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REVIEW ARTICLE

Conceptualizing forgiveness: A review and path forward

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Summary

Forgiveness is a valuable conflict management strategy that has numerous benefits in workplace settings (e.g., for employees, team dynamics, dyadic relationships, and organizations). However, important conceptual questions have emerged, especially as scholars have begun to examine forgiveness in the workplace. To better understand these issues, we conduct a critical review and analysis of the extant literature to identify key conceptual issues that are creating challenges for the study of forgiveness in organizational behavior. Building on these insights, we propose that conceptualizing forgiveness as a special case of emotion regulation can provide a strong conceptual and theoretical foundation that can address these challenges. Moreover, we outline how this approach can create exciting new research avenues that can enhance our theoretical understanding of forgiveness (e.g., distinguishing between the processes underlying forgiveness; identifying points of intervention to promote forgiveness; exploring the role of time in forgiveness; examining how context impacts forgiveness). We also identify how this approach can provide novel practical insights into how forgiveness can be facilitated and effectively managed in the workplace.

KEYWORDS
conceptualization, emotion regulation, forgiveness, interventions, process, review

1 | INTRODUCTION

> We all experience difficult times at work. It may be a job loss, a betrayal from a colleague, a challenging political situation, witnessing incivility, or even loss of a needed sale … we rarely talk about forgiveness at work, but learning to forgive, or enhance our forgiveness practices can make all the difference to find fulfillment in our work.—Welch (2011)

Decades of research has established the benefits of forgiveness. Within the workplace, fostering forgiveness has been shown to have beneficial outcomes for employees (e.g., enhanced physical and psychological health and decreased burnout; Booth et al., 2018; Toussaint et al., 2018), dyadic relationships (e.g., transgressor reintegration and relationship maintenance; Gromet & Okimoto, 2014; Radulovic et al., 2019), and organizations (e.g., job satisfaction, affective organizational commitment, and decreased turnover intentions; Basford et al., 2014; Booth et al., 2018; Radulovic et al., 2019). Indeed, forgiveness has been recognized as a critically important conflict management strategy that can not only diminish the detrimental impact of interpersonal conflict but can also promote well-being and productivity (e.g., Deterline, 2016).

Despite the importance of forgiveness, scholars have grappled with the question "what is forgiveness?," and there is still divergence on fundamental issues, including how forgiveness should be conceptualized. Unfortunately, this ambiguity may create significant challenges and lost opportunities. For example, using disparate

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conceptualizations implies that "we are thinking about and measuring it in very different ways" (Clark et al., 2019, p. 167), which may create uncertainty about whether the same phenomenon is being examined. By contrast, a clear conceptualization has numerous advantages, including clarifying the meaning of the construct, distinguishing it from related constructs, providing a common language for scientific inquiry, and offering the basis for operationalizing the construct (Podsakoff et al., 2016). Taken together, establishing conceptual clarity is essential for advancing the forgiveness literature toward a state of maturity (e.g., Edmondson & McManus, 2007).

To address the question "what is forgiveness," we overview key conceptualizations and conceptual insights that have accumulated in the broader forgiveness literature. Next, we critically review forgiveness research in the field of organizational behavior (OB) (i.e., forgiveness in workplace contexts) with a focus on conceptual and associated measurement issues that have arisen. Based on these insights, we draw on emotion regulation theories to reconceptualize forgiveness to address these challenges and create new opportunities for the study of forgiveness within the workplace. We highlight how this conceptualization can provide a research agenda for organizational scholars that can further enhance our theoretical understanding as well as offer practical guidance for effectively managing and promoting forgiveness in the workplace.

We aim to advance the forgiveness literature in three ways. First, we review how forgiveness has been conceptualized and empirically studied by OB scholars. Moreover, we critically analyze how disagreements around conceptualization have created ambiguities and detracted from construct clarity. In doing so, we identify key conceptual and measurement challenges impacting the literature, which is important for understanding the current state of the literature and how to advance the literature toward a state of maturity.

Second, while extant forgiveness conceptualizations have typically been atheoretical, scholars have argued that "conceptual definitions and theory formulation go hand in hand" (DiRenzo, 1966, p. 6). That is, conceptualizations are rooted on theoretical assumptions that can shape the meaning of the construct (see Podsakoff et al., 2016). Building on this notion, we argue that conceptualizing forgiveness as a special case of emotion regulation can provide a strong theoretical foundation that illuminates key assumptions related to forgiveness while also addressing the challenges identified by our critical analysis. By offering a theoretically based conceptualization of forgiveness, we aim to enhance conceptual clarity, thereby enabling a more integrated and systematic approach to the study of forgiveness.

Third, we argue that viewing forgiveness through the lens of emotion regulation can provide important theoretical, methodological, and practical guidance. As such, we highlight ways in which this conceptualization can further advance the literature and create exciting new opportunities. For example, although forgiveness is often recognized as an effective conflict management strategy, many employees struggle with forgiveness (Barclay & Saldanha, 2016). An emotion regulation approach can provide insights into how forgiveness can be theoretically understood as well as empirically studied as a process. By doing so, scholars may also identify points of intervention and therefore offer practical guidance on how to facilitate forgiveness. Thus, to highlight the advantages of an emotion regulation approach to forgiveness, we conclude by offering a research agenda that showcases key theoretical, methodological, and practical opportunities that can advance our theoretical understanding and ability to provide evidence-based practical guidance. Overall, our objective is to create a strong and integrated conceptual foundation that can create novel, theoretically significant, and practically relevant insights that can advance our understanding and practical ability to manage forgiveness in the workplace.

2 | UNDERSTANDING CURRENT CONCEPTUALIZATIONS OF FORGIVENESS

Scholars broadly agree that forgiveness is an intraindividual process involving a prosocial change toward a perceived transgressor (see McCullough, Hoyt, & Rachal, 2000).[1] This reflects several noteworthy points of agreement among scholars. First, forgiveness can occur after an interpersonal transgression. Second, while forgiveness becomes relevant after an interpersonal offense, forgiveness is *intraindividual* in nature (Enright & Human Development Study Group, 1991). That is, forgiveness occurs *within* an aggrieved individual and is not dependent on interaction with the transgressor. Forgiveness is therefore distinct from reconciliation (i.e., acts to extend goodwill to the transgressor; Aquino et al., 2006). Third, forgiveness reflects a prosocial change in the aggrieved individual toward the transgressor. This suggests that forgiveness is a process that includes a temporal element (e.g., Baskin & Enright, 2004). As such, forgiveness is unlikely to occur in a single moment. Instead, forgiveness is likely to take time, although how long can be idiosyncratic of the person and the situation (e.g., Enright & Fitzgibbons, 2000).

Despite general agreement on the above points, forgiveness conceptualizations have diverged on key conceptual points (Worthington, 2019). In particular, although there is general agreement that forgiveness involves prosocial change, there have been differences in "what" the prosocial change involves. As displayed in Figure 1, forgiveness conceptualizations have included a range of disparate phenomena, including emotions, cognitions, behavioral intentions, and behaviors. For example, McCullough et al. (1997, 1998, 2006) focused on behavioral intentions, defining forgiveness as a multidimensional construct that reflects a reduction in revenge and avoidance intentions (negative dimensions) and an increase in benevolence intentions (positive dimension) toward a transgressor.[2] Other forgiveness conceptualizations have instead emphasized emotions and/or cognitions as key

[1]We focus on forgiveness in response to an interpersonal transgression. This excludes research focused on self, trait, relationship-level, group-level, or organization-level forgiveness. Going forward, we use the term forgiveness to reflect an individual's forgiveness processes related to an interpersonal transgression.

[2]McCullough and colleagues have historically referred to the revenge, avoidance, and benevolence dimensions of forgiveness as motivations. However, this conceptualization and its operationalization appear to focus on behavioral intentions and/or behaviors (e.g., "I'm going to get even"; "I am avoiding him/her"; McCullough et al., 2006) rather than motivations (for further discussion on forgiveness motives, see Cox et al., 2012).

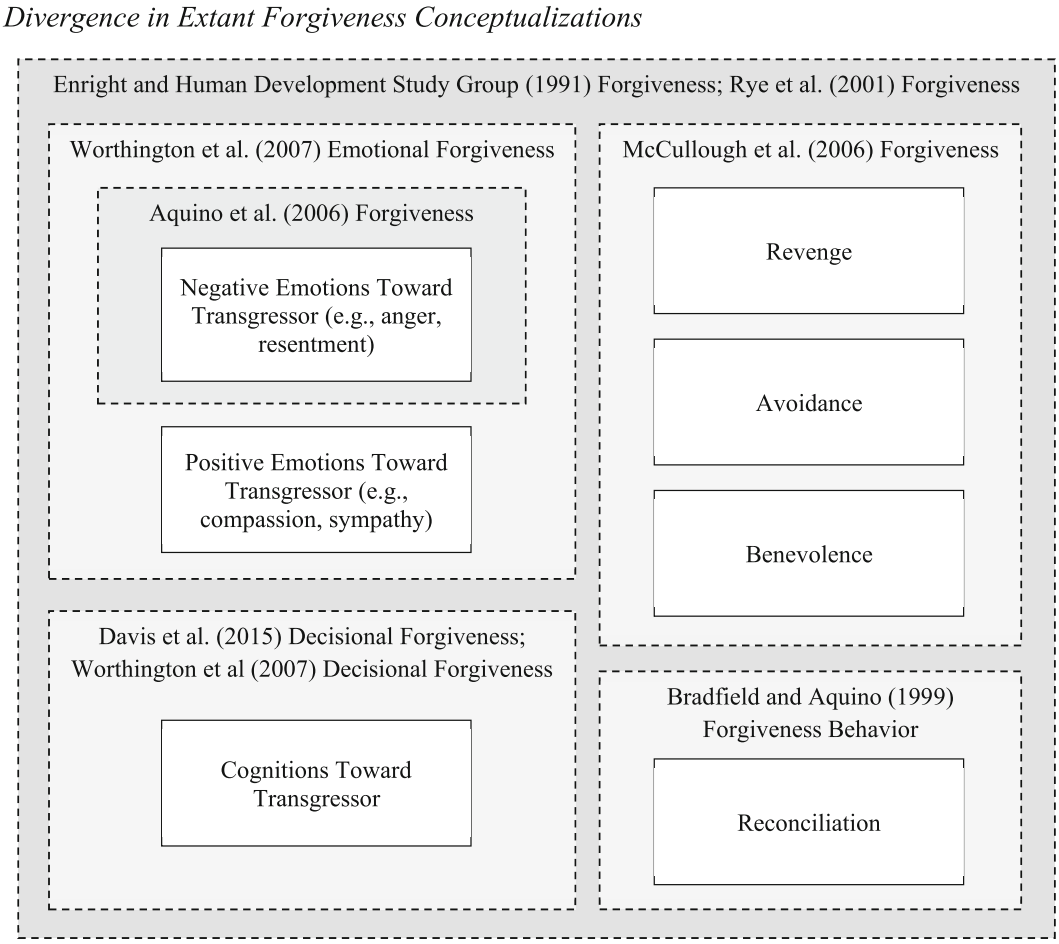

FIGURE 1 Divergence in extant forgiveness conceptualizations. *Note*: Dotted lines delineate individual forgiveness conceptualizations and indicate the phenomena that are encompassed within each conceptualization. For example, whereas the Aquino et al. (2006) forgiveness conceptualization encompasses one element (i.e., negative emotions toward a transgressor), the Enright and Human Development Study Group (1991) forgiveness conceptualization encompasses all other forgiveness conceptualizations and phenomena

elements of forgiveness rather than intentions or behaviors. For example, Worthington and colleagues distinguished between emotional and decisional forgiveness (e.g., Worthington et al., 2007; Worthington & Scherer, 2004). Emotional forgiveness refers to an emotional transformation that occurs as people release negative and eventually increase positive emotions toward a transgressor. By contrast, decisional forgiveness involves cognitively "committing to apply energy and effort to regulate negative emotions, thoughts, and behaviors until unforgiving emotions (e.g., hurt, resentment, bitterness) are substantially reduced" (Davis et al., 2015, p. 281; e.g., "I have decided to forgive him/her").

Within the field of OB, Aquino et al. (2006) conceptualized forgiveness as the "internal act of relinquishing anger, resentment, and the desire to seek revenge against the offender" (p. 654; see also Aquino et al., 2001, 2003). Although this definition appears to combine emotions and intentions, Aquino et al. (2006) have primarily operationalized forgiveness as a single dimension corresponding to the degree that one has "let go" of negative emotions toward a transgressor (e.g., "I let go of the negative feelings I had against them") and explicitly distinguished it from goodwill actions toward the offender (i.e., reconciliation, Bradfield & Aquino, 1999; Aquino et al., 2006). Interestingly, the authors recently offered a new definition that also includes changes in positivity toward a transgressor (Bies et al., 2016). However, this new definition has not yet been operationalized, and it is not clear whether positivity was intended to be a distinct second dimension or one pole of a single dimension (e.g., where negativity toward a transgressor is replaced with positivity).

