

Forgiveness Communication in Interracial Friendships between Women

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Abstract

Forgiveness is a natural part of the human experience. It is one of the many interpersonal processes and intrapersonal reactions to an offense. However, little research exists to explain how forgiveness is communicated. Even less appears to address racial difference in friendship contexts. This study explored forgiveness communication in terms of racial difference between women. The following research gathered perspectives of 22 women ($n=8$ African American (Black) women and $n=14$ European American (White) women) between the ages of 18-24 in an online survey inquiring about their use of forgiveness strategies and their relational outcomes in interracial friendship transgressions. The results revealed a strong correlation between the victims' (respondents) report of their transgressors' (respondents' friend) use of an *explanation* and a *strengthened* relationship. Furthermore, there was a significant difference in Black and White transgressors' use of *explicit acknowledgement* to seek forgiveness. Implications of these findings are discussed.

Keywords: forgiveness episode, forgiveness-seeking, forgiveness-granting, relational outcomes, intersectionality

Introduction

Forgiveness has been studied in several disciplines, including psychology, theology, philosophy, and most recently, communication (Waldron & Kelley, 2008; Worthington, 2006). Even lay people have notions about the meaning of forgiveness (Younger, Piferi, Jobe, & Lawler, 2004). While a plethora of definitions exists for forgiveness, there appears to be unclear evidence in terms of how forgiveness is actually communicated (Merolla, 2008).

Forgiveness appears to be understudied in terms of racial differences. Moreover, researchers have focused on forgiveness in romantic relationships, families, and friendships; however, there is minimal discussion in the literature that explores forgiveness communication in interracial friendships between women. It may be advantageous to understand how race and/or attitudes about race within a friendship context may influence a person's manner of requesting and granting forgiveness. The way forgiveness is sought and granted can also influence the relational outcomes or consequences (Waldron & Kelley, 2005), but this influence has not been studied in terms of interracial friendships.

The goal of this study will be to determine whether forgiveness is communicated differently between women of different racial groups. Additionally, understanding in-group and out-group communication rules may provide insight into the possible relational outcomes of interracial forgiveness episodes. The knowledge acquired can promote healthy collaborative relationships between African American (Black) and European American (White) women who may experience a transgression with an out-group member. Furthermore, the knowledge gained can potentially be useful in assisting both groups of women in seeking and granting forgiveness while reducing future negative emotions.

Literature Review

Given that forgiveness has been studied in various fields, it is difficult to create a universal definition of the term (Worthington, 2006; Younger, et al., 2004). Despite the different definitions, forgiveness is generally described across disciplines as a process by which an individual who has been wronged relinquishes negative emotions toward a perceived transgressor (Baumeister, Exline, & Sommer, 1998; Hebl & Enright, 1993; Kelley, 1998; Waldron & Kelley, 2008; Witvliet, Ludwig, & Vander Lann, 2001; Worthington, 2006; Younger, et al., 2004).

Forgiveness episodes have also been defined as times when individuals are less willing to seek revenge, and more likely to restore the relationship to positive grounds (McCullough, Worthington, & Rachal, 1997). Many lay people seem to agree with McCullough, Worthington, and Rachal's (1997) definition that forgiveness involves letting go of malevolent feelings and attempts to reconcile; however, other scholars disagree that forgiveness must involve reconciliation (Younger, et al., 2004; Waldron & Kelley, 2008). Baumeister et al. (1998) believe that a person can explicitly communicate forgiveness, but internally harbor resentment or can choose to internally forgive a transgressor, but desire to end the relationship. This means that forgiveness does not guarantee relationship restoration and perhaps should not be equated with reconciliation.

Moreover, scholars have defined forgiveness in terms of negation. They describe what forgiveness is not in order to better understand the construct. Scholars argue that forgiveness is not pardoning, forgetting, condoning, denying, or excusing (Hebl & Enright, 1993; Waldron & Kelley, 2008; Witvliet, et al., 2001). Just because a person may choose one of these mechanisms as a way of coping with an offense does not mean that it should be characterized as forgiveness.

