. . .what am I not.”
Positive Organizational Climate	Participants stated that, as an outcome of forgiveness-seeking, their workplace became a more welcoming, open, and productive workplace communication environment.	John: “. . . Everything’s out in the open, you know, and once we talked and, you know, made up friends again, like everyone is more relaxed, you know, because they can see us, . . .like working together.”
Strengthened Positive Relationships	Participants stated that the outcome of their forgiveness-seeking behavior had an overall positive effect on their relationship.	Maria: “And I feel like [after the transgression] our relationship grew more genuine and kind of like a close bond just because I was able to be vulnerable, and not have a façade [in the relationship].”

## **CHAPTER V**

### **DISCUSSION**

The purpose of this thesis was to use thematic analysis to examine the motivations, behaviors, organizational conditions, and outcomes of the forgiveness-seeking process in the workplace. First, organizational members were motivated to seek forgiveness in their workplace for two reasons: their desire to maintain positive relationships with their coworkers and their desire to maintain their professional image or maintain both their personal and professional image in the workplace. Second, participants sought forgiveness utilizing direct and indirect strategies. Third, participants stated that the informal and formal organizational conditions that encouraged forgiveness-seeking in the workplace was leadership participation and an open communication climate. Fourth, participants found that outcomes of forgiveness-seeking in the workplace are that their forgiveness-seeking efforts allowed them to view forgiveness as a learning experience, create a positive organizational climate, and strengthen positive relationships.

Overall, this study found that relationships are integral to the forgiveness process. First, organizational members are motivated to seek forgiveness in their workplace in order to maintain their professional relationships. Organizational members are also self-motivated to seek forgiveness in order to maintain their personal or professional image, a process often known as “saving face.” These relationships also enabled organization members to utilize either direct or indirect forgiveness-seeking strategies after they have committed a transgression. As an outcome of forgiveness-seeking, participants found they had a strengthened positive relationship with the party with whom they had harmed.

Additionally, the organization itself can have a major impact on the forgiveness-seeking process. For example, the leader's participation in the forgiveness-seeking process, can help organizational members feel encouraged to seek forgiveness in their workplace. Further, the climate of the organization is a central facet in the forgiveness process. Through other informal practices such as establishing an open communication climate where organizational members can talk honestly with one another, forgiveness can be more easily enacted in their workplace. The organizational climate can become more positive, or mutually beneficial to the both the transgressor and the victim *and* the coworkers observing the forgiveness experience.

Moreover, the results of this study emphasized that the process of seeking forgiveness in the workplace is also associated with learning. Organizational members found that an outcome of seeking forgiveness was that they were able to view their forgiveness-seeking as an opportunity to learn and grow professional and reflect on the beneficial nature of the experience. Participants stated that they often learned from their workplace mistakes and, in some cases, were able to work with their supervisor to avoid repeating the transgression in the future.

### **Forgiveness-seeking in the Workplace**

The results of this study were consistent with previous works on forgiveness. Inspired by the work of Kelley (1998) and Kelley and Waldron (2006), this study also examined the motivations, behaviors, and relationships of people seeking forgiveness. However, this study also explored the organizational conditions and outcomes associated with the forgiveness-seeking process. The results of this study provided a detailed and personal account of the experiences of forgiveness seekers in the workplace. The breadth and depth of qualitative data provides insight as to the motivations, behaviors, outcomes, and organizational conditions involved in the forgiveness-seeking process. A qualitative inquiry expands the previously post-positivist

explorations in forgiveness (Aquino et al., 2003; Kelley & Waldron, 2006; Thompson & Synder, 2003).