While the above conceptualizations predominantly focus on either behavioral intentions/behaviors, emotions, or cognitions, other conceptualizations adopt a broader view of forgiveness as encompassing multiple phenomena. In an early conceptualization, Enright and colleagues defined forgiveness as a replacement of negative thoughts, emotions, and behaviors toward a transgressor with positive thoughts, emotions, and behaviors (Enright & Fitzgibbons, 2000; Enright & Human Development Study Group, 1991). Rye et al. (2001) suggest a similar approach by defining forgiveness as letting go of negative emotions, cognitions, and behavior (possibly accompanied by an increase in positive responses toward the transgressor). Although the measures associated with these conceptualizations can be used to assess multiple dimensions, empirical research adopting

TABLE 1 Summary of reviewed forgiveness articles

Authors	Forgiveness definition	Forgiveness operationalization	Design
Andiappan and Treviño (2011)	"Although the definition of forgiveness remains imprecise (Exline et al., 2003), psychologists and ethicists agree that forgiveness represents an individual's conscious decision to let go of negative emotions and desires for revenge (Aquino et al., 2003; Enright et al., 1998; Exline et al., 2003; Horsbrugh, 1974; Lewis, 1980) without necessarily forgetting or excusing the offense … forgiveness involves an intentional change in how the victim views, feels about, and acts toward the offender (Roberts-Cady, 2003). It allows for the development of positive, or at least neutral, feelings toward the offender, reduces the desire for retribution (Gordon et al., 2004), and involves a desire for reconciliation (Worthington and Drinkard, 2000)" (p. 372)	No measure (theoretical paper)	IV: victim sensemaking Mediator: need for reconciliation efforts, repair efforts Moderator: relationship and victim characteristics DV: *forgiveness*, trust
Aquino et al. (2001)	"… defined as a deliberate decision by the victim to relinquish anger, resentment, and the desire to punish a party held responsible for inflicting harm (Enright & The Human Development Study Group, 1991; Horsbrugh, 1974; Murphy, 1988; North, 1987; Richards, 1988; Shriver, 1995). Forgiveness can be expressed interpersonally through reconciliation, which is the attempt by the victim to restore or rebuild a damaged relationship by extending acts of goodwill toward the offender (McCullough, Rachal, Sandage, Worthington, Brown, & Right, 1998; McCullough et al., 1997; Rusbult, Verette, Whitney, Slovik, & Lipkus, 1991)" (p. 53)	5 items from Wade (1989) – forgiveness behavior indicated by reconciliation [behaviors; 1 dimension; positive valence]	IV: blame attribution Moderator: relative status, absolute status DV: *forgiveness behavior (i.e., reconciliation)*, revenge
Aquino et al. (2003)	"… forgiveness is 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" (p. 212)	No measure (theoretical paper)	

TABLE 1 (Continued)

Authors	Forgiveness definition	Forgiveness operationalization	Design
Aquino et al. (2006)	"… we differentiated between the intrapersonal and the interpersonal aspects emphasized by other writers by defining forgiveness as the internal act of relinquishing anger, resentment, and the desire to seek revenge against the offender (e.g., Enright & the Human Development Study Group, 1991; North, 1987). To capture the interpersonal aspect of forgiveness, we used the term reconciliation, which we defined as an effort by the victim to extend acts of goodwill toward the offender in the hope of restoring the relationship (McCullough et al., 1997, 1998)" (p. 654)	4 items that measure forgiveness as a release of negative emotions [primarily emotions; 1 dimension; negative valence]	IV: relative status, absolute status Moderator: procedural justice climate DV: *forgiveness*, reconciliation, revenge
Ayoko (2016)	"… a transformation of motives and emotions from a hostile to a more pro-social orientation toward a transgressor following a hurtful event, McCullough 2000; Worthington, 2006" (p. 173)	Adaptation of Guerrero and Bachman (2006) [1 dimension; unclear valence; direct assessment]	IV: perceived apology sincerity, attitudes toward forgiveness Mediator: *forgiveness* DV: willingness to cooperate
Baer et al. (2018)	"… an effort to bring an end to feelings of anger and resentment, and replace them with positive feelings and thoughts (Enright & The Human Development Study Group, 1994; North, 1987; Worthington, 2005)" (p. 1767)	4 items from McCullough et al.'s (1997) measure of forgiveness [cognitions; 1 dimension; mixed valence]	IV: unfairness talk Moderator: reframing response Mediator: supervisor directed emotions (hope and anger), *forgiveness* DV: supervisor-directed OCB
Balaji et al. (2020)	"Forgiveness involves reduced negative feelings, increased thoughts of reconciliation, and enhanced goodwill (Joireman, Grégoire, & Tripp, 2016). It is considered as a positive process that allows FLEs (frontline employees) to 'let go' by reducing the subsequent stress and leaving behind the transgressions they experienced" (p. 1)	2 items adapted from Aquino et al. (2006) plus 1 item direct assessment [primarily emotions; 1 dimension; primarily negative valence; direct assessment]	IV: customer incivility Moderator: org. culture Mediator: *forgiveness*, revenge DV: customer-oriented behavior, dysfunctional behavior
Barclay and Saldanha (2016)	"… the internal act of relinquishing anger, resentment, and the desire to seek revenge against the offender (Aquino et al., 2001, 2006)" (p. 700)	Aquino et al. (2006) measure of forgiveness [primarily emotions; 1 dimension; negative valence]	IV: expressive writing Mediator: expressed emotions (negative and positive), cognitions, perceptions of injustice, perceived resolution DV: *forgiveness*
Basford et al. (2014)	"Interpersonal forgiveness has been conceptualized as a motivational construct (McCullough et al., 1998). In particular, avoidance and revenge motivations are proposed to underlie forgiveness (McCullough et al., 1998). Recent investigation also acknowledges the importance of a third motivation underlying forgiveness—benevolence … (McCullough et al., 2006)" (p. 103)	McCullough et al. (2006) – forgiveness indicated by avoidance and benevolence (combined) [mix of intentions, behaviors, cognitions, emotions; 1 dimension; mixed valence; direct assessment]	IV: credibility Mediator: leader apology sincerity, humility, transformational leadership, *forgiveness* DV: trust in leader, satisfaction with supervision, LMX, organizational commitment

(Continues)

TABLE 1 (Continued)

Authors	Forgiveness definition	Forgiveness operationalization	Design
Beattie and Griffin (2014)	No definition provided	2 items that assess forgiveness [1 dimension; unclear valence; direct assessment]	IV: self-blame, severity of incivility, status of transgressor Moderator: neuroticism DV: *forgiveness*, revenge, avoidance, seek support, displaced anger
Berndsen et al. (2018)	No definition provided	Studies 2 and 3: adaptation of Rye et al. (2001) forgiveness scale [mix of cognitions, emotions, behaviors; 1 dimension; mixed valence; direct assessment]	IV: perspective, severity Mediator: perspective taking, responsibility of wrongdoing, moral emotions DV: *forgiveness*, trust, fear, retribution
Bies et al. (2016)	"Forgiveness is the internal act of relinquishing anger, resentment, and the desire to seek revenge against someone who has caused harm as well as the enhancement of positive emotions and thoughts toward the harm-doer" (p. 251)	No measure (theoretical paper)	
Bisel and Messersmith (2012)	No definition provided	McCullough et al. (1998) – forgiveness indicated by revenge and avoidance (combined) [mix of intentions, behaviors, cognitions; 1 dimension; negative valence]	IV: transgressor (friend, supervisor) Moderator: apology, training DV: *forgiveness*
Biswas (2009)	"Forgivingness has been defined by Roberts (1995) as 'the disposition to abort one's anger (or altogether to miss getting angry) at persons one takes to have wronged one culpably, by seeing them in the benevolent terms provided by reasons characteristic of forgiving' (p. 290). Another way to define it is as '… a willingness to abandon one's right to resentment, negative judgment, and indifferent behavior toward one who unjustly injured us, while fostering the undeserved qualities of compassion, generosity and even love towards him or her' (Enright et al, 1998, pp. 46–47) … In other words, it signifies absence of revenge intention and presence of positive frame of mind toward the person, who committed wrong" (p. 149)	6 items from McCullough et al. (1998) – forgiveness indicated by revenge and avoidance [mix of intentions, behaviors, cognitions; 2 dimensions; negative valence]	Factor analysis of *forgiveness*
Bobocel (2013)	"According to McCullough, Pargament, and Thorensen (2000), 'When people forgive, their responses toward (or, in other words, what they think of, feel about, want to do, or actually do to) people who have offended or injured them become more positive and less negative' (p. 9)" (p. 720)	4 items from McCullough and Hoyt (2002) – forgiveness indicated by benevolence [mix of intentions and cognitions; 1 dimension; primarily positive valence; direct assessment]	IV: overall justice Moderator: other-orientation, self-concern DV: *forgiveness*, revenge

TABLE 1 (Continued)

Authors	Forgiveness definition	Forgiveness operationalization	Design
Boonyarit et al. (2013)	"Forgiveness is a willingness to discard one's right to revenge and instead to show mercy to the offender (Enright & Coyle, 1998). It is a motivation to reduce avoidance of the offender, as well as to abandon any anger, grudge holding, or revenge towards the offender; conversely, it helps to increase conciliation when the moral norms can be re-established (Worthington, 1998). McCullough et al. (2000) concluded that forgiveness is an intraindividual, prosocial change toward the offender that occurs within a specific interpersonal relationship. In the organizational context there are several definitions of forgiveness. Aquino et al. (2003) suggested that interpersonal workplace forgiveness is a process where the individual, who was hurt by his or her colleague, attempts to overcome negative feelings – such as resentment and anger – toward the offender and to stop himself or herself from causing the offender harm even if he or she believes it is ethically justifiable to do so" (p. 320)	23 items measuring workplace forgiveness [cognitions, emotions, intentions, behaviors; 4 dimensions; unclear valence; direct assessment] Rye et al. (2001) forgiveness scale [mix of cognitions, emotions, behaviors; 1 dimension; mixed valence; direct assessment] 1 item assessing forgiveness [1 dimension; unclear valence; direct assessment]	Correlates: *forgiveness*, positive and negative affect, dispositional forgiveness, willingness to reconcile, rumination, revenge
Booth et al. (2018)	"Forgiveness is a form of emotion-focused coping in which the victim uses cognitive control resources to transform negative emotions to positive or neutral emotions that are focused on continuing the relationship with the perpetrator (Worthington, 2006; Worthington & Scherer, 2004) … victims have the potential to change their negative emotions to more positive other-focused emotions (e.g., empathy, compassion, and love) and, thus, let go of their negative feelings and forgive their perpetrators (e.g., Sandage & Worthington, 2010). Forgiveness can, therefore, be understood as a process of motivational change (McCullough, Fincham, & Tsang, 2003), in which avoidance and revenge motivations are decreased and benevolent motivation increased (Wilkowski, Robinson, & Troop-Gordon, 2010)." (p. 515)	2 items from Aquino et al. (2006) – release of negative emotions, plus 1 item direct assessment [primarily emotions; 1 dimension; primarily negative valence; direct assessment]	IV: victimization (severity) Moderator: workgroup conflict Mediator: *forgiveness* DV: job satisfaction, burnout, turnover intentions Note: Revenge was a control

(Continues)

TABLE 1 (Continued)

Authors	Forgiveness definition	Forgiveness operationalization	Design
Bradfield and Aquino (1999)	"Forgiveness is a complex of affective, cognitive, and behavioral phenomena in which negative affect and judgment toward the offender are diminished, not by denying one's right to such affect and judgment, but by viewing the offender with compassion, benevolence, and love (Enright et al., 1992). Forgiveness involves the forswearing of resentment and anger on moral grounds (Murphy, 1988)" (p. 610)	4 items adapted from Wade (1989) – forgiveness cognition indicated by reconciliation [mix of intentions and cognitions; 1 dimension; positive valence] 3 items from Wade (1989)—forgiveness behavior indicated by reconciliation [behaviors; 1 dimension; positive valence]	IV: blame, offender likableness, offense severity Mediator: *forgiveness (cognitions)*, revenge cognitions DV: *forgiveness (behavior)*, revenge behavior
Bright et al. (2006)	Forgiveness is an intentional response to perceived negative experiences in which the propensity toward harbored negativity is displaced or dissolved, allowing the forgiver to 'refrain from causing the offender harm even though he or she believes it is morally justifiable to do so' (Aquino et al., 2003:212) … The prevailing, 'neutral' perspective suggests that the emotions, thoughts, and behaviors associated with offense are at least transformed 'from negative to neutral' (Yamhure Thompson & Shahen, 2003) … In contrast, the 'positive' view is that forgiveness includes a transformation from negativity to positivity. For instance, Enright, et al. (1998) maintain that true forgiveness requires a complete shift to positive emotion, cognition, motivation, and behavior toward former offenders …" (p. 80)	Qualitative methodology	
Butler and Mullis (2001)	"There are many definitions of forgiveness, but the broadest definitions combine behavioral, cognitive, and affective elements. Hunter (1978) described genuine forgiveness as a state characterized by the cessation of animosity, with a reduced need for defensiveness, the justification of anger, or retaliation. According to Hope (1987), forgiveness includes a person's understanding his or her right to make choices about dealing with hurtful events from the past, choosing to absolve perceived wrongs that others have committed, and relinquishing resentment and bitterness. Fitzgibbons (1986) described genuine forgiveness as freeing people from the subtle control of individuals and events of the past so that they can forget painful experiences" (pp. 260–261)	Enright forgiveness inventory [emotions, cognitions, behaviors, intentions; 6 dimensions; negative and positive valence]	Correlates: *forgiveness*, lifestyle themes

TABLE 1 (Continued)

Authors	Forgiveness definition	Forgiveness operationalization	Design
Chou et al. (2021)	"In the field of psychology, forgiveness often refers to moving past resentment resulting from a specific wrongdoing or relational injury (Sandage et al. 2003). Although forgiveness can occur due to a fear of confrontation and unwillingness to acknowledge a wrongdoing (Haaken 2002), we follow Roberts (1995) and view forgiveness as an individual's compassion, humility, self-reflection, and a sense of justice."	Qualitative methodology	IV: characteristics of recipient, performance-related threats, resentment of helping Moderator: *forgiveness*, organizational rewards DV: help continuation
Crossley (2009)	No definition provided	Unclear[a]	IV: greed, malice Mediator: offense severity, anger, sympathy DV: revenge, avoidance, reconciliation
Eaton and Struthers (2006)	"Forgiveness is a motivated decision by victims of an offense to let go off [sic] their legitimate anger and resentment toward the offender and to evaluate him or her more favorably [Struthers et al., 2005], and thus it can break the link between the negative emotions (i.e., anger) and aggressive behavior" (pp. 196–197)	2 items assessing forgiveness [1 dimension; unclear valence; direct assessment]	IV: responsibility Mediator: anger, sympathy, *forgiveness* Moderator: repentance DV: psychological aggression
Elangovan et al. (2007)	No definition provided	McCullough et al.'s (1997) measure of forgiveness [primarily cognition; 1 dimension; mixed valence; direct assessment]	IV: attributions, number of prior violations DV: erosion of trust Note: *Forgiveness* was a control
Elangovan et al. (2015)	No definition provided	McCullough et al.'s (1997) measure of forgiveness [primarily cognition; 1 dimension; mixed valence; direct assessment]	IV: repair behavior, damage DV: erosion of trust Note: *Forgiveness* was a control
Epitropaki et al. (2020)	"Existing forgiveness conceptualizations are quite diverse (e.g., Enright et al., 1996; Exline & Baumeister, 2000; Finkel et al., 2002) but they share an important common feature, i.e., the assumption that forgiveness is a complex transformational process, which involves prosocial change regarding a transgressor on the part of the transgression recipient. As McCullough, Fincham, and Tsang (2003) point out '… nearly every theorist appears to concur that when people forgive, their responses (i.e., thoughts, feelings, behavioral inclinations or actual behaviors) towards a transgressor become more positive and/or less negative' (p. 540)" (p. 5)	No measure (review paper)	