Finally, forgiveness involves various dimensions (Hebl & Enright, 1993) including both an internal process occurring within the victim, and an interpersonal process between a transgressor and a victim (Baumeister, & et al., 1998; Metts & Cupach, 2007; Waldron & Kelley, 2008). Scholars who believe that forgiveness is both an internal and interpersonal process suggest that in order for

forgiveness to be communicated, a wrong must first be identified by the victim and perceived as unresolved. Then, it must then be explicitly stated to the transgressor (Waldron & Kelley, 2008; Worthington, 2006). Perhaps the ambiguity in defining forgiveness may translate into the difficulty involved in theorizing about forgiveness communication.

In their book on forgiveness communication, Waldron and Kelley (2008) outline a six-stage communication cycle that occurs during the period of forgiveness. They call this cycle a “forgiveness episode.” During the period from transgression to negotiation of the relationship, the communication processes that occur are: (1) divulging or sensing an offense, (2) handling emotions, (3) understanding the implications of the transgression, (4) asking for forgiveness (5) giving forgiveness, and (6) collaborating on the future of the relationship (Waldron & Kelley, 2008). Waldron and Kelley (2008) also argue that the stages are interdependent. Moreover, how each stage is communicated between the victim and transgressor, the severity of transgression, and the relationship type are among the several variables that determine motivation to forgive, the fate of a relationship and the meanings drawn from wrongdoings (Waldron & Kelley, 2008). Merolla (2008) found that over half of the friends in his study were more likely than romantic couples to use indirect forgiveness as opposed to direct or conditional forgiveness. This finding supports the notion that the type of relationship may influence the forgiveness strategy used during the forgiveness process.

Interracial Communication

According to Orbe and Harris (2008), “Interracial communication is the transactional process of message exchange between individuals in a situation or context where racial difference is perceived as a salient factor by at least one person” (p. 6). In other words, racial difference is seen as an obvious feature that controls the way one or both individuals behave in an intergroup interaction. Intergroup communication occurs when either party in a social interaction defines self or other in

terms of group memberships (Harwood, Giles, & Palomares, p. 2). Houston (1994) suggests that ineffective interracial communication is a result of a violation of expectancy toward cultural norms and the inability to recognize that a violation has occurred. In their analysis of their interracial friendship, Diggs and Clark (2002) found that their awareness of race and cultural difference influenced their ability to communicate effectively with one another. Hughes and Baldwin (2002) support this claim by asserting that being aware of “stumbling blocks” (e.g., stereotypes and communication differences) through cultural competence can prevent people from facing communication obstacles.

Scholars’ assertion that communication is a cultural construct suggests that people of different racial groups tend to have distinct communication styles (Collins, 2000; Diggs & Clark, 2002; Hecht, Ribeau, & Alberts, 1989; Houston, 2000; Richardson & Taylor, 2009). For example, McCullough (1998) found that the Black women in her study saw their communication style as more direct than their White female counterparts. In addition to having diverse communication styles, individuals from different racial backgrounds tend to perceive out-group members’ styles as divergent from their own and based on stereotypes (Hecht, Ribeau, & Alberts, 1989; Houston, 1994; Hughes & Baldwin, 2002; Martin, Moore, Hecht, & Larkey, 2001). For instance, Martin et al., (2001) found speak loudly was perceived as an argumentative behavior by White respondents who rated the communication styles of Black people. Additionally, perceptions of difference were found to affect communication behavior. In Scott’s (2000) study of Black women’s communication, the women in her study used convergent language such as using the word “girl” to create a connection with other Black women. Moreover, the women chose a divergent style, by using the word “look” to address White women and Black men which created a distinction between themselves and their communication partner. The above findings suggest that not only do people have different

communication styles that are influenced by their cultural background, but their perceptions and attitudes about out-group members can also influence divergent communication behavior.