However, this study expands the findings of forgiveness in the workplace, explored by Aquino and colleagues, (2003), Cameron (2007) and Waldron and Kloeber (2012). This research also further develops the subject of forgiveness in the workplace in examining the specific process of forgiveness-seeking in the organizational context, which had previously only been discussed by Metts and colleagues (2006) and Zdanuik & Bobcel (2015). On a similar note, this study cultivated research on the lesser researched topic of forgiveness-seeking (Kelley & Waldron, 2006; Palanski, 2012; Thompson & Synder, 2003; Waldron & Kelley, 2005). This study found that many people utilize interpersonal forgiveness behaviors similarly in workplace settings. In addition, this study supported the much of the previous research on how organizational members enact forgiveness in the workplace and how it is impacted by organizations.

**Motivations to seek forgiveness.** The participant's motivations to seek forgiveness align with previous research claims. In the case of many participants, the transgressor was motivated to seek forgiveness to maintain or restore their relationships with their colleagues (Ren & Gray, 2009). To do this, participants engaged in relational renegotiation (Kelley et al., 2019; Waldron & Kelley, 2008) to seek forgiveness from their coworker and avoid possible damage to the relationship. Because many participants had previously positive relationships with the person they transgressed against, the transgressor wanted to maintain the state of that relationship and mitigate the possible negative effects of the transgression (Waldron et al., 2008; Younger et al., 2004). The results confirmed the work of Waldron and colleagues (2008) because participants were motivated seek forgiveness to continue the relationship in the future.

Several scholars (Edwards et al., 2018; Palanski, 2012; Sandage et al., 2001) asserted that individuals are motivated to seek forgiveness in order to protect their own image just as participants did for the sake of their professional and or personal reputation. Kelley and Waldron's (2006) finding that transgressors often attempt risk losing face was persistent within the experience of the forgiveness seekers in this study.

**Forgiveness-seeking strategies.** Waldron and Kelley (2005) found that participants often utilize multiple forgiveness-seeking strategies to reinforce their intentions and emotions. This claim is supported by the results of participants who utilized multiple forgiveness-seeking strategies such as apologizing face-to-face (direct strategy) and displaying nonverbal assurances (in direct strategy).

However, the results of this study differed slightly regarding traditional forgiveness-seeking strategies. Unlike the results of other forgiveness-seeking explorations (Edwards et al., 2018; Kelley, 1998; Kelley & Waldron, 2006, Waldron & Kelley, 2008), participants in this study did not exclusively utilize indirect strategies of seeking forgiveness. Though some participants utilized indirect strategies in combination with direct strategies, participants in this study were extremely concerned with achieving their objective of seeking forgiveness. Further, the one participant that employed humor as an indirect forgiveness-seeking strategy was met with positive effects and did not face any negative repercussions of his forgiveness-seeking behavior (Waldron & Kelley, 2008).

**Organizational conditions for forgiveness-seeking.** This study confirmed the preliminary work of Zdaniuk and Bobocel (2015) and Zhen and colleagues (2016) which stated that organizational leadership can impact how conflict is handled in the workplace. It is the role of organizational leadership to encourage his or her members to develop relationships with one

another and seek forgiveness in moments of conflict. Participants, specifically one supervisor herself, stated that organizational leadership must also model effective forgiveness-seeking behaviors for his or her followers to feel supported to recreate these behaviors in the workplace when they experience conflict (Zdaniuk & Bobocel, 2015). Though Cameron (2007) noted that it is often unclear who should advocate for forgiveness-seeking in the workplace, these results suggest that the leader must take on this responsibility and help construct these interactions among conflicting organizational members.

Another similarity between the results and previous research (Cameron et al., 2004; Fehr & Gelfand, 2012) was that organizations can facilitate open organizational climates which encourage members to seek forgiveness in their workplace. Participants relayed that open communication climates helped them feel safe to disclose their emotions about with one another in the workplace (Miller et al., 2007). Though some scholars, (e.g., Aquino et al., 2003; Lammers & Garcia, 2009) suggested that organizational norms can deter people from expressing their emotions in the workplace and therefore discourage members from seeking forgiveness, participants never stated that they felt like organizational values restrained them from doing so. Instead, participants found that the power of the open organizational climate aided them in enhancing their relationships, productivity, and conflict management abilities.