(Continues)

TABLE 1 (Continued)

Authors	Forgiveness definition	Forgiveness operationalization	Design
Exline et al. (2003)	"Although controversy surrounds the definition of forgiveness (Enright, Eastin, Golden, Sarinopolous, & Freedman, 1992)… psychologists agree that forgiveness does not imply forgetting, condoning, or excusing offenses, and forgiveness does not necessarily imply reconciliation, trust, or release from legal accountability… forgiveness involves a conscious decision—while acknowledging the seriousness of the wrong—to release or forego bitterness and vengeance (e.g., Enright, Freedman, & Rique, 1998). Forgiveness is sometimes described as an altruistic gift (e.g., Enright et al., 1998; Smedes, 1984; Worthington, 1998b), one given freely in spite of not being deserved by offenders. One controversial aspect of the forgiveness definition deals with whether forgiveness requires positive feelings toward offenders, or whether the absence of negative feelings is sufficient (e.g., Enright et al., 1998; Richards, 2002)…" (p. 339)	No measure (theoretical paper)	
Goodstein and Aquino (2010)	"Psychologists have defined forgiveness as a process involving affective, cognitive, and behavioral responses in which negative emotions towards and judgments about the offender are diminished by trying to view the offender with compassion, understanding, and perhaps even love" (pp. 625–626)	No measure (theoretical paper)	
Goodstein and Butterfield (2010)	"Psychologists define forgiveness as a process involving affective, cognitive, and behavioral responses in which negative emotions toward and judgments about the offender are diminished by trying to view the offender with compassion, understanding, and perhaps even love (Aquino et al., 2003; Enright, Gassin, & Wu, 1992; McCullough et al., 1997; North, 1987). In making a choice to forgive, the victim makes a conscious effort to give up resentment and punishment… The forgiver may also attempt to make some effort to reconcile with the offender by extending acts of goodwill…" (p. 460)	No measure (theoretical paper)	

TABLE 1 (Continued)

Authors	Forgiveness definition	Forgiveness operationalization	Design
Gromet and Okimoto (2014)	"Forgiveness is viewed as the victim deciding to replace negative thoughts and feelings toward the offender and the offense with more neutral or positive ones (Exline et al., 2003), providing an alternative to retribution or revenge in dealing with injustice (Tripp, Bies, & Aquino, 2007; Wade & Worthington, 2002)" (p. 413)	Forgiveness was directly manipulated in a scenario [unclear valence]	IV: *forgiveness* Moderator: offender amends Mediator: liking of offender, liking of victim, perceived relationship repair DV: offender, victim, & team reintegration
Herscovis et al. (2018)	"Forgiveness is often conceptualized as an 'unfolding of a sequence of events over time' (McCullough, Pargament, & Thoresen, 2001, p. 8) in which the target changes in his or her thoughts, feelings, motivations, or behaviors toward the perpetrator. Further, it is 'a complex response that has been conceptualized as being both an intra- and an interpersonal event' (Aquino et al., 2006, p. 654). Aquino and colleagues termed the interpersonal aspect of forgiveness reconciliation… The intrapersonal component is termed forgiveness and is defined as 'the internal act of relinquishing anger, resentment, and the desire to seek revenge against the offender' (Aquino et al., 2006, p. 654)… we term it psychological forgiveness and define it as an internal state that is achieved when targets relinquish anger toward the perpetrator. Thus, it is not a coping strategy, but a final outcome that is achieved as the result of coping strategies and responses" (p. 167)	5 items from Rye et al. (2001) forgiveness scale [mix of cognitions and emotions; 1 dimension; mixed valence; direct assessment]	IV: incivility Mediator: confrontation, avoidance DV: *forgiveness*, experienced incivility, enacted incivility, emotional exhaustion
Hornsey et al. (2017)	No definition provided	Study 1: 1 item that assesses if someone should be forgiven [1 dimension; unclear valence; direct assessment]	IV: political ideology Mediator: entity beliefs, social dominance orientation DV: *forgiveness*, apology
Hui et al. (2011)	"…forgiveness can be defined as an intrapersonal process involving the reframing of the act of transgression that has caused negative feelings, such that the victim no longer holds a negative view of the person, seeks revenge, or avoids the person" (p. 1214)	McCullough et al. (1998)—forgiveness indicated by revenge and avoidance (combined) [mix of intentions, behaviors, cognitions; 1 dimension; negative valence]	IV: *forgiveness*, trust Moderator: behavior consistent with apology DV: *forgiveness*, trust
Iwai and Carvalho (2020)	"Forgiveness can be understood as a 'set of motivational changes whereby one becomes decreasingly motivated to retaliate against an offending relationship partner, decreasingly motivated to maintain estrangement from the offender, and increasingly motivated by conciliation and goodwill for the offender' (McCullough et al., 1997, p. 321)."	Study 2: McCullough and Hoyt (2002)—forgiveness indicated by revenge, avoidance, and benevolence [mix of intentions, behaviors, cognitions, emotions; 3 dimensions; negative valence, mixed valence; direct assessment]	IV: implicit theories of personality Mediator: attributions of behavioral stability DV: *forgiveness*

(Continues)

TABLE 1 (Continued)

Authors	Forgiveness definition	Forgiveness operationalization	Design
Kalbfleisch (1997)	No definition provided	Study 3: 1 item assessing degree that someone would be forgiven [1 dimension; unclear valence; direct assessment]	IV: response strategies to conflict DV: *forgiveness*, respect, esteem, anger, conflict
Kim et al. (2018)	"Forgiveness is defined as 'the set of motivational changes whereby one becomes decreasingly motivated to retaliate against the offending partner, decreasingly motivated to maintain estrangement from the offender, and increasingly motivated by conciliation and goodwill toward the offender despite the offender's hurtful actions.' (McCullough et al., 1997; pp. 321–322)" (p. 3)	5 items from McCullough et al. (1998)—forgiveness indicated by revenge and avoidance (combined) [mix of intentions, behaviors, cognitions; 1 dimension; negative valence]	IV: transformational leadership Mediator: *forgiveness* DV: innovative behavior
Ksenofontov and Becker (2020)	No definition provided	Study 3: 3 items assessing forgiveness [1 dimension; unclear valence; direct assessment]	IV: expression of thanks Mediator: *forgiveness*, system justification DV: protest intentions
Little et al. (2007)	"…forgiveness behaviour is regarded as 'a morally superior response to a perceived wrong' and is preceded by the forgiver releasing negative affect and replacing it with positive affect such as feelings of compassion, benevolence and love (Bradfield & Aquino, 1999, p. 610). We reasoned that this preceding release of negative affect was the initial phase … This step would be necessary but not sufficient for real forgiveness when faced with a perceived wrong, for one could avoid revenge but not exhibit a morally superior response. The avoidance system only qualifies as forgiveness … if positive affect replaces any negative affect in response to a perceived wrong. A valid measure of forgiveness must therefore capture these clearly positive behaviours and feelings" (p. 245)	5 items from Bradfield and Aquino (1999)—forgiveness behavior indicated by reconciliation plus 1 new item [behaviors; 1 dimension; positive valence]	IV: *forgiveness*, revenge, state positive and negative affect, burnout, engagement DV: health
Madsen et al. (2009)	"Sells and Hargrave (1998)… found that each forgiveness definition and theory contained the following six threads: 1. There is an injury or violation with subsequent emotional/physical pain. 2. The violation results in a broken/fragmented relationship between parties. 3. Perpetuation of injury is halted. 4. A cognitive process is pursued where the painful event or action is understood or reframed with a fuller context. 5. There is a release or letting go of justifiable emotion and retaliation related to the event. 6. There is a renegotiation of the relationship" (p. 249)	No measure (theoretical paper)	

TABLE 1 (Continued)

Authors	Forgiveness definition	Forgiveness operationalization	Design
Marler et al. (2011)	"Aquino et al. characterize forgiveness of workplace offences as 'a way of actively coping with one's work environment' (2003: 213). According to this perspective, forgiveness is not passively accepting the circumstances of being wronged, 'rather, it involves a deliberate effort to alter how one thinks, feels, and behaves toward the offender, even when it may be within one's moral right to pursue retribution and experience anger and resentment' (Aquino et al., 2003: 213)" (p. 146)	6 items that assess hypothetical forgiveness [1 dimension; unclear valence; direct assessment]	IV: use of touch by the offender Mediator: supervisor support, apology sincerity DV: *forgiveness*
McCarthy (2017)	"Forgiveness is defined as 'a deliberate decision by the victim to relinquish anger, resentment and the desire to punish a party held responsible for inflicting harm' (Aquino et al., 2001: 53). From a philosophical perspective, forgiveness involves resigning negative and vengeful feelings not by denying one's right to these types of negative affect and judgment, but by forgoing that path and instead viewing the offender with benevolence and compassion (Enright, Gassin & Wu, 1992). It is a complex phenomenon that involves affective, cognitive, and behavioral components (Bradfield & Aquino, 1999) and is conceptualized as a process which incorporates the resignation of negative affect and judgment toward the offender, which includes a willingness to reconcile and begin rebuilding trust" (p. 3)	No measure (theoretical paper)	IV: trust violation Mediator: *forgiveness* (i.e., reconciliation) Moderator: environmental factors, elapsed time, sincerity, characteristics of the relationship, apology DV: trust repair
Mok and De Cremer (2015a)	"Forgiveness involves inhibiting interpersonally destructive impulses, such as revenge (Bradfield & Aquino, 1999; McCullough et al., 1998) and choosing to act in favor of long-term interests, such as mending the relationship with the offender (Aquino et al., 2001; Finkel & Campbell, 2001)" (p. 437)	Study 1: McCullough et al. (1998)—forgiveness indicated by revenge and avoidance [mix of intentions, behaviors, cognitions; 2 dimensions; negative valence] Study 2: McCullough and Hoyt (2002)—forgiveness indicated by benevolence [mix of cognitions, intentions, emotions; 1 dimension; mixed valence; direct assessment] Study 3: 3 items that assess forgiveness [1 dimension; unclear valence; direct assessment]	IV: money prime (new vs. used) Mediator: vitality DV: *forgiveness*

(Continues)

TABLE 1 (Continued)

Authors	Forgiveness definition	Forgiveness operationalization	Design
Mok and De Cremer (2015b)	"Forgiveness refers to a prosocial intrapersonal change in response to a perceived harm by another party (McCullough, Pargament, & Thoresen, 2001). Forgiveness occurs when people are willing to let go of revenge or avoidance towards their offender (Bradfield & Aquino, 1999; Cloke, 1993; McCullough et al., 1998). In existing relationships, forgiveness can involve benevolent feelings towards the offender (e.g., goodwill), besides merely letting go of bitter or vengeful feelings (McCullough & Hoyt, 2002)" (p. 267)	Study 1: 1 item [1 dimension; unclear valence; direct assessment] Study 2: McCullough et al. (1998)—forgiveness indicated by revenge and avoidance [mix of intentions, behaviors, cognitions; 2 dimensions; negative valence], 1 item direct assessment Study 3: Barnes et al. (2009)—forgiveness indicated by revenge [mix of cognitions and intentions; 1 dimension; negative valence]	IV: processing style (broad vs. narrow construal) Mediator: perception of offense severity DV: *forgiveness*
Okimoto and Wenzel (2014)	"…a transformation of motives and attitudes toward the offender from negative to positive, indicative of reduced retributive motives, reduced avoidance, and increased benevolence (McCullough et al., 2006; McCullough, Rachal, Sandage, Worthington, Brown, & Hight, 1998). … true forgiveness is typified by a *willingness to reconcile* with the offender, letting go of the negative emotions and moving forward with relationship repair" (p. 450)	No measure (theoretical paper)	
Palanski (2012)	"… Aquino et al. (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.' Cameron and Caza (2002, p. 37) describe forgiveness as 'a conscious choice to replace negativity with positivity, and it is inherently social since it occurs in relationship to other individuals, not inanimate objects.'"(p. 277)	No measure (theoretical paper)	

TABLE 1 (Continued)

Authors	Forgiveness definition	Forgiveness operationalization	Design
Paul and Putnam (2017)	"…forgiveness is a social coping process involving the elimination of the cognitive, affective, and behavioral ill-effects of a wrongdoing (Waldron & Kelley, 2008; Worthington, 2003). Among researchers and the public some disagreement exists over the forms of forgiveness (Kearns & Fincham, 2004), such as whether or not it includes reconciliation (Hook, Worthington, & Utsey, 2009; Sandage & Williamson, 2005). Over time, forgiveness decreases negativity and possibly increases positivity of thoughts, behaviors, and emotions toward the wrongdoer (Bright et al., 2006; McCullough, 2001; Waldron & Kelley, 2008; Wenzel & Okimoto, 2010)" (p. 45)	Qualitative paper (coded)	
Pollack and Bosse (2014)	"Defined, forgiveness can be characterized as a decision to 'release or forego bitterness and vengeance' (Exline et al., 2003: 339). Forgiveness is a moral value that helps people move beyond feelings of revenge and hatred (North, 1987), and typically means there is a 'willingness to consider engaging in future interactions' (Bottom et al., 2002: 500)" (p. 746)	No measure (theoretical paper)	IV: rel. commitment, rel. satisfaction, offender performance, actual and potential harm, intentionality, offender trust repair efforts, offender agreeableness, victim prior neg. experiences Mediator: relationship value, exploitation risk DV: *forgiveness*
Radulovic et al. (2019)	"…we define forgiveness in dyadic relationships as the process that enables individuals to abandon their negative responses following interpersonal offences and instead respond positively (Fincham, 2000)… characterized as a prosocial change toward the offender (McCullough, 2000)" (pp. 499–500)	Study 2: adaptation of Fincham et al. (2008)—forgiveness indicated by revenge, avoidance, and benevolence (combined) [mix of intentions, behaviors, cognitions; 1 dimension; mixed valence]	IV: LMX Moderator: forgiveness climate DV: *forgiveness*
Raj et al. (2020)	"Forgiveness is defined as 'the set of motivational changes whereby one becomes (a) decreasingly motivated to retaliate against an offending relationship partner, (b) decreasingly motivated to maintain estrangement from the offender, and (c) increasingly motivated by conciliation and goodwill for the offender, despite the offender's hurtful actions' (McCullough et al., 1997, pp. 321–322). Forgiveness can be experienced (intrapsychic, i.e., not conveyed to one's transgressor) or expressed interpersonally (conveyed to one's transgressor; Exline & Baumeister, 2000)" (p. 345)	Study 4: another victim's forgiveness was directly manipulated in a scenario [unclear valence]; 1 item assessed whether participants would forgive [1 dimension; unclear valence; direct assessment]	IV: participant *forgiveness*, another victim's *forgiveness*, communicated forgiveness Mediator: beliefs about appearing ungenerous, overclaimed standing DV: benevolence, integrity