Standpoint Theory

Standpoint theorists claim that people on the margins of society, because of a perceived inferiority due to their social identity (race, gender, class), often have a more impartial view of the world (Harding, 2004). This less biased worldview is often the result of being an outsider who analyzes the behaviors of dominant group members. This individuals also opposes the behaviors and policies that continue to allow dominant group members to control society while marginalized members are left powerless. For instance, a feminist standpoint is not held by all women because of their social identity. This standpoint is typically held by women who can identify both covert and overt sexism in institutions in our society and work to oppose these partriarchal systems. Women with a feminist standpoint understand their oppression and can work to spread awareness of injustice toward women (Wood, 2005; 2011). In a society that grants privileges and disadvantages to people based on social identity, forgiveness occurring between a marginalized group member and a dominant group member may prove to be difficult because of the underlying perceptions both marginalized and dominant group members may have of the transgression. The manner in which forgiveness is communicated can move from merely being a strategy to being interpreted as a means to perpetuate both privilege and oppression.

Intersectionality

Intersectionality is a branch of Standpoint Theory that refers to the idea that multiple social identities work together to shape a more impartial worldview (Richardson & Taylor, 2009). Instead of constructing knowledge through only a gendered lens, for instance, intersectionality allows a person to view the world through multiple lenses simultaneously. In other words, a standpoint is created by taking into account someone's race, class, sexual orientation, and other social identities.

Therefore, assessing how women communicate forgiveness would not provide a full picture if social identities other than gender were not considered.

There appears to be consensus among scholars that divergent communication rules and evaluations of communication skills can cause conflict in interracial interactions (Hecht et al., 1989; hooks, 1984; Houston, 1994; Hughes & Baldwin, 2002; Martin, et al., 2001; Samter & Burleson, 2005). Communication in these interactions has been conceptualized as “difficult dialogues” (Martin et al., 2001). Samter and Burleson (2005) concluded that the different value placed on the importance of communication skills in same-sex friendships can potentially be a factor in Black and White women’s struggle to create and maintain friendships (Samter & Burleson, 2005). Thus, if close friendships develop between Black and White women and conflict is likely to occur, one can argue that the difference in communication style may present obstacles during the forgiveness process.

Forgiveness-seeking, forgiveness-granting strategies

Waldron and Kelley (2008) have identified five forgiveness-seeking and five forgiveness-granting strategies based on their research of forgiveness communication in romantic relationships. Forgiveness-seeking strategies are the communication behaviors used by a transgressor in order to gain the forgiveness of the victim in a transgression. The most common forgiveness-seeking behaviors from Waldron and Kelley’s (2008, p. 112) research includes:

- (1) *Explicit acknowledgement* (saying “I’m sorry”);
- (2) *nonverbal assurance* (hug);
- (3) *compensation* (gift);
- (4) *explanation* (reason); and
- (5) *humor* (joking).

Forgiveness-granting strategies are communication behaviors used by a victim to demonstrate to the transgressor that they have forgiven him or her. These strategies include:

- (1) *Explicit forgiveness* (saying “I forgive you”);
- (2) *conditional* (“only if things change”);
- (3) *nonverbal display* (facial expression);
- (4) *discussion* (talking about offense);

(5) *minimize* (saying “no big deal”).

Waldron and Kelley’s (2005) studies focused on the degree to which these strategies were used in romantic relationships; however, they did not focus on friendships. Moreover, their studies sought to identify how forgiveness is communicated instead of the examining the difference in communication strategies used by relational partners. This study focuses on how these strategies are used in women’s interracial friendships. More specifically, this study will exam whether a difference exists in the manner in which Black women and White women communicate forgiveness during a transgression. Thus, the following questions will be addressed in the current study:

RQ1: Is there a significant difference in the reported forgiveness-seeking strategies used by Black and White transgressors in interracial friendship transgressions?

RQ2: Is there a significant difference in the reported forgiveness-granting strategies of Black and White victims in interracial friendship transgressions?

Because there is a dearth of information focusing on how Black women and White women communicate during forgiveness, the first step is to discover what strategies these women use to seek and grant forgiveness. Second, the two groups of women can be compared to discover if a difference exist in the way Black women and White women communicate forgiveness. If the findings reveal a significant difference in forgiveness communication styles, further studies can be conducted to explore race as a salient factor in how forgiveness is communicated.