**Outcomes of forgiveness-seeking.** The results of this study reinforced the findings of Metts and colleges (2005) who found that organizational members can restore their workplace environments to places full of positivity, filled with prospering relationships their efforts to seek forgiveness. This study also strengthened previous claims of several scholars (Cameron et al., 2004; Toussaint et al., 2018) which suggested that the promotion of forgiveness can enable

organizational members to more easily work together, as well as improve productivity, and overall work quality.

Further, the results regarding strengthened relationship aligned with the assertions of many scholars (Akoyo, 2016; Kelley & Waldron, 2006; Putnam, 2006; Waldron & Kloeber, 2012; Waldon et al., 2018) who suggested that the transgressor and victim will improve their workplace relationship after participating in the forgiveness process. Despite having a potentially negative experience due to their transgression, after seeking forgiveness, many offenders cited that they looked forward to working with their coworker whom they had harmed (Akoyo, 2016). Many participants stated that they felt as though there was no longer tension within the relationship with their victim (Stone, 2002). In many cases, participants stated that they felt like their experience seeking forgiveness fostered a renewal or improved amount of trust in their relationship (Waldron et al., 2008; 2018).

The positive organizational climate outcome result of this study is extremely supported in the organizational communication literature. Participants expressed that the atmosphere of their workplace often became less toxic after they had sought forgiveness. The results also aligned with claims from Fehr and Gelfand (2012) which stated that as other coworkers observed an offender forgiveness-seeking, they adapted and exhibited more prosocial behavior in their workplace. The enhanced organizational climates due to forgiveness-seeking enabled other coworkers to foster altruistic behaviors, such as talking openly with their fellow organizational members and developing deeper, more positive relationships with one another (Miller et al., 2007; Muse et al., 2005).

Finally, in viewing forgiveness as a learning experience, participants were also supported the ideas of Stone (2012) who said that organizational members who seek forgiveness will feel

empowered after doing so. As prefaced by Toussaint and colleagues (2018) forgiveness-seeking allowed participants to work through their mistakes with their coworkers and supervisors, therefore improving their task performance.

### **Academic Contributions**

This study makes several significant contributions to the field of organizational communication. First, this study confirms forgiveness as positive communication construct. Participants in the study consistently stated that their experience seeking forgiveness strengthened their relationships and improved their workplace climate and productivity. Participants employed specific behaviors to fulfill their motivations and achieve the outcome of seeking forgiveness in their workplace. This study solidifies the findings of several organizational scholars (Luthans, 2002; Luthans & Youself, 2007; Martin, 2005; Muse et al., 2005) which stated that organizational members can utilize forgiveness to help organizations flourish, ultimately improving morality and productivity. The initial study of forgiveness began within the origins of religious traditions, social constructs, and values (Kirkup, 1993; Kelley & Waldron, 2006). The altruistic roots of forgiveness inspired its application in conflict resolution and relational relegation (Waldron & Kelley, 2008; Kelley et al., 2019). Participants in this study gained greater levels of closeness and intimacy within their workplace relationships (Worthington et al., 2010) and because of their efforts to seek forgiveness. After gaining this intimacy, organizational members created working conditions, such as open and honest communication, through seeking forgiveness, to help them thrive or flourish in their workplace (Muse et al., 2005; Roberts, 2006). In doing so, organizational members who sought forgiveness elevated their organization to the highest possible standards to benefit the workplace (Cameron & Spreitzer, 2011; Quinn et al., 2012; Spreitzer & Sonenshein, 2004). Participants risked their

own personal and/or professional images to be resilient against conflict and engage in virtuous behaviors that would benefit their workplace. Organizational members enacted these practices in order to sustain, maintain, and improve their organizational relationship, climate, and practices (Martin, 2005; Roberts, 2006). While organizational members could still work with tension in their workplace, they enacted positive behaviors associated with forgiveness-seeking to promote optimism and reduce negativity (Martin, 2005; Roberts, 2006).