(Continues)

TABLE 1 (Continued)

Authors	Forgiveness definition	Forgiveness operationalization	Design
Ran et al. (2021)	"Forgiveness is defined as 'one's willingness to abandon rightful resentment, condemnation and even subtle revenge toward the offender' (McCullough et al., 1998; Takada and Ohbuchi, 2013)"	McCullough and Hoyt (2002)—forgiveness indicated by revenge, avoidance, and benevolence (combined) [mix of intentions, behaviors, cognitions, emotions; 1 dimension; mixed valence; direct assessment]	IV: congruence in power motives Mediator: empathy DV: *forgiveness*
Shafa et al. (2017)	No definition provided	4 items that assess inclinations to forgive [1 dimension; unclear valence; direct assessment]	IV: apology Mediator: remorse, blame, perceived sincerity Moderator: culture DV: *forgiveness*
Stackhouse (2019)	"…captures giving up negative feelings, thoughts, and motivations towards an offender and replacing them with positive feelings, thoughts, and motivations towards an offender (McCullough et al., 1998)" (p. 209)	McCullough et al. (1998)—forgiveness indicated by revenge and avoidance (combined) [mix of intentions, behaviors, cognitions; 1 dimension; negative valence]	IV: trait forgivingness Mediator: severity, expectancy violation, offender reconstrual DV: *forgiveness*, job satisfaction, affective commitment, leave intentions
Stone (2002)	"Websters *New World College Dictionary* states that to forgive is '…to give up resentment against or the desire to punish; stop being angry with; pardon or to give up all claim to punish or exact penalty for (an offense); overlook.' Ultimately forgiveness means to give up blame or faultfinding" (p. 278)	No measure (theoretical paper)	
Stouten and Tripp (2009)	"…by definition, forgiveness is the letting go of anger: Enright & the Human Development Study Group, (1991, p. 108) define forgiveness as 'a willingness to abandon one's right to resentment, condemnation, and subtle revenge towards the offender who acts unjustly while fostering the undeserved qualities of compassion generosity or even love toward him/her.' Such forgiveness also implies that cooperation will follow (e.g., Karremans, Van Lange, & Holland, 2005)" (p. 288)	1 item assessing willingness to forgive [1 dimension; unclear valence; direct assessment] 7 items from McCullough et al. (1998)—forgiveness indicated by revenge and avoidance (combined) [mix of intentions, behaviors, cognitions; 1 dimension; negative valence]	IV: asking for forgiveness Moderator: who asks for forgiveness (leaders vs. followers) DV: *forgiveness*, anger, cooperation
Strelan et al. (2008)	"Forgiveness entails overcoming a set of negative cognitive, affective, and behavioural responses (Thompson et al., 2005) that may subsequently lead to more benevolent responding (Enright & Fitzgibbons, 2000). To that end, a prominent definition conceives of forgiveness as a function of motivational transformation, wherein people's motivations towards an offender change from negative to positive (McCullough et al., 1997). Nonetheless, there is not yet a consensus on how forgiveness should be defined (Strelan & Covic, 2006)…" (p. 1538)	McCullough et al. (2003)—forgiveness indicated by revenge, avoidance, and benevolence [mix of intentions, behaviors, cognitions; 3 dimensions; negative valence, mixed valence]	IV: justice type (restorative, retributive) Moderator: context (workplace, intimate relationship, criminal justice system) DV: *forgiveness*

TABLE 1 (Continued)

Authors	Forgiveness definition	Forgiveness operationalization	Design
Strelan et al. (2017)	"Forgiveness is often defined as prosocial motivational change (McCullough et al., 1998), in which victims move from a negative to positive stance towards a perpetrator. Forgiveness is both intrapersonal (e.g., Worthington, 2001) and interpersonal (e.g., Finkel et al., 2002) in nature. In the case of the former, victims' cognitions and emotions about a transgression and a transgressor change from negative to positive. As such, it is possible to experience an internal conversion without necessarily indicating forgiveness to an offender (e.g., Worthington, 2001)… Forgiveness may also be manifested interpersonally, so that offenders become aware that victims' motivations and attitudes towards them have transitioned to become more inclusive and approach oriented (e.g., McCullough, 2008)" (p. 472)	Study 3: 5 items adapted from McCullough et al. (2003)—forgiveness indicated by benevolence, plus 4 new items [mix of intentions, cognitions, emotions; 1 dimension; mixed valence; direct assessment]	IV: punishment Mediator: justice restoration, empowerment, revenge DV: *forgiveness*
Struthers et al. (2005)	"As a motivated decision by victims of an offense to let go of their legitimate anger and resentment toward the offender and to evaluate him or her favourably, forgiveness is believed to be an intrapersonal process that is influenced by certain social cognitive factors located within victims, namely, their causal attributions and their inferences of the transgressor's responsibility for the offense (Aquino et al., 2001; Baumeister et al., 1998; Bradfield & Aquino, 1999; Fincham, 2000; Heider, 1958; McCullough, Fincham, & Tsang, 2003; McCullough & Hoyt, 2002; Struthers, Miller, Boudens, & Briggs, 2001). However, forgiveness is also distinguished as an interpersonal process that is affected by factors located outside of the victim such as an apology from the transgressor…" (p. 300)	Study 1: 4 items that assess forgiveness [mix of emotions and cognitions; 1 dimension; mixed valence; direct assessment] Study 2: 4 items from Study 1 plus 1 new item [mix of emotions, cognitions, intentions; 1 dimension; mixed valence; direct assessment]	IV: type of training (social motivational, job satisfaction training) DV: *forgiveness*
Tarraf et al. (2019)	"Forgiveness is a prosocial, positive attitudinal change toward a perpetrator (McCullough, Pargament, & Thoresen, 2000). Forgiving entails the victim attempting to reinterpret the offense and actions of the perpetrator (Aquino et al., 2003). Forgiving also involves reducing ruminations about the incident" (p. 141)	Rye et al. (2001) forgiveness scale [mix of cognition, emotions, behaviors; 1 dimension; mixed valence; direct assessment]	IV: incivility Moderator: mindfulness Mediator: rumination, negative affect DV: *forgiveness*, stress
			IV: relational identification

(Continues)

TABLE 1 (Continued)

Authors	Forgiveness definition	Forgiveness operationalization	Design
Thompson and Korsgaard (2019)	"Forgiveness is when individuals remove negative thoughts and feelings toward the relational other and refrain from seeking revenge (Aquino et al., 2003). Forgiveness is a choice whereby the focal individual removes antipathy, anger, and hostility elicited by the transgression (Enright & The Human Development Study Group, 1991; McCullough et al., 2006; Rusbult, Verette, Whitney, Slovik, & Lipkus, 1991)" (p. 155)	5 items that assess forgiveness [mix of emotions and cognition; 1 dimension; primarily negative valence; direct assessment]	Mediator: *forgiveness* DV: relationship resilience
Toussaint et al. (2019)	"Forgiveness is the releasing of negative and promotion of positive thoughts, feelings, and behaviors toward someone who hurt you (Worthington & Wade, 1999)" (p. 1090)	Case study on the application of forgiveness training.	DV: productivity, stress, anger, positive states, health-related quality of life, physical vitality
Toussaint et al. (2018)	"Forgiveness can be defined as a process by which people replace unforgiving emotions (eg, anger) with positive, other-oriented emotions (eg, empathy) (Worthington & Scherer, 2004)" (p. 60)	Study 1: McCullough et al. (1998)—forgiveness indicated by revenge and avoidance (combined) [mix of intentions, behaviors, cognitions; 1 dimension; negative valence]	Correlates: *forgiveness*, work days missed, productivity, mental health, physical health
Williams et al. (2020)	"Reconciliation, considered the opposite of revenge (Fehr et al., 2010), is defined here as 'the internal act of relinquishing anger, resentment, and the desire to seek revenge against the offender' (Aquino et al., 2006, p. 654). Forgiveness and reconciliation are not automatic and are impossible without engaging in cognitive processing that requires victims' deliberate cognitive efforts either to incorporate mitigating factors into their attributions and appraisals or to choose to forgive for moral reasons (Fehr et al., 2010)" (p. 197)	No measure (theoretical paper)	IV: positive affective culture Mediator: cognitive flexibility Moderator: perception of transgressor responses, victim's perceived dependence, interpersonal affective bonds DV: *forgiveness behavior* (i.e., *reconciliation*), cooperation, revenge
Worthington et al. (2010)	"We view forgiveness as involving two distinct yet related processes. Decisional forgiveness involves a behavioral intention to act in ways toward the offender that are less negative and more positive. However, one can make a sincere decision to forgive and still experience negative emotions about the transgression or the offender (e.g. anger, sadness, and hate). Emotional forgiveness, then, involves the replacement of negative unforgiving emotions with positive other-oriented emotions (e.g. empathy, sympathy, and love) toward the offender" (p. 121)	No measure (theoretical paper)	

TABLE 1 (Continued)

Authors	Forgiveness definition	Forgiveness operationalization	Design
Zdaniuk and Bobocel (2015)	"Although various definitions of forgiveness have been proposed over the years, McCullough et al. (2000) observed that most share a critical assumption: 'When people forgive, their responses toward (or, in other words, what they think of, feel about, want to do to, or actually do to) people who have offended or injured them become more positive and less negative' (p. 9). In other words, a fundamental feature of forgiveness is 'intraindividual prosocial change toward a transgressor' (McCullough, Fincham, & Tsang, 2003, p. 540)" (p. 864)	Study 1: 5 items adapted from McCullough and Hoyt (2002)—willingness to forgive indicated by benevolence [mix of cognitions, intentions, emotions; 1 dimension; mixed valence; direct assessment] Study 2: McCullough and Hoyt (2002)—forgiveness indicated by benevolence [mix of cognitions, intentions, emotions; 1 dimension; mixed valence; direct assessment]	IV: leader idealized influence, transactional leadership DV: *forgiveness*, avoidance, revenge
Zheng et al. (2016)	"Forgiveness is defined as a victim's prosocial motivational change toward a transgressor. Specifically, when people forgive, they experience a reduced motivation for avoidant and vengeful behavior and an increased motivation for benevolent behavior (McCullough et al., 2001)" (p. 1390)	Study 1: McCullough et al. (2006)—forgiveness indicated by revenge, avoidance, benevolence (combined) [mix of intentions, behaviors, cognitions, emotions; 1 dimension; mixed valence; direct assessment] Study 2: Aquino et al. (2006) [primarily emotions; 1 dimension; negative valence]	IV: apology Moderator: relative power Mediator: victim cynicism DV: *forgiveness*
Zipay et al. (2021)	"Forgiveness is defined as a state brought on by the psychological process of releasing resentment, negativity, and condemnations of the event and replacing that negativity with positive emotions and thoughts (Bies et al., 2016; Enright, 1991; Green et al., 2008; McCullough et al., 1997)." (p. 364)	Study 3: 4 items from McCullough et al.'s (1997) measure of forgiveness [primarily cognition; 1 dimension; mixed valence; direct assessment]	IV: leniency Moderator: *forgiveness* Outcomes: pride, guilt

Notes: Content in brackets indicates the coding for forgiveness operationalizations (components, number of dimensions, valences assessed, and whether the operationalization includes a direct assessment). Since direct assessments can assess different things for different individuals (see Lawler-Row et al., 2007), when scales are predominately direct assessments, components are coded as unknown (i.e., left blank) and valences are coded as unclear. Mixed valence = positive and negative valences combined into a single dimension.

[a]In this article, it was not clear which variables were meant to be indicators of forgiveness (i.e., whether revenge, avoidance, and/or reconciliation were meant to be indicators of forgiveness).

these conceptualizations typically assess forgiveness as a single factor that collapses the different phenomena associated with forgiveness (i.e., negative and positive emotions, cognition, and behaviors) into a single scale score (see Enright & Rique, 2004; Worthington et al., 2015). This positions forgiveness as a single dimension in which decreasing negativity toward a transgressor is accompanied by a simultaneous increase in positivity.

3 | CONCEPTUAL REVIEW AND CRITICAL ANALYSIS OF FORGIVENESS RESEARCH IN OB

Given the variety of forgiveness conceptualizations that have emerged in the broader forgiveness literature as well as the burgeoning interest in forgiveness from organizational scholars (e.g., Barclay & Saldanha, 2015, 2016; Bies et al., 2016; Bobocel, 2013; Booth et al., 2018; Hershcovis et al., 2018; Zipay et al., 2021), we set out to review extant forgiveness research in the field of OB. We critically analyze how forgiveness has been conceptualized and measured in workplace contexts. In doing so, we examine whether and how conceptual differences evident in the broader forgiveness literature manifest in the OB literature. We also identify conceptual/measurement challenges and missed opportunities that may have arisen in the study of forgiveness in workplace contexts which may be preventing the literature from advancing toward a state of maturity.

To conduct our review, we searched the databases EBSCO Business Source Complete, ProQuest (ABI/Inform, PsycArticles, PsycInfo), and Web of Science for all articles using the term "forgiv*" and any of the terms "organization," "organisation," "organizational," "organisational," "workplace," "worker," "job," or "employee." The search was limited to English-language articles in peer-reviewed scholarly journals published at any time before June 2021. After the removal of duplicates, the search yielded 605 potential articles. These articles were then screened for inclusion in our review. To ensure that our critical analysis focused on forgiveness in the workplace, articles had to be related to forgiveness involving an interpersonal transgression and have a work-related focus (e.g., based on sample and/or context of study) to be included. Articles on non-focal concepts were excluded (e.g., self-forgiveness, receiving forgiveness, seeking forgiveness, trait-level forgiveness, forgiveness climate, and organizational-level forgiveness). In total, 66 articles remained after screening. Table 1 provides a detailed summary of the reviewed articles, including the definition of forgiveness, measures used (if applicable), and the variables that were examined in each article.