Relational Outcomes

Relational outcomes are also the focus of the current study. Relational outcomes refer to the result of the relationship after a forgiveness episode. Based on the findings from the forgiveness narratives in his previous study, Kelley (1998) conceptualized relational outcomes into three categories: “(1) *strengthened* relationship; (2) *weakened* relationship; (3) *normalized* relationship”

(p. 736). Waldron and Kelley (2005) later used these relational outcome subscales in their quantitative study of romantic partners by asking participants to give an account of their perceived outcome of the relationship. Relational outcomes of interracial friendship transgressions will be explored using these three categories. In particular, this study will seek to determine if there is a correlation between relational outcomes and the forgiveness strategies used by both Black and White transgressors and victims. The last research questions will address the following:

RQ3: What is the relationship between reported relational outcomes and forgiveness-seeking strategies used by White and Black women in interracial friendships in which a transgression has occurred?

RQ4: What is the relationship between reported relational outcomes and forgiveness-granting strategies used by White and Black women in interracial friendships in which a transgression has occurred?

In discovering whether differences exist in the way Black women and White women employ forgiveness communication strategies, it is important to identify what relational outcomes those strategies might produce as well. The findings may identify strategies, that when used by either Black women or White women, can potentially produce positive, negative, or neutral outcomes. For example, if a Black woman uses *humor* to seek forgiveness it may weaken the relationship with her White friend. Having an awareness of relational outcomes and how they relate to the strategies used in communication will be helpful for women in framing their message in order to increase their chances of a positive relational outcome.

Methods

Design

The purpose of this study was to understand forgiveness communication between women in interracial friendships by applying a quantitative method. A survey design was used in order to

assess the forgiveness-seeking and forgiveness-granting strategies employed by Black and White women, as well as their reported relational outcomes. A survey design allows researchers to operationalize the beliefs, attitudes, and behaviors of participants in a study (Frey, Botan, & Kreps, 2000). The more “precise” data provided by the survey allows researchers to determine statistically significant connections between the variables (Waldron & Kelley, 2008). Additionally, a survey design allows researchers to generalize about both the characteristics of research participants and the population they represent (Frey, Botan, & Kreps, 2000).

Measures

Waldron and Kelley’s (2005) instruments for measuring forgiveness-seeking strategies, forgiveness-granting strategies, and relational outcomes were included in the present study’s survey.

Waldron & Kelley’s (2005) Forgiveness-seeking Scale. The forgiveness-seeking strategies measure developed by Waldron and Kelley (2005) originally included 28 Likert-type items; however, 10 of those items were removed because they did not load above .50 (Waldron & Kelley, 2005). This left 18 items for inclusion in their original study that measured five reasonably reliable subscales. The reliabilities for the forgiveness-granting subscale items in Waldron and Kelley’s original study were: *explicit acknowledgement*, $\alpha=.90$; *nonverbal assurance*, $\alpha=.79$; *compensation*, $\alpha=.75$; *explanation*, $\alpha=.75$; and *humor* $\alpha=.88$. An example, of an item corresponding to the *explicit acknowledgement* subscale included a statement such as, “They told me they were sorry.” Respondents rate the extent of use on a scale from 1 “very slight use” to 7 “extensive use;” a rating of 0 meant the strategy was not used. The present study included the original 28 items the survey; however, only the 18 items that were included for analysis in Waldron and Kelley’s study were used for analysis in this study. Reliabilities for the subscales in the present study--*explicit acknowledgement*, $\alpha=.85$; *nonverbal assurance*, $\alpha=.63$; *compensation*, $\alpha=.33$; *explanation*, $\alpha=.85$; and *humor*, $\alpha=.71$ —were similar to the reliabilities of the subscales in the original study; however, the Cronbach’s alpha for *compensation* was

significantly lower than the original subscale. Due to its low reliability, this subscale was removed from further analysis in the present study.