Second, this study furthers the academic literature on forgiveness in distinguishing interpersonal forgiveness and forgiveness in the organizational context. These connections stem from the central idea that forgiveness is all about relationships. Relationships are the centripetal force that motivate people to seek forgiveness and enact behaviors to maintain them. For many years, interpersonal communication scholars studied forgiveness exclusively in the context of interpersonal altercations (Kelley, 1998; Metts, 1994; 2006; Younger et al., 2004). Because limited research (Aquino et al., 2003; Biesel & Messersmith, 2012; Paul & Putnam, 2017) existed regarding how forgiveness is enacted in the workplace, this study becomes one of the first of its kind to produce empirical results. The results of this study suggest that there are some similarities between how forgiveness is employed in both the organizational and interpersonal contexts. For example, participants stated that they were motivated to seek forgiveness in order to partially maintain their personal image. Participants were also motivated to restore trust and have a more positive relational future with the party they had offended (Madsen et al., 2009; Waldron & Kelley, 2008, Waldron et al., 2008). This shows, relationships are the driver of all types of forgiveness-seeking communication.

However, in the workplace, people were also motivated by their professional image and the implications on their professional relationship. Within the workplace, the participant's

personal characteristics also did not play a large role in why organizational members were motivated to seeing forgiveness in the workplace. In terms of the relationship itself, like interpersonal relationships, mutually beneficial relationships prior to transgressions motivated and allowed transgressors to maintain and strengthen their relationship (Kelley, 1998; Waldron & Kelly, 2008). When seeking forgiveness in their workplace, organizational members also employed similar strategies as they do in the interpersonal context. Participants would meet with coworkers to apologize and directly seek forgiveness and combine direct and indirect forgiveness-seeking (Edward et al., 2018; Kelley, 1998; Waldron & Kelley, 2008; Waldron, et al., 2008, Waldron et al., 2018).

Third, in expanding forgiveness construct to the organizational context, this study underscores the role climate plays in forgiveness-seeking. In the organization, climate is an antecedent as well as an outcome of forgiveness-seeking. Participants were motivated to seek forgiveness to maintain a positive organizational climate, and, as a result of their forgiveness-seeking, the climate in their organization was often strengthened. Fehr and Gelfand (2012) supports this assertion that forgiveness climates are developed to empathetically and easily deal with conflict in organizations. Muse and colleagues (2005) suggested that these climates develop as a result of intimate and positive organizational relationships, which created these climates. Or, Zdaniuk and Bobocel, (2015) and Zhen and colleagues (2016) would postulate that organizational climates that encourage forgiveness were carefully constructed and nurtured by organizational leadership who modeled and facilitated forgiveness-seeking interactions. Thus, organizational climates are unique in that they exist because of and for forgiveness-seeking to occur.

Fourth, the most surprising finding from this study was that participants viewed forgiveness as learning experience. When participants expressed learning, they seemed to indicate that they learned from watching others (social learning) and they also learned from forgiveness-seeking with their coworker. Social learning is one way that organizational members observe one another's behaviors to understand the impact of forgiveness-seeking in the workplace (Fehr & Gelfand, 2012). Participants discussed that their forgiveness-seeking behavior enabled them to have a revelation about their workplace tasks, their relationship with the supervisor, and/or their career. After seeking forgiveness, organizational members dedicated themselves to fixing the mistake they had made so they did not repeat it in the future. For example, many participants stated that they changed or adapted their behavior, or verbally clarified their task to ensure they would not repeat the same mistake in their workplace.

Additionally, the findings suggest that, because they participated in the forgiveness, organizational members were able to engage in disclosure about their transgressor with their coworker. During this disclosure, the parties discussed what the transgressor could do to prevent the mistake in the future, why they made the mistake in the first place, and/or the transgressor sought information about their workplace responsibility in order to perform better. This conversation, which resulted from forgiveness-seeking, will ultimately benefit the organization's and its members' productivity. This conversation enabled organizational members to maintain and strengthen relationships with their victim. Finally, in correcting their mistake and improving their relationship with their coworker, organizational members also benefited in gaining stronger communication abilities and competencies in their workplace.