3.1 | Overview of the state of the forgiveness literature in OB

The first OB forgiveness article identified in our review was published in 1997. Since then, there has been a steady increase in the number

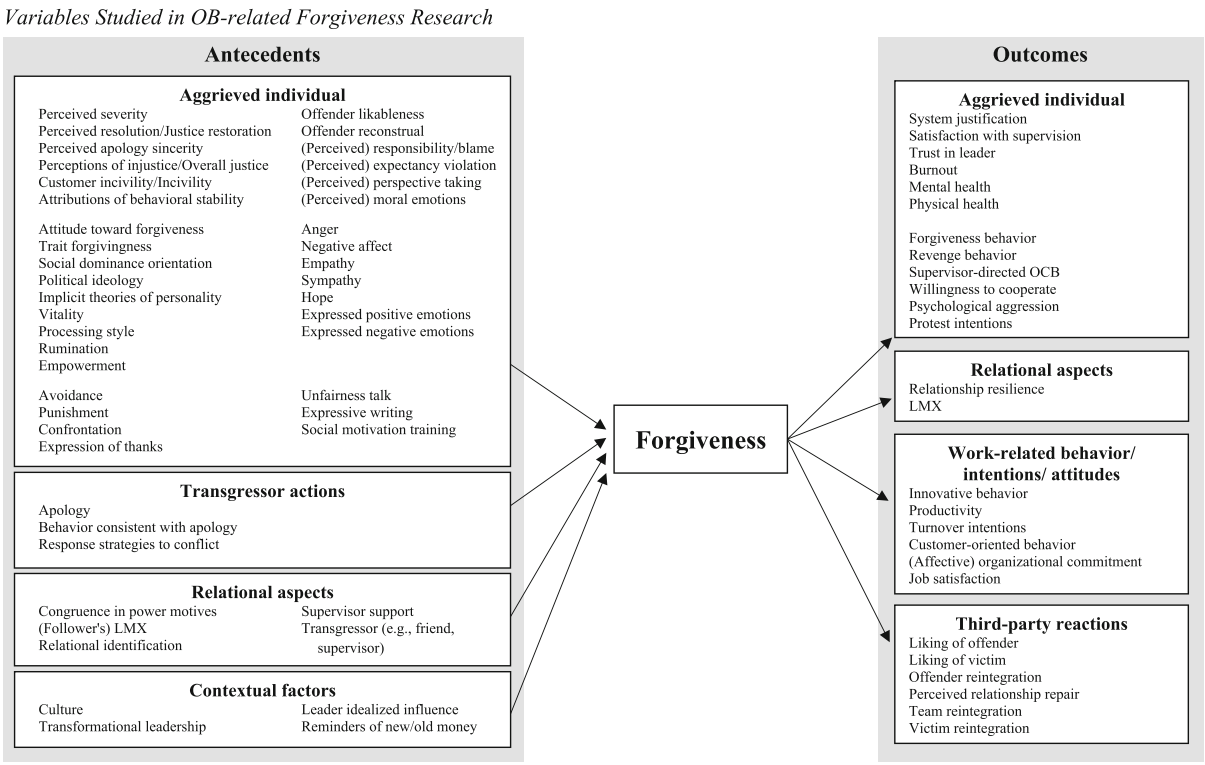

FIGURE 2 Variables studied in OB-related forgiveness research. *Note*: Mediating and moderating variables were included as antecedents or outcomes according to their positioning in the model. We did not include moderators that have not been explicitly hypothesized to relate to forgiveness, given that it is unclear whether and how they are expected to relate to forgiveness. For mediators, we considered both explicit and implicit hypotheses (e.g., cases where a mediation, but not the direct effects, were hypothesized)

of yearly publications, with roughly two-thirds of the reviewed articles being published within the last 10 years. Of the 66 reviewed articles there were 47 quantitative, 14 theoretical, 1 review, 1 case study, and 3 qualitative articles. As shown in Figure 2, empirical research has examined relationships between forgiveness and a variety of variables, including constructs that are specific to the workplace context (e.g., transformational leadership, leader member exchange, and job satisfaction).[3] Overall, the focus of the OB forgiveness literature has been on establishing the nomological network of forgiveness. While these empirical findings have highlighted the importance of understanding forgiveness in the workplace context, most of the relationships identified in this review have been studied only once (with a few exceptions, such as perceived apology sincerity and blame attributions). This suggests that knowledge on these relationships may still be relatively tentative.

Notably, most of the reviewed quantitative articles studied forgiveness as an outcome. More precisely, forgiveness was studied as an outcome in 27 articles, as a mediator in 10 articles, as a predictor in 4 articles, as a moderator in 1 article, as a control variable in 2 articles, and as a correlated variable (with no path model specification) in 3 articles. This has resulted in more knowledge related to the antecedents of forgiveness rather than the mechanisms or outcomes of forgiveness. Taken together, while knowledge on forgiveness in workplace contexts has increased over the years, the literature does not yet appear to have reached a mature state (see Edmondson & McManus, 2007).

3.2 | Critical analysis of forgiveness conceptualizations

Our review indicates that there are considerable differences in how forgiveness has been defined within the field of OB (see Table 1). Interestingly, published papers often define forgiveness using a combination of different conceptualizations rather than defining forgiveness using a single conceptualization. While this can provide a general "flavor" of the forgiveness construct, the lack of specificity is unlikely to foster conceptual clarity (see Podsakoff et al., 2016). Commonly cited conceptualizations include variants of McCullough et al. (1998), Aquino et al. (2006), and Enright and Human Development Study Group (1991), although a wide variety of other conceptualizations have also been used. Interestingly, 10 of the reviewed articles did not conceptually define forgiveness but instead relied on lay understandings of forgiveness.

Our critical analysis identified three key issues with forgiveness conceptualizations that appear to create challenges for OB forgiveness research. We discuss each of these issues below.

[3]For the variable-based review (see Figure 2), we focused on quantitative empirical articles and hypothesized effects (to account for relationships that are grounded on overt theorizing) that were empirically supported.

3.2.1 | Issue #1: Differences in forgiveness components can create conceptual confusion

There are considerable differences in which phenomena have been used to reflect forgiveness in empirical OB research (see Figure 1). Specifically, forgiveness has been conceptualized as a change in behavioral intentions, a change in behaviors, a change in emotions, a change in cognitions, or a change in multiple phenomena (e.g., some combination of intentions, behaviors, emotions, and/or cognitions). These differences can be problematic as each of these different phenomena typically occupies different spaces in theoretical models. For example, emotions are generally considered as being predictive of behaviors rather than being considered synonymous with behaviors (e.g., Lazarus, 1991; Weiss & Cropanzano, 1996).

Importantly, using a vast array of different phenomena to reflect forgiveness can raise validity issues and make it difficult to discern and interpret effects across studies. For example, Aquino et al. (2006) conceptualize forgiveness as a decrease in negative emotions toward a transgressor, while intentions/behaviors are considered distinct from forgiveness. By contrast, McCullough et al. (1998) position emotions (i.e., affect) as an antecedent to forgiveness, while forgiveness is indicated by intentions/behaviors. These two conceptualizations specify that forgiveness occurs in different locations within theoretical models. Specifically, what is seen as an *indicator* of forgiveness in one model is viewed as an *antecedent* or *outcome* of forgiveness in the other model. Conceptual differences such as these potentially interfere with the ability to accurately test the antecedents and outcomes of forgiveness. This problem is not restricted to these two conceptualizations and may be compounded by conceptualizations that specify forgiveness as a combination of phenomena (e.g., Enright & Human Development Study Group, 1991; Rye et al., 2001). In these conceptualizations, multiple causally distinct phenomena may be combined into a single variable (e.g., emotions combined with intentions/behaviors).

Taken together, the conceptual differences in extant forgiveness conceptualizations often render results noncomparable (i.e., "the findings from one research tradition are not directly analyzable in terms of the other"; Cropanzano et al., 2003, p. 833). This may limit the generalizability of findings across research traditions. Nevertheless, research findings stemming from such different research traditions are often lumped together under the umbrella term "forgiveness." This may obscure theoretical insights and limit the field's ability to produce clear, actionable advice.

3.2.2 | Issue #2: Forgiveness dimensionality has been inconsistent

Conceptualizations differ on whether forgiveness involves a decrease in negativity toward a transgressor, an increase in positivity toward a transgressor, or some combination of both. On the surface, this is a question of forgiveness valence. However, at its core, this is a disagreement about dimensionality, and whether changes in negativity

and positivity toward a transgressor should be combined into a single dimension or instead be conceptualized as multiple distinct dimensions, each with a unique pattern of relationships with other variables.

Importantly, differences in forgiveness dimensionality do not appear to be isolated to differences between conceptualizations. Instead, our review indicates that there is also considerable inconsistency in how dimensions have been used by researchers. An example of this can be seen in how empirical research has used the McCullough et al. (1998, 2002, 2006) forgiveness conceptualization. In this conceptualization, forgiveness is indicated by revenge, avoidance, and benevolence (with revenge and avoidance reflecting "negative" dimensions and benevolence reflecting a "positive" dimension). In our review, three articles were identified as studying forgiveness using two dimensions indicated by revenge and avoidance (e.g., Mok & De Cremer, 2015a); six articles collapsed revenge and avoidance into a single dimension (e.g., Kim et al., 2018); two articles studied forgiveness using three dimensions (i.e., revenge, avoidance, and benevolence; e.g., Strelan et al., 2008); three articles combined revenge, avoidance, and benevolence into a single dimension (e.g., Zheng et al., 2016); one article combined avoidance and benevolence into a single dimension (Basford et al., 2014); and four articles studied forgiveness using only benevolence as a single dimension (e.g., Zdaniuk & Bobocel, 2015).

Taken together, disagreements regarding the dimensionality of forgiveness are problematic because they can interfere with the accuracy of research and obscure insights into forgiveness. For example, if changes in negativity and positivity toward a transgressor are distinct phenomena that have different patterns of relationships with other variables (e.g., Fincham et al., 2005; McCullough & Hoyt, 2002), then combining them into a single dimension may result in contamination and decrease validity. By contrast, research that uses conceptualizations that only specify one valence (e.g., the release of negative emotions; Aquino et al., 2006) may result in deficiencies as research may overlook unique aspects of unstudied dimension(s). Differences in dimensionality across studies may also result in noncomparable results between studies, particularly when research combines dimensions in inconsistent ways.

3.2.3 | Issue #3: The use of intentions/behaviors as indicators of forgiveness is problematic

Our review indicates that the use of interpersonal intentions/behaviors as indicators of forgiveness is especially problematic for the OB literature because it can create theoretical confusion and/or obscure nomological networks. Indeed, OB scholars have argued that forgiveness is an internal experience that should be separated from external actions (e.g., behaviors, such as reconciliation; Aquino et al., 2001, 2006; Palanski, 2012). That is, forgiveness is an *intraindividual* phenomenon that is distinct from *interpersonal* actions. For example, aggrieved individuals may try to act positively toward the transgressor in the absence of forgiveness (e.g., if they are required to continue working together).

Importantly, organizational scholars have also taken great pains to distinguish between forgiveness, revenge, and avoidance since each of these conflict management strategies is important in their own right. However, this approach directly contrasts with the tendency for conceptualizations originating from social psychology to incorporate revenge and avoidance into forgiveness (e.g., McCullough et al., 1998, 2006). For example, our review indicated that 14 articles used revenge as an *indicator of forgiveness* (e.g., Stouten & Tripp, 2009) whereas 12 articles studied revenge alongside forgiveness but as a *distinct variable* (e.g., as an alternative outcome or mediator; Balaji et al., 2020; Bobocel, 2013; see Table 1). This ambiguity can create theoretical and conceptual confusion as well as make it more difficult to appreciate the distinctiveness of these conflict management strategies.

Distinguishing between these constructs is also critical to prevent conflating forgiveness with counterproductive work behaviors (CWBs). More precisely, CWBs are a commonly studied form of negative job performance that include undesirable behaviors, such as interpersonal aggression and conflict (Rotundo & Sackett, 2002). Within OB, revenge and avoidance are often studied under the umbrella of CWBs. For example, Dalal et al.'s (2009) commonly used CWB measure includes items that clearly incorporate avoidance (e.g., "Tried to avoid interacting with a coworker"). Avoidance has therefore been used as an indicator of both CWBs and forgiveness, thereby decreasing discriminant validity between the two constructs.

Adding to the confusion, some *forgiveness* measures that assess interpersonal intentions/behaviors have also been used to assess CWBs in *non-forgiveness* OB research. For example, Ferris et al. (2016) used items from the avoidance dimension of McCullough et al.'s (1998) forgiveness measure to assess avoidance-oriented CWBs. Similarly, Skarlicki et al. (2008) studied retaliation (a CWB) using the revenge subdimension of McCullough et al.'s (1998) forgiveness measure. In both examples, measures that are purported to assess forgiveness were used to assess CWBs, and not forgiveness. This problem is not isolated to revenge and avoidance; some conceptualizations treat positive behaviors/intentions (e.g., benevolence, reconciliation; e.g., McCullough et al., 2006) as indicators of forgiveness. This can also be problematic because it risks introducing variance related to citizenship behaviors (OCBs; see Rotundo & Sackett, 2002), another dimension of performance, into forgiveness measurement.

Given the importance of job performance in organizational behavior, it is vital that we study the relationship between forgiveness and CWBs/OCBs. However, this is difficult when interpersonal behavioral intentions/behaviors are used as indicators of forgiveness because this practice essentially confounds forgiveness with CWBs and/or OCBs.

3.3 | Critical analysis of forgiveness research measurement and methodology

Given that conceptual clarity issues often impact the way that constructs are studied (e.g., operationalizations; see Podsakoff et al., 2016), we also explore measurement and methodologies to better

understand the current conceptual challenges associated with forgiveness in organizational behavior. Our review indicates that the most commonly used forgiveness measures in OB forgiveness research have been variants of McCullough et al.'s (1998, 2002, 2006) scales, which use intentions and behaviors as indicators of forgiveness (19 articles). A variety of other scales have also been used, including direct assessments of forgiveness (13 articles); Aquino et al.'s (2006) forgiveness scale that focuses on the release of negative emotions (five articles); Rye et al.'s (2001) forgiveness scale that assesses cognitions, emotions, intentions, and behaviors (four articles); McCullough et al.'s (1997) forgiveness cognition scale (four articles); Bradfield and Aquino's (1999) forgiveness behavior scale (three articles); as well as other, less frequently used scales. With respect to methodologies, of the quantitative articles, the most commonly used methodologies were scenario studies (21), cross sectional surveys (20), and experiments/quasi-experiments (11). There were also six multi-wave surveys and two diary studies.[4]

Our critical analysis of forgiveness measures and methodologies identified several key issues. We discuss each of these below.