Waldron & Kelley's (2005) Forgiveness-granting Scale. The forgiveness-granting strategies measure in Waldron and Kelley's study included 20 Likert-type items and were created using data from the forgiveness narratives in Kelley's 1998 study. Each survey item included statements that corresponded to one of the five forgiveness-granting strategies which were *nonverbal display*, *minimizing*, *conditional*, *discussion*, and *explicit forgiveness*. The statement "I began treating them like I always had," is an example of an item corresponding to the *nonverbal assurance* subscale. Items are first rated on extent of use by their partner (0=not used to 7=extensive use). Then participants are asked to rate that same item on degree of usefulness (1=not at all useful to 7=very useful). The Cronbach's alpha of the nonverbal display items in the original study was .73. The reliabilities for *minimizing* (.76), *conditional response* (.72), and *discussion* (.76) were tested with the Spearman-Brown prophesy formula in Waldron and Kelley's study. The *explicit forgiveness* item was measured as a single global item, in Waldron and Kelley's original study because "linguists suggest that explicit declarations of this type perform a distinct function in the discourse of forgiveness" (Waldron & Kelley, 2005, pp. 731). In the present study reliabilities for the *nonverbal display* ($\alpha = .73$), *minimizing* ($\alpha = .77$), *conditional* ($\alpha = .62$), and *discussion* ($\alpha = .86$) subscales were all tested using Cronbach's alpha formula. This study also included the 20 Likert-type items and the rating system used in Waldron and Kelley's original study.

Waldron & Kelley's (2005) Relational Outcome Scale. The relational outcome scale included 16 Likert-type items that measured the three relational outcome narratives from Kelley's 1998 study. The relational outcome subscales included items such as "After forgiveness things went back to normal" (*normalized*); "After forgiveness our relationship deteriorated over time" (*weakened*); "After forgiveness our relationship was strengthened" (*strengthened*) (2005, p. 731). The degree of

agreement with each statement is rated on a scale from 1=slightly agree to 7=strongly agree, 0 representing not applicable. In Waldron and Kelley's study, the reliabilities of the relational outcomes subscales are *normalized*, $\alpha=.90$; *weakened*, $\alpha=.76$; and *strengthened*, $\alpha=.86$. The Cronbach's alpha for subscales in the present study were *normalized* $\alpha=.79$, *weakened*, $\alpha=.67$ and *strengthened* $\alpha=.87$.

Participants

Participants ($n=22$) were women between the ages of 18-24 who were currently involved in an interracial friendship or had been in the past, and could clearly remember an interracial friendship transgression that involved forgiveness. Of the attempted surveys ($n=78$), 50 were completed. During the data treatment process, it was discovered that several participants' responses did not pertain to an interracial friendship between a Black woman and a White woman, and as a result, these participants were removed from the study. Therefore, $n=22$ surveys were included in the data analysis ($n=8$ from Black female respondents and $n=14$ from White female respondents).

Procedure

Participants were recruited by sending an email invitation to a scholarship program's listserv through the office of Minority Student Services (now Multicultural Academic Student Services) at a midsize Midwestern university, Blackboard users, Facebook friends, and personal contacts of the researcher. The survey was hosted by the online survey hosting website SurveyMonkey.com. Research participants participated on a voluntary basis only if they met the criteria. Before beginning the survey, the participants were asked to complete an electronic informed consent form that described the nature of the study and ensured participants' anonymity. In order to protect participants' privacy, participants were informed that their names would not be associated with their responses in this study. Participants were also allowed to discontinue the study at any time without negative consequences. Instructions were given to the participants for each section of the survey. Respondents were asked to set aside 20 to 25 minutes in order to complete the online survey. They

were prompted to recall a specific time in which forgiveness was involved in their interracial friendship. They were also be asked to rate how well they remembered the forgiveness episode.

Data Treatment

Once the survey period ended, the data set was downloaded from the online survey hosting website (SurveyMonkey.com). The information was imported into SPSS v.18 statistical software. None of the survey items were negatively-worded; therefore, they did not need to be reverse scored. After variables were labeled, mean scores were calculated for each subscale of the forgiveness-seeking strategies, forgiveness-granting strategies, and relational outcomes measures. Finally, the reliabilities of the scales for the forgiveness-seeking strategies