Organizational members found that the outcome of their forgiveness-seeking was an improvement to their overall workplace skills and abilities. These claims are also supported by

Palanski (2012) and Stone (2002) who stated that organizational members can reduce negative outcomes, caused by mistakes in the workplace, through seeking forgiveness from those they have harmed. Kelley and colleagues (2019) stated that forgiveness-seeking is a means by which people change harmful, destructive experiences into constructive situations in the workplace. Overall, forgiveness is a transformational experience (Cameron, 2007) where offenders can learn from their mistakes and have a positive experience in the end.

### **Limitations and Directions for Future Research**

This study provides many opportunities for future research on forgiveness-seeking in the workplace. One limitation of this study is that the sample of participants was limited and similar in background (mid-aged white women). Another study could be replicated with a larger, with a more representative participant sample to see if the same themes would emerge in the experiences of other organizational members.

Consequently, more research could explore if other organizational conditions emerge in another data set to yield different ways organizational members can integrate forgiveness-seeking into their workplace. While this study mainly found that leadership participation and an open communication climate are the ways in which organizational members are encouraged to seek forgiveness in the workplace. An additional study could further the findings to examine if there are any formalize organizational practices or policies that aid in fostering forgiveness in the workplaces.

Future research could be inspired by the work of Kelley and Waldron (2005) who interviewed romantic couples together to address the concerns of both the transgressor and their victim. Since this study only viewed the unique perspective of the transgressor, a future study on forgiveness in the workplace could seek participants of both parties. Also, future studies could

explore complex transgression scenarios in which parties do not agree upon who is responsible for the transgression. In these scenarios, it may be unclear who is the transgressor and who is the victim. Or, in some cases, there may be multiple transgressors or multiple victims. Scholars should investigate these complex conflict scenarios to analyze whether similar organizational conditions and outcomes encouraged forgiveness-seeking and/or if consistent forgiveness-seeking motives and behaviors recur.

### **Practical Contributions**

Organizational members can work together to create a positive and open communication climate with one another in their workplace. When conflicts occur, organizational members should feel secure enough in their professional relationships with one another that they are comfortable seeking forgiveness. Though conflict resolution can be difficult, organizational members should realize that unresolved tension and the lack of forgiveness-seeking can result in damaged workplace relationships, a negative organizational climate, and a missed opportunity to learn from their mistake. The results of this study can be utilized to help organizational members understand how they can seek forgiveness, why they do it, and the outcome of their forgiveness-seeking efforts. Organizational members can also be ambassadors in their workplace and employ the practices of POS to develop relationships with their coworkers through open and honest communication. Organizational members should ensure that their leaders are encouraging forgiveness and hold them to the same standards as themselves.

When conflict occurs in the workplace, the results of this study suggest that organizational members should set aside time to reflect upon their experience seeking forgiveness in the workplace. Organizational members can develop a positive view of their transgression if they analyze their behavior. For example, an organizational member should call

a meeting with their victim to discuss why they made the mistake and what they can do to avoid repeating it in the future. This practice will be mutually beneficial for the offender, victim, and the organization. The offender's productivity will increase, which will improve the organizational outputs, and the relationship between the victim and the offender because they resolved the present conflict and avoided repeating it in the future.

Additionally, organizational practitioners could develop a training program highlighting best practices on how to properly seek forgiveness in the workplace. This may resemble the previous work of Bisel and Messersmith's (2012) OOPS Model of delivering an effective apology. However, according to the results, it seems practitioners would be more fruitful in working with organizational leadership to discuss how they help to facilitate forgiveness-seeking in their workplace. For example, practitioners could suggest that organizational leadership practice forgiveness-seeking when they transgress against their coworker (Zdniuk & Bobocel, 2015).