3.3.1 | Issue #4: Forgiveness is rarely studied as a process

While scholars have incorporated different elements into their conceptualizations of forgiveness, most forgiveness scholars seem to agree that forgiveness should be conceptualized as a process that unfolds over time. However, OB research rarely recognizes the process-oriented and temporal nature of forgiveness. Instead, most of the reviewed research uses cross-sectional survey designs or experimental/scenario study designs that assess a momentary snapshot of forgiveness. This can be problematic because these types of designs provide limited information regarding change. Consider a cross-sectional survey design that uses McCullough et al.'s (1998) measure of forgiveness. A "high" level of forgiveness on this scale (i.e., low level of revenge and avoidance toward a transgressor) may reflect a decrease in intentions/behaviors consistent with forgiveness or simply a weak reaction to the transgression. By not examining change over time, cross-sectional designs have limited ability to speak to whether forgiveness has occurred.

Although some cross-sectional forgiveness studies attempt to address this issue by using retrospective measures (e.g., assessing the degree to which negative emotions have been "let go"; Aquino et al., 2006), this strategy may not be compatible with studying forgiveness as it unfolds. While our review identified two articles that used repeated-measures survey designs (i.e., Beattie & Griffin, 2014; Booth et al., 2018), each survey wave assessed forgiveness related to a different transgression, providing little insight into how the forgiveness process for a single transgression unfolds over time. Our review also identified six multi-wave studies—however, forgiveness was measured in just one of the waves, and therefore, these studies do not assess change over time.

Overall, the lack of OB research that examines forgiveness as a process that occurs over time reflects a misalignment between conceptualization and operationalization, which has therefore limited our understanding of forgiveness.

3.3.2 | Issue #5: Most extant forgiveness measures have significant validity issues

Our analysis indicates that most extant forgiveness measures have validity issues that may limit their measurement precision. One common problem is that measures often include items which assess conceptually distinct constructs. For example, extant forgiveness scales used in OB research include items that appear to assess rumination, trust, depression, reconciliation, and CWBs, among others (e.g., Aquino et al., 2006; Enright & Human Development Study Group, 1991; McCullough et al., 1998, 2006; Rye et al., 2001). This is problematic because it may create construct validity issues (e.g., introduce construct contamination) that can decrease the accuracy of observed relationships between forgiveness and other constructs (e.g., its antecedents and outcomes) (see Podsakoff et al., 2016). Measures also often combine decreases in negativity and increases in positivity toward a transgressor into a single scale score, which can fail to recognize important distinctions between these phenomena (see Lindquist et al., 2016). Thus, critical challenges facing the forgiveness literature include ensuring alignment between conceptualization and operationalization as well as construct validity (e.g., decreasing potential contamination by related constructs).

3.3.3 | Issue #6: Direct assessments of forgiveness are problematic

Another measurement issue is that forgiveness is often operationalized using direct assessments that include the word "forgive" (example item: "I have forgiven him/her"). In some cases, direct assessments are included as single items in longer scales. However, our review also identified 13 articles where a direct assessment was the primary measure (see Table 1). The use of direct assessments is problematic because the word forgiveness can mean different things to different participants. For example, Lawler-Row et al. (2007) found that participants differed in whether they associated the word forgiveness with changes in emotions, cognitions, behaviors, or attitudes. Participants also differed in whether they saw forgiveness as a letting go of negativity, enhancing positivity, or both. This is problematic because direct assessments may lack measurement equivalence (i.e., people may respond to direct assessments differently based on their lay theories of forgiveness), which can decrease measurement precision, and obscure relationships between forgiveness and other constructs. This may also undermine attempts to understand the distinct nomological networks associated with a reduction in negativity versus an enhancement in positivity.

[4]Counts are larger than the number of articles because some articles included more than one study/methodology.

3.3.4 | Issue #7: Some forgiveness measures use difference scores to assess change

Finally, forgiveness is sometimes operationalized as the degree to which one has "let go" of negativity (example item: "I let go of the negative feelings I had against them"; Aquino et al., 2006). To assess the degree to which they have "let go," respondents must perform a mental subtraction between their prior and current levels of negativity, resulting in a difference score. Difference scores are problematic because they artificially constrain regression coefficients, thereby decreasing measurement accuracy and weakening observed relationships between variables (Edwards, 2001). Although researchers often think of difference scores as being created when researchers subtract variables during analysis, Edwards (2001) warns that scales in which respondents implicitly or explicitly compute differences suffer from the same issues as researcher-calculated difference scores because the issues with difference scores "do not depend on whether the respondent or the researcher calculates the difference" (p. 268). Thus, while it is important to capture change to reflect forgiveness as a process, it is also critical to ensure that the manner in which this is done does not introduce the problems associated with difference scores.

3.4 | Summary

Taken together, our critical analysis identified numerous conceptual and methodological issues related to the study of forgiveness in workplace settings. Moreover, our analysis indicates that no single extant forgiveness conceptualization addresses all the issues. Given the importance of forgiveness to individual and organizational functioning, it is vital that these issues are addressed. With this in mind, we seek to clarify the key elements of forgiveness and address challenges in the field by offering a new conceptualization of forgiveness.

4 | CLARIFYING THE CONCEPTUALIZATION OF FORGIVENESS

Forgiveness researchers have traditionally agreed that, at its core, forgiveness represents an *intraindividual* process of change. Forgiveness therefore occurs within an aggrieved individual and is not dependent upon interaction with a transgressor. Indeed, forgiveness can be an important and functional process even if an aggrieved individual never has interactions with a transgressor again. This is important because it indicates that *interpersonal* behaviors/intentions are unlikely to be the core elements of forgiveness. Consistent with this, our analysis indicates that when behaviors/intentions (e.g., revenge, avoidance) are positioned as indicators of forgiveness, it can create significant challenges for forgiveness research, including creating confusion regarding the relationship between forgiveness and its behavioral outcomes (e.g., CWBs; see Critical Issue #3 above). As such, shifting focus away from behaviors/intentions and toward emotions and cognitions as core elements of forgiveness may help address these issues.

Specifically, we argue that forgiveness can be seen as a special case of emotion regulation. Emotion regulation refers to the goal-directed process by which individuals attempt to influence what, when, and how emotions are experienced (Gross, 1998, 2015). At its core, emotion regulation reflects an *intraindividual* process that positions *emotions* and *cognitions* as core elements. In emotion regulation, individuals have a current emotional state and a desired emotional state which corresponds to how they want to feel (e.g., "I want to feel happy"; Mauss & Tamir, 2014). When there is a discrepancy between how they currently feel and how they want to feel, they can engage in emotion regulation strategies to change their emotions over time to reduce the discrepancy (Naragon-Gainey et al., 2017).

Viewing forgiveness through an emotion regulation lens is an exciting opportunity to leverage theory in the conceptualization of forgiveness. This is important because forgiveness conceptualizations have historically been atheoretical in nature. Indeed, the roots of many forgiveness conceptualizations/operationalizations can be traced back to inductive studies where the construct was informed by laypeople's understandings of forgiveness (e.g., Wade, 1989). However, this practice can lead to conceptual difficulties because there is considerable confusion among laypeople regarding the nature of forgiveness (Lawler-Row et al., 2007). We propose that leveraging theory in the conceptualization of forgiveness can enhance conceptual clarity by identifying and parsimoniously capturing the key elements of forgiveness (e.g., emotions and cognitions). We now overview and then discuss how this conceptualization can help address the conceptual issues that were identified in our critical analysis.

4.1 | Reconceptualizing forgiveness using emotion regulation

Building on an emotion regulation theoretical foundation, we define forgiveness as emotion regulation that occurs in the context of an interpersonal transgression in which negative emotions toward a transgressor are decreased and/or positive emotions toward a transgressor are increased. Importantly, at its core, forgiveness involves a process of intraindividual change in which an individual improves their emotions toward a transgressor. Forgiveness is therefore not a singular act (e.g., "I forgive you") but rather involves setting emotion goals and then regulating the trajectory of one's emotions toward reaching these goals over time. As discussed below, this regulation can be facilitated by the use of emotion regulation strategies.

As shown in Figure 3, there are two core elements in a forgiveness process: a *current emotional state* which corresponds to how an aggrieved individual currently feels toward a transgressor and a *desired emotional state* which corresponds to how the individual wants to feel (i.e., an emotion goal). Importantly, whereas a current emotional state is an emotional component of forgiveness, a desired emotional state is a *cognitive* component of forgiveness. For example, an aggrieved individual may currently feel a high degree of negative emotions toward a transgressor but may want to feel no negative emotions. In this case, the individual's desired emotional state (wanting no

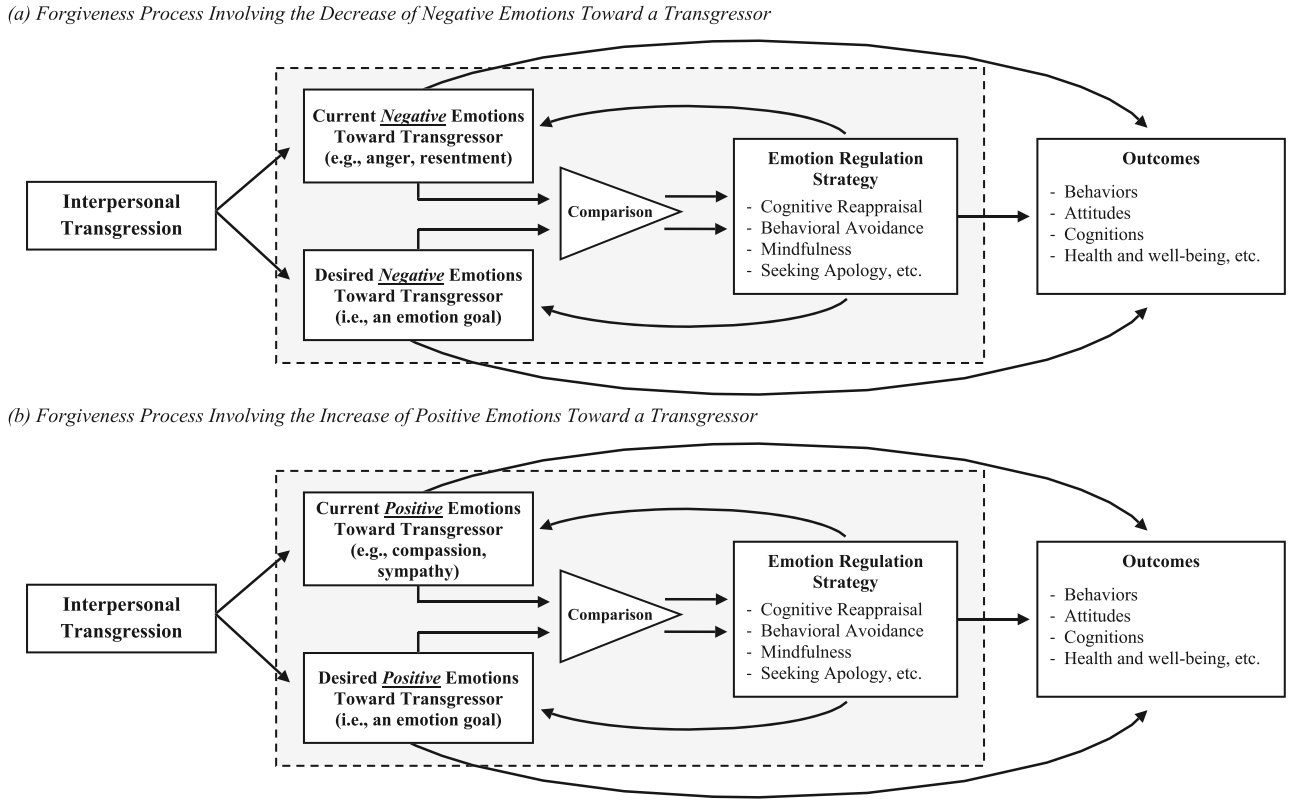

FIGURE 3 (a) Forgiveness process involving the decrease of negative emotions toward a transgressor. (b) Forgiveness process involving the increase of positive emotions toward a transgressor. *Note*: The regulation of (a) negative and (b) positive emotions correspond to two distinct forgiveness processes. When individuals consciously or nonconsciously recognize a discrepancy between their current and desired emotions (i.e., their emotion goal), they can engage in emotion regulation strategies to facilitate forgiveness. Note that the comparison is included for visualization purposes only and not as a predictor. Instead, the current and desired emotions are unique predictors of the emotion regulation strategy. Recursive arrows from the outcomes to the forgiveness process have been excluded to reduce visual complexity

negative emotions) is a cognitive representation of how the individual *wants to feel* (Mauss & Tamir, 2014).

When an individual (consciously or nonconsciously) desires to improve their emotions toward a transgressor (i.e., when they detect a discrepancy between their current emotional state and their desired emotional state), then they are engaging in a forgiveness process. More precisely, an aggrieved individual can engage in emotion regulation to change how they feel toward a transgressor over time (e.g., they can reduce their negative emotions or increase their positive emotions toward a transgressor). For example, an individual who wants to decrease their negative emotions toward a transgressor is engaged in a forgiveness process. In this case, there is a discrepancy between the individual's current emotional state and their desired emotional state. To reduce this discrepancy, the individual can engage in one or more emotion regulation strategies to improve their emotions (see Figure 3). For example, individuals may engage in a cognitive reappraisal strategy in which they reappraise the transgression to develop a different understanding of the transgression (e.g., that it may not have been intentional). This may decrease their current negative emotions toward the transgressor (Gross, 2015), thereby reducing the discrepancy between current and desired emotions.

A variety of emotion regulation strategies have been identified, including acceptance, avoidance, cognitive reappraisal, distraction, mindfulness, rumination, and suppression, among others (Naragon-Gainey et al., 2017). These emotion regulation strategies can be intraindividual, interpersonal, cognitive, or even behavioral in nature. For example, an aggrieved individual may cognitively reappraise a transgression as an intraindividual strategy or seek an apology from a transgressor as an interpersonal strategy. Notably, the effectiveness of emotion regulation strategies can be highly context dependent (Naragon-Gainey et al., 2017). Indeed, individuals often misregulate their emotions by engaging in ineffective emotion regulation strategies (Gross, 2015). This is consistent with forgiveness often being complex and difficult to achieve.