Organizational leaders should also play an active role in cultivating forgiveness-seeking behaviors and climates in their workplace. Supervisors should establish consistent practices for their organizational members to deal with conflict in their workplace. One suggestion is that leaders help the parties in conflict schedule a meeting to seek forgiveness from one another. During this meeting, the role of the leader is to actively listen to the situation, encourage forgiveness-seeking, and act as mediators between parties in conflict. Another practice organizational leaders should establish is modeling proper forgiveness-seeking practices when they make a mistake themselves. This way, organizations members will observe that behavior, and through social learning, put it into practice themselves during times of conflict. Leaders

should play a role in assessing workplace conflict, developing relationships with their followers, and creating an environment where members can feel free to seek forgiveness.

## **Conclusion**

This study explored how organizational members seek forgiveness in their workplace. Specifically, the research examined how and why people seek forgiveness for a transgression as well as examining the impact of their experience. Though forgiveness was previously studied in the realm of religion, psychology and interpersonal communication, this study expands the existing knowledge claims to the field of organizational communication. This study connects positive communication constructs to the forgiveness literature.

The study expands previous academic research on POS. Practically, this study provides implications on how organizational members can utilize forgiveness-seeking to improve their relationships, productivity, and climate at workplace. Supervisors can encourage forgiveness-seeking and model their own conflict resolution behavior to their employees. Overall, the academic and practical results of this study provide three take-aways for organizational members. Organizational members seeking forgiveness do so because they want their colleagues to like, and/or continue to have a good working relationship with them. Second, organizational members work in a place that is flourishing and positive. And finally, when conflict inevitably occurs in the workplace, forgiveness-seeking can turn destructive experiences into constructive ones for organizations and their members.

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## APPENDIX 1

### RECRUITMENT SCRIPTS

#### **Social Media Recruitment Script**

Hello Everyone:

I am Isabella Ruggiero, and I am conducting a study about how seek forgiveness in their workplace. Your responses are important to me because they will contribute to knowledge about this important communication topic.

The study focuses on how leaders communicate forgiveness with their employees. If you are 18 years of age or older and employed full-time (minimum 35 hours/week), please consider participating in this study This project is facilitated through the Department of Communication & Media at Texas A&M University-Corpus Christi.

Participation in this research study will involve completing a virtual interview.

Participation takes 45-75 minutes.

**Participation in this study is voluntary.**

If you are 18 years of age or older and employed full-time (35 hours/week minimum) at an organization, please contact me for details:

iruggiero@islander.tamucc.edu

For questions, or if you would like additional information to assist you in reaching a decision about participation, please feel free to contact Michael Sollitto (michael.sollitto@tamucc.edu; 361-825-2443).

Thank you for your assistance with this project.

#### **Email Recruitment Script to Communication Instructors**

Hello [name of instructor]

I am conducting a study about how people seek forgiveness in their organization, and I was wondering if you would allow me to distribute a flyer about the study to your students. Participation for this study is voluntary. The targeted population for my study is individuals 18 years old or older and are currently employed. The study involves conducting interviews asking individuals about their experiences with forgiveness in the workplace. I would greatly appreciate your assistance in this endeavor. For more information about our ongoing research efforts, please contact: Michael Sollitto, Department of Communication & Media, 361-825-2443, michael.sollitto@tamucc.edu or Isabella Ruggiero at iruggiero@islander.tamucc.edu

Have a great day,  
Isabella Ruggiero

APPENDIX 2  
CONSENT FORM

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**CONSENT TO PARTICIPATE IN A  
RESEARCH STUDY AT TEXAS A&M UNIVERSITY-CORPUS CHRISTI**

**Forgiveness Seeking in the Workplace**

---

**WHO IS DOING THIS STUDY?**

A study team led by Michael Sollitto is doing this research study. Other research professionals may help them.

We are asking you to be a part of this research study. Please read the information below and ask questions about anything that you do not understand before you make a choice.

---

**WHY IS THIS STUDY BEING DONE?**

The goal of this research study is to explore a person's motives and behaviors to seek forgiveness in their workplace, and the overall implications to their organization throughout the forgiveness process. The purpose of this study is to explore the ways that individuals seek forgiveness.

---

**WHO CAN BE IN THIS STUDY?**

We are asking you to be a part of this research study because you are age 18 or older and are employed as a full-time employee (35+ hours/week) To be eligible to be in this study, you must be over the age of 18 and are employed full time at your organization.

---

**WHAT WILL HAPPEN TO ME IN THIS STUDY?**

Being in this study involves allowing the researchers to use data from an interview with you about your experiences seeking forgiveness. The researcher will ask questions about your experiences and ask you to provide detail about forgiveness. However, your responses will only be used as part of this study if you consent for them to be used. Whether you participate in the research or do not participate in the research does not change your standing in your workplace or in any other endeavour.

---

**WHAT ARE THE RISKS OF THE STUDY?**

There are certain risks in this study. The main risk may include:

- Confidentiality risk: Your participation will involve collecting information about you. There is a slight risk of loss of confidentiality. Your confidentiality will be protected to

the greatest extent possible. You do not have to give any information to the study that you do not want to give.

- **Survey Questions:** Some questions may be embarrassing or uncomfortable to answer. Sample questions that you may be asked are: "I enjoy disagreeing with others." You do not have to answer questions you do not want to.

If you have any of these problems or changes in the way you feel about being in the study, you should tell the study team as soon as possible.

---

### **WHAT ARE THE BENEFITS OF BEING IN THIS STUDY?**

There may be no direct benefit to you from being in this research study. By being in this study, you may help researchers learn more about organizational members' communication of forgiveness.

---

### **WHAT ABOUT EXTRA COSTS?**

No costs to subjects. Participation in this study will not result in any extra costs to you. You will not have to pay anything extra if you are in this study aside from the personal time and travel costs it will take to come to all of the study visits.

---

### **WHAT ARE THE ALTERNATIVES TO BEING IN THIS STUDY?**

Instead of being in this study, you may choose not to participate.

---

### **WHAT ARE MY RIGHTS AS A STUDY PARTICIPANT?**

Being in a research study is voluntary. You do not have to be in this study. If you choose not to participate, there will be no penalty or loss of benefits to which you are otherwise entitled.

#### **What if I change my mind?**

You may withdraw from the study at any time without penalty.

---

### **WHO SHOULD I CALL IF I HAVE QUESTIONS OR PROBLEMS?**

Dr. Michael Sollitto (Bay Hall 327; 361-825-2443; michael.sollitto@tamucc.edu) is in charge of this research study. **You may call him with questions at any time during the study.**

You may also contact Isabella Ruggiero (iruggiero@islander.tamucc.edu) with any questions you may have.

You may also call Texas A&M University-Corpus Christi Institutional Review Board (IRB) with questions or complaints about this study at irb@tamucc.edu or 361-825-2497. The IRB is a committee of faculty members, statisticians, researchers, community advocates, and others that ensures that a research study is ethical and that the rights of study participants are protected.

---

**CONSENT TO PARTICIPATE**

The purposes, procedures, and risks of this research study have been explained to me. I have had a chance to read this form and ask questions about the study. Any questions I had have been answered to my satisfaction. A copy of this signed form will be given to me.

\_\_\_\_\_  
Signature of Participant

\_\_\_\_\_  
Date

---

**STUDY PERSONNEL**

I have explained the purposes, procedures, and risks involved in this study in detail to:

\_\_\_\_\_  
Print name of Participant

Any questions that have been raised have been answered to the individual's satisfaction.

\_\_\_\_\_  
Signature of Person Obtaining Consent

\_\_\_\_\_  
Date

\_\_\_\_\_  
Time

Print Name of Person Obtaining Consent \_\_\_\_\_