4.1.1 | Two distinct forgiveness processes

In this conceptualization, forgiveness encompasses two distinct processes corresponding to the regulation of negative and positive emotions. The forgiveness process for negative emotions is associated with *decreasing* discrete negative emotions toward a transgressor (e.g., anger, resentment). By contrast, the forgiveness process for positive emotions is associated with *increasing* discrete positive emotions (e.g., compassion and sympathy) toward a transgressor. We focus on the constellations of anger and compassion emotions because they are both other-directed discrete emotions that can reflect one's

emotional response to a transgressor and because they have been consistently suggested in the broader forgiveness literature as the core emotional components of forgiveness (e.g., Aquino et al., 2001, 2003, 2006; Enright & Human Development Study Group, 1991; Worthington & Scherer, 2004).

By incorporating both negative and positive emotions, our conceptualization is consistent with a core theme in the literature in which forgiveness is characterized by a decrease in negativity and an increase in positivity toward a transgressor (e.g., Enright & Human Development Study Group, 1991; Fincham et al., 2005; McCullough, Hoyt, & Rachal, 2000; McCullough, Pargament, & Thoresen, 2000). However, whereas some conceptualizations and some operationalizations treat decreasing negativity and increasing positivity as two ends of a single forgiveness dimension, we argue that it is critical to conceptually and empirically treat the regulation of negative and positive emotions as distinct forgiveness processes. This is consistent with emotions research, which recognizes that negative and positive emotions are not polar opposites, but rather distinct phenomena with unique nomological networks (e.g., Fredrickson, 2001). This distinction is also consistent with recent research which has indicated that negative and positive emotions are associated with different brain regions and should be treated as distinct systems or processes (see Lindquist et al., 2016). Moreover, previous theory and findings from the forgiveness literature suggest that positive and negative dimensions of forgiveness have different nomological networks (e.g., Fincham et al., 2005; Strelan et al., 2008).

Importantly, because the two forgiveness processes are distinct, aggrieved individuals can engage in either one or both forgiveness processes. For example, people may attempt to reduce negative emotions toward a transgressor without attempting to increase positive emotions. Alternatively, people may engage in both processes simultaneously, each with differing desired emotional states and emotion regulation strategies. The two forgiveness processes are also likely to have unique relationships with other variables, consistent with nomological differences between negative and positive emotions. Thus, it is expected that the forgiveness processes for negative and positive emotions have differing antecedents, mechanisms, and outcomes.

4.2 | Addressing key challenges to forgiveness research in OB

We argue that an emotion regulation conceptualization of forgiveness can parsimoniously address the key challenges to forgiveness research that were identified in our review. First, our critical analysis indicated that there is confusion regarding which phenomena are involved in forgiveness (i.e., emotions, cognitions, behaviors, and/or intentions; Critical Issue #1). This conceptualization clarifies the role of emotions and cognition (i.e., current emotions and desired emotions) as key components in forgiveness. Importantly, our conceptualization disentangles forgiveness from other constructs (e.g., rumination; Critical Issue #5). Further, behaviors and/or intentions are removed from the forgiveness construct and instead positioned as regulation strategies or forgiveness outcomes. In doing so, this conceptualization clarifies the roles of emotions, cognitions, and behaviors and how they each relate to the process of forgiveness.

Second, this conceptualization clarifies forgiveness dimensionality (Critical Issue #2) by accounting for the idea that forgiveness can include both decreases in negativity and increases in positivity toward a transgressor (e.g., Enright & Human Development Study Group, 1991; Fincham et al., 2005; McCullough et al., 1997, 1998). This conceptualization also enhances clarity related to the dimensionality of forgiveness by specifying that these phenomena correspond to distinct emotion regulation processes (distinct processes for negative versus positive emotions toward the transgressor).

Third, this conceptualization addresses the problematic nature of using behaviors and intentions as indicators of forgiveness (Critical Issue #3). Specifically, behaviors and intentions are positioned as emotion regulation strategies (e.g., avoidance as an emotion regulation strategy; Naragon-Gainey et al., 2017) or as outcomes rather than indicators of forgiveness. In doing so, this conceptualization can distinguish forgiveness from revenge, avoidance, and job performance (e.g., CWBs and OCBs) (Critical Issue #5).

Fourth, our analysis indicated that OB forgiveness research rarely studies forgiveness as a process (Critical Issue #4). We argue that viewing forgiveness through an emotion regulation lens reveals the theoretical and empirical importance of distinguishing between negatively and positively valenced forgiveness processes. Moreover, this conceptualization enables researchers to make theoretically derived predictions regarding how the processes function. For example, this conceptualization highlights how emotion regulation strategies can be used to bring current emotions into alignment with desired emotions (or further away from each other in the case of misregulation), which provides insight into how the process can unfold. This enables a variety of exciting future research opportunities regarding the study of how forgiveness processes function and how forgiveness can be managed (discussed more below).

Finally, our analysis indicated that extant measures of forgiveness have a variety of issues that can affect their appropriateness for research in OB (Critical Issues #5, 6, and 7). By contrast, reconceptualizing forgiveness as an emotion regulation process identifies the key components of forgiveness. This provides the conceptual basis for operationalizing forgiveness while also removing the need for direct assessments (Critical Issue #6) or difference scores (Critical Issue #7).[5] Taken together, an emotion regulation perspective provides a strong methodological path forward for measuring forgiveness that can also enhance alignment between conceptualization, theorizing, and the operationalization of forgiveness.

[5]Theoretically, emotion regulation typically occurs when a discrepancy between one's current and desired states is consciously or nonconsciously detected (e.g., Mauss & Tamir, 2014). However, it is more informative to assess people's current and desired emotions rather than empirically assessing the "comparison," which would require a participant-calculated or researcher-calculated difference score (see Edwards, 2001). Importantly, current emotions and desired emotions are seen as distinct predictors of emotion regulation strategies and outcomes in this conceptualization. We therefore recommend that researchers assess people's current and desired emotions and treat them as unique variables. This eliminates the need for a difference score, thereby enhancing research precision and criterion-related validity (see Edwards, 2001).

5 | A PATH FORWARD AND RESEARCH AGENDA

Building on the above, we now highlight how viewing forgiveness through an emotion regulation lens can provide a path forward and research agenda for the forgiveness literature. We begin our discussion by identifying key research themes that offer exciting opportunities for future forgiveness research. We conclude with a discussion of practical implications.

5.1 | Opportunity #1: Studying forgiveness as a process

While the literature has long recognized that forgiveness is a process of change, our critical analysis indicates that very little OB research has examined forgiveness as a process. We argue that viewing forgiveness through an emotion regulation lens creates considerable opportunities for research contributions that can enhance our knowledge of how workplace forgiveness processes unfold, including how people forgive, the effect of desired emotions on forgiveness processes, and the role of time in forgiveness.

5.1.1 | Studying how people forgive

Viewing forgiveness through an emotion regulation lens provides exciting new opportunities to examine *how* people forgive, including how forgiveness can be facilitated and hindered in organizations. Importantly, the emotion regulation literature has identified numerous emotion regulation strategies, such as acceptance, mindfulness, and suppression, to name a few (for a meta-analytic review, see Naragon-Gainey et al., 2017). We argue that these emotion regulation strategies can serve as key enablers of the forgiveness process. Indeed, these strategies are important because they can influence one's current emotions and desired emotions. For example, cognitively reappraising a transgression (e.g., identifying situational factors that may have created the transgression rather than blaming the transgressor) may facilitate forgiveness by impacting current emotion levels or by changing one's desired emotions (i.e., emotion goals).

Although emotion regulation strategies can promote forgiveness, there is also the potential that some emotion regulation strategies may lead to misregulation—that is, "regulating in ways that are harmful rather than helpful" (Gross, 2015, p. 14). This is consistent with the idea that the process of forgiveness can be difficult, with setbacks often occurring along the way. With this in mind, there is considerable opportunity to examine the effectiveness of individual emotion regulation strategies, including when specific strategies are functional or dysfunctional.

Importantly, by specifying that behaviors/intentions do not reflect forgiveness but are rather emotion regulation strategies or outcomes, our conceptualization enables a more comprehensive and nuanced examination of how individuals forgive. For example, whereas previous conceptualizations often position avoidance as an indicator of how much someone forgives (e.g., McCullough et al., 2006), our conceptualization suggests that avoidance is *distinct* from forgiveness and may be used as an emotion regulation strategy. This enables the study of *when* avoidance is functional or dysfunctional to forgiveness. For example, an employee may choose to avoid a colleague who has transgressed against them until they can decrease their negative emotions. In this case, avoidance can serve as an emotion regulation strategy that can facilitate forgiveness and may be especially effective in the short term when the employee is concerned about exercising self-control (e.g., preventing an outburst that can escalate conflict; Duckworth et al., 2016).[6] This highlights the importance of disentangling avoidance from forgiveness because avoidance may sometimes *facilitate* forgiveness rather than simply indicate an absence of forgiveness.[7]

There are also exciting opportunities to examine the effectiveness of emotion regulation strategies that are unique to the workplace forgiveness context and/or that may be impacted by the workplace context. For example, employees often feel the need to suppress negative emotions in the workplace to support short-term organizational goals (e.g., Fitness, 2000). However, suppression may make it more difficult to downregulate these emotions and can have negative health implications.

Taken together, there are considerable opportunities to investigate the effect that intraindividual and interpersonal emotion regulation strategies can have on forgiveness processes. By highlighting the role of emotion regulation strategies, our conceptualization can enhance our understanding of how individuals forgive as well as how forgiveness can be facilitated and/or hindered within organizations.

5.1.2 | Studying the effect of desired emotions

Although it is often assumed that individuals avoid aversive emotional states (e.g., anger), research has shown that individuals may desire to feel aversive emotions when it has utility for their longer-term goals (Tamir, 2009). That is, people often want to feel emotions that they expect to be useful, even when those emotions are not pleasurable in the short-term (Tamir, 2016; Tamir et al., 2015). For example, individuals who anticipate subsequent confrontation may want to feel anger because this may improve their performance during the confrontation (Tamir et al., 2008; Tamir & Ford, 2012). In the context of forgiveness, an aggrieved individual may desire to sustain some or all of their

[6]We thank an anonymous reviewer for this insight.

[7]Similar to avoidance, revenge may also serve as an emotion regulation strategy that can impact forgiveness processes. For example, rather than precluding forgiveness, revenge may sometimes foster forgiveness by enabling people to decrease their current negative emotions or lower their desired level of negative emotions. For example, revenge may reestablish social norms (e.g., Tripp & Bies, 1997), thereby enabling individuals to set a desired emotional state that has a low level of negative emotions and focus on regulating toward this state. Alternatively, under different circumstances (e.g., when there is potential for a feud to emerge; Tripp & Bies, 2010), revenge may lead people to set a new desired emotional state characterized by higher levels of negative emotions. This suggests that revenge could be either functional or dysfunctional to forgiveness depending upon the specific context. However, examining these possibilities is only possible when revenge is treated as being distinct from forgiveness.

negative emotions in anticipation of future conflict or to maintain vigilance if the transgressor is a perceived (ongoing) threat (Baumeister et al., 1998). That is, an individual may choose not to fully forgive (e.g., let go of negative emotions) if retaining some level of negative emotions has perceived utility. Similarly, aggrieved individuals may desire to have varying levels of positive emotions toward a transgressor, depending upon the perceived level of utility of positive emotions in the specific context. Whereas extant forgiveness conceptualizations generally assume that aggrieved individuals are trying to completely forgive (i.e., they desire no negativity and/or a high level of positivity toward a transgressor), our conceptualization can parsimoniously capture differences in the degree to which they want to forgive a transgressor (i.e., differences in desired emotions).

When forgiveness is viewed through an emotion regulation lens, it also opens up new opportunities to examine the effect of desired emotions on forgiveness processes. For example, researchers can study the effect of desired emotions (e.g., how much one wants to forgive) on the choice of emotion regulation strategies (i.e., how one is attempting to forgive) and the degree to which emotion regulation strategies are functional for forgiveness (see Figure 3). In some cases, it may be better for individuals to have realistic desired emotions (e.g., a goal of moderate negative emotions toward a transgressor) rather than unrealistic or aspirational desired emotions (e.g., a goal of having no negative emotions toward a transgressor). This is because unrealistic emotion goals may prompt strategies that are incompatible with the reality of the workplace context (e.g., when there are likely to be future offenses). However, in other cases, aspirational levels of desired emotions may promote cognitive reappraisal or sensemaking that may help reframe a transgression, thereby facilitating forgiveness.

There are also opportunities to examine cases in which current emotions or emotion regulation strategies impact an individual's level of desired emotions over time, either facilitating or impeding a forgiveness process. For example, individuals with high levels of negative emotions toward a transgressor may engage in acceptance as an emotion regulation strategy (Naragon-Gainey et al., 2017). In this case, they may adjust their desired emotions to match their current emotion level. This may lead them to abandon forgiveness processes, choosing to instead retain their less-than-ideal emotions toward a transgressor (e.g., they may choose to hold a grudge rather than forgive).

Adopting an emotion regulation perspective also highlights the importance of studying contextual factors (both internal and external) that can influence individuals' desired emotions. For example, forgiveness motives (see Cox et al., 2012) may prompt disparate desired emotions. Whereas individuals who feel like they have no alternative but to forgive may set a desired emotion state characterized by a moderate level of negative emotions, those who believe forgiveness is the right thing to do may set desired emotion states characterized by low levels of negative and high levels of positive emotions. As another example, the existence of a close relationship prior to the transgression (e.g., Finkel et al., 2002) may lead people to set desired emotion states characterized by low levels of negative and high levels of positive emotions.

Overall, adopting the idea that individuals have varying levels of desired emotions and that desired emotions can change over time recognizes that forgiveness processes are likely to be idiosyncratic (e.g., not everyone will want to fully forgive), and opens up a wide range of research questions that can provide deeper insights into the functioning of forgiveness processes. This can increase our ability to provide actionable advice to individuals and organizations.

5.1.3 | Studying the role of time in forgiveness

Extant forgiveness research typically does not examine a temporal component (e.g., only assesses a current state) or is backward-looking (e.g., examines the degree to which someone has "forgiven"). By contrast, our conceptualization examines forgiveness as a forward-looking process (i.e., regulating current and desired emotions to bring them into alignment). We argue that this distinction highlights the temporal nature of forgiveness and provides new opportunities to study the role of time in forgiveness. This strategy can also enhance precision and clarify relationships with outcomes. For example, a forward-looking conceptualization is likely to be more predictive of subsequent emotion regulation strategies and outcomes because assessments of one's current and future states can more accurately predict one's current attitudes and behaviors than retrospective assessments (see Shipp et al., 2009). For example, an employee's current well-being is likely to be better predicted by where they currently are in the process of forgiveness rather than whether they have "forgiven" in the past. This may also expand the outcomes that can be investigated.

By enabling a more precise examination of emotion regulation strategies, our conceptualization also creates opportunities to examine whether certain emotion regulation strategies are more effective at differing times in the forgiveness process. For example, cognitive reappraisals may be more effective early in a forgiveness process if individuals can cognitively reframe the transgression before misregulation can occur. Importantly, our conceptualization highlights that forgiveness is a complex and potentially long-term process, suggesting that it may be necessary for individuals to utilize multiple emotion regulation strategies over time (e.g., to bring current and desired emotions into alignment, to maintain alignment, or to recover from misregulation). With this in mind, there are also opportunities to examine the temporal ordering of emotion regulation strategies, as some strategies may be particularly effective when they follow other specific strategies that were active earlier in the forgiveness process.

Our forgiveness conceptualization includes both emotional (i.e., current emotions) and cognitive elements (i.e., desired emotions and some emotion regulation strategies). The role of cognition in our conceptualization suggests that there may also be opportunities to examine the effect that perceptions of time can have on forgiveness processes. Whereas previous research focuses on "clock time" (e.g., "time heals all wounds"; Wohl & McGrath, 2007), an emotion regulation perspective provides insights into how subjective time may detract from forgiveness and how to manage these effects. For example, ruminating about a transgression may make the transgression feel

subjectively close. This may intensify current negative emotions, impact desired emotions, and consume regulatory resources as aggrieved individuals try to regulate these emotions. By contrast, mindfulness may make the transgression seem more distant, thereby enhancing forgiveness.

Viewing forgiveness through the lens of emotion regulation also helps recognize the presence of dynamic regulatory feedback loops. This can provide insight into how a forgiveness process influences and is influenced by one's reactions and the surrounding context.[8] This also creates the opportunity to examine how forgiveness processes may be impacted over time by additional events from the same transgressor. Moreover, this perspective suggests that the process of forgiveness may be impacted by the frequency with which it is employed. On the one hand, the more that forgiveness processes are used, the easier it may be to achieve. Further, individuals' regulatory acumen may influence the speed of forgiveness (e.g., those who have developed strong emotion regulation skills may be able to more quickly align their current and desired emotions). On the other hand, individuals may become more reticent to engage in forgiveness when it is feels like it is being overused or if it is not having the intended benefits.

This perspective also enables deeper insights into the study of forgiveness in the broader context of aggrieved individuals' relationship with their offenders. For example, it is possible that individuals may develop higher levels of positive emotions toward their transgressor than they experienced prior to the transgression. That is, setting desired emotion states characterized by high levels of positive emotions may prompt engagement in cognitive reappraisal focused on identifying positive aspects in the situation (Naragon-Gainey et al., 2017). Over time, this may lead to higher levels of experienced positive emotions than previously experienced.[9]

Taken together, viewing forgiveness through an emotion regulation lens incorporates time into the construct and also provides a theoretical basis for understanding how time is likely to impact the process of forgiveness. This enables a more detailed examination of forgiveness as an ongoing process by capturing forgiveness processes as they occur, thereby facilitating the examination of how and when emotion regulation strategies, interventions, and moderators affect forgiveness over time—that is, an emotion regulation perspective explicitly incorporates time into the "what, how, and why" (see George & Jones, 2000) of forgiveness.

5.2 | Opportunity #2: Studying two distinct forgiveness processes

By identifying two distinct emotion regulation *processes* (i.e., distinguishing between forgiveness involving negative vs. positive emotions), our conceptualization highlights the possibility that these processes may have unique antecedents, mechanisms, and outcomes. When forgiveness is viewed in this way, it creates a variety of exciting new research opportunities. Instead of stressing similarities between forgiveness dimensions, important contributions can be made by examining the unique aspects of each forgiveness process. For example, it may be fruitful to examine unique antecedents that impact whether an individual engages in either or both processes. Similarly, examining the unique outcomes from each process may shed light on how each process can impact different forms of job performance (e.g., task performance, counterproductive behaviors, and citizenship behaviors; Rotundo & Sackett, 2002). For example, the forgiveness process involving positive emotions may be particularly effective in the promotion of citizenship behaviors given that this process focuses on the enhancement of approach-oriented (positive) discrete emotions toward a transgressor (Lazarus, 1991).

There are also exciting opportunities to examine the interplay between the two forgiveness processes. Prior research has suggested that individuals can experience ambivalence toward a transgressor (i.e., high negativity along with high positivity toward a transgressor; Fincham et al., 2005) and that this may be dysfunctional. This suggests that it is also important to examine the effect that the processes can have on each other, including whether the processes can come into conflict. For example, the emotion regulation strategies and outcomes for one forgiveness process may have a beneficial or detrimental impact on the effective functioning of the other. With this in mind, it may be especially helpful to examine when it is important to engage in one rather than the other process and whether there are ideal temporal orderings of the two processes. Taken together, better understanding the distinctions between the processes and their interplay may enhance theoretical insights and practical guidance regarding how to forgive.

5.3 | Opportunity #3: Studying forgiveness interventions

Although interventions have been developed to facilitate forgiveness in clinical settings and with trained counselors (for meta-analytic reviews, see Baskin & Enright, 2004; Wade et al., 2014), few interventions are available for nonclinical populations and organizational settings (for an exception, see Barclay & Saldanha, 2016). We propose that an emotion regulation perspective can provide opportunities and insights that can guide the development of novel forgiveness-related interventions that are appropriate for organizational settings.

At the most basic level, interventions can educate individuals on what forgiveness is (i.e., emotion regulation processes involving the decrease in negative emotions and/or the increase in positive emotions toward a transgressor). This may help address the confusion that lay people can have regarding the nature of forgiveness (Lawler-Row et al., 2007). It may also reduce resistance to engaging in forgiveness by helping individuals see forgiveness as a viable and important

[8]For instance, if one engages in revenge or if the transgressor offers an apology, the individual may experience a recalibration of the current and/or desired emotional states. In turn, this can impact the need to engage in regulation and the emotion regulation strategies that are likely to be effective. Thus, although forgiveness is an *intraindividual* process, this theoretical foundation provides insight into how the external context can impact it.

[9]We thank an anonymous reviewer for this insight.

option. Further, it may help provide individuals with realistic expectations of how forgiveness unfolds (e.g., that it can be difficult and may take considerable time) as well as provide knowledge that can maximize the likelihood that they can successfully forgive.

There are also opportunities for interventions that target specific components in the forgiveness processes (see Figure 3). For example, it may be beneficial for interventions to target desired emotional states (i.e., emotion goals). This type of intervention may help individuals choose which forgiveness process(es) they should engage in (e.g., whether they should attempt to regulate positive and/or negative emotions) and help individuals choose an ideal/functional level of desired emotions for their specific situation. Interventions may also train individuals on emotion regulation strategies, teaching them how to limit their use of dysfunctional strategies in favor of engaging in strategies that are more likely to be functional. This may also involve educating individuals on how to be more effective at a specific forgiveness-related emotion regulation strategy (e.g., mindfulness training). Interventions may also be designed to target contextual factors in an attempt to enhance factors that facilitate forgiveness or to remove factors that are likely to interfere with forgiveness (e.g., remove factors that promote misregulation).

Taken together, developing a strong theoretical understanding of forgiveness processes can facilitate practical guidance on how to manage and foster forgiveness. Given that a goal of scientific research is to enhance well-being and effectiveness in organizations and broader society (e.g., Tsui, 2021), this is an especially important advantage of applying an emotion regulation perspective to forgiveness.

5.4 | Opportunity #4: Integrating context and contextualizing forgiveness for the workplace

The OB literature has highlighted the importance of examining contextual factors, especially those that are unique to the workplace context. For example, Bies et al. (2016) made a compelling argument for recognizing that forgiveness can be embedded in many contextual layers in organizational settings, with each layer having its own contextual factors that need to be considered. This "system" includes contextual layers related to the dyad (e.g., power differences and reparations), group (e.g., group identity), organization (e.g., dispute mechanisms and organizational policies), and broader cultural context (e.g., honor cultures). Similarly, Fehr and Gelfand (2012) argue that organizations can create forgiveness climates, which reflect shared perceptions related to the value and importance of forgiveness in the organization.

Although contextual factors are critical for understanding forgiveness in organizational settings, it has been less clear *how* these contextual factors can influence forgiveness. However, we argue that an emotion regulation perspective provides exciting opportunities to integrate the underlying forgiveness processes with the contextual layers in which the processes are embedded. From an emotion regulation perspective, contextual factors may be influential for employees' current emotions, desired emotions, and the strategies that they may use to achieve desired emotions. For example, employees' negative emotions toward the transgressor may be amplified when the transgression not only impacts them but also violates organizational norms.

An emotion regulation perspective may also be especially helpful for understanding how to facilitate and manage forgiveness within an organizational context. For example, a strong forgiveness climate may encourage employees to set a low desired level for negative emotions and decrease negative emotions to align with the organization's values. Acknowledging one's desire to decrease negative emotions may guide the employee toward organizational strategies that can facilitate this process (e.g., reaching out to a trusted supervisor or employee support program; Bies et al., 2018). As another example, organizational contexts are unique in that they often require the parties to continue working together in the aftermath of an offense to achieve a common goal (Aquino et al., 2003). This suggests the need for strategies that can help employees deal with the situation in the short term and in the long term—for example, mitigation of some negative emotions in the short term to allow task completion, followed by a more comprehensive approach in the long term or in cases where continued interaction is expected.

An emotion regulation perspective can also highlight outcomes that are important for organizational contexts. Although some work-related outcomes have been studied within the OB forgiveness literature, less attention has focused on behavioral outcomes that are related to employee effectiveness (e.g., job performance and CWBs).

Taken together, we argue that an emotion regulation perspective can foster a deeper understanding of how forgiveness can be effectively managed in the workplace by outlining how the underlying process of forgiveness can be connected with and influenced by the contextual layers that can surround it. Moreover, disentangling forgiveness from its behavioral outcomes can promote an understanding of how forgiveness may impact workplace behaviors, including job performance. These insights can also provide a strong basis for stimulating the development of evidence-based practices related to forgiveness in organizational contexts.

5.5 | Opportunity #5: Aligning conceptualization with operationalizations and incorporating methodological advances

While the above opportunities represent exciting new research directions, they also highlight the importance of undertaking empirical work to align the conceptualization of forgiveness with its operationalization. As noted by our above discussion, this is likely to include developing and validating scales that enable current emotions and emotion goals to be captured while avoiding difference scores (also see Footnote 5), ensuring that emotions are targeted toward the transgressor to avoid ambiguity (for a discussion, see Hillebrandt & Barclay, 2017), and separating forgiveness involving positive emotions from forgiveness involving negative emotions. As such, we call for a revised operationalization of forgiveness to facilitate future empirical research in this domain.

We also acknowledge that studying forgiveness processes can be more complex than conducting cross-sectional research that examines forgiveness as a snapshot. However, this also creates an exciting opportunity to leverage methodological advances that capture processes and examine how processes can unfold over time (for reviews and best practice recommendations, see Gabriel et al., 2017; Gabriel et al., 2019). Indeed, introducing new methodological tools to the forgiveness literature is likely to spark exciting new research questions and avenues.

Additionally, as noted above, conceptualizing forgiveness as an intraindividual process also creates opportunities to explore forgiveness within the larger interpersonal context of the offense, its aftermath, and individuals' relationships with other relevant parties (including transgressors, third-party observers, and other relevant organizational actors). However, care should be taken in considering what phenomenon is being assessed when different measurement sources are considered. For example, in the aftermath of an offense, individuals may verbally state that they have forgiven and/or they may extend acts of goodwill toward the transgressor (i.e., engage in reconciliation behaviors). However, individuals who do so may or may not have internally forgiven the other party. This creates opportunities to investigate potential incongruities between intrapersonal experiences and others' perceptions. While others' assessments may focus on behaviors (e.g., others' assessments of whether one has expressed forgiveness or enacted reconciliation behaviors), it is important to recognize that such assessments are conceptually distinct from *intra*personal processes of forgiveness. Indeed, these *intra*personal processes are likely best captured with self-report ratings because these processes are not directly observable by others.

5.6 | Practical implications

Beyond stimulating evidence-based interventions and practices, our conceptualization also provides practical insights and guidance for employees, managers, and organizations. As noted above, many employees struggle to forgive. Recognizing the importance of forgiveness processes involving negative and positive emotions as well as the roles of current emotions and emotion goals can provide a basis for self-reflection. In turn, this may identify where the struggles are occurring and the strategies that are likely to be effective to enhance emotion regulation. Further, this information can be beneficial not only for employees but for those who support employees (e.g., managers, employee assistance programs, and HR practitioners). For example, these insights about the process of forgiveness can provide guidance to leaders on how to best support their employees during and after conflict. Organizations may also benefit from selecting employees with strong emotion regulation skills since this may help with effective conflict management in the organization. Further, organizations that seek to develop strong forgiveness climates should foster servant leadership since this leadership style is focused on aiding employees with their concerns and daily struggles (see Fehr & Gelfand, 2012).

Building on the above, forgiveness may also be enhanced through training programs. For example, many organizations have already adopted training programs that can promote emotion regulation skills (e.g., mindfulness training; see Cohen & Ochsner, 2018 for a review). By linking these skills to forgiveness and conflict management, organizations may be able to enhance forgiveness as well as foster forgiveness climates in organizations. Further, given that temporality can impact how people interpret and respond to situations (Shipp et al., 2009), training programs that focus people on the present or future (rather than the past) may also enhance forgiveness (e.g., by providing motivation and focusing them on applying strategies to reach their desired emotions). As evidence-based protocols are validated, these may also be incorporated into existing training programs and/or offered separately (e.g., providing conflict management or forgiveness workshops). Further, organizations may benefit from incorporating these insights into dispute resolution processes as part of the dispute resolution and/or to help employees understand how they can move on after the formalized processes are completed.

6 | CONCLUSION

Forgiveness is a critically important conflict management strategy within organizations. By conceptualizing forgiveness as special case of emotion regulation, we provide a path forward that addresses key challenges in the field and creates exciting new research avenues that can enhance our theoretical understanding. This is critical for creating evidence-based practical guidance for employees, managers, and organizations that can enable them to effectively manage and foster forgiveness in the workplace. We hope that forgiveness and emotion regulation scholars leverage this foundation to further advance our knowledge and practical ability to promote forgiveness within the workplace.

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DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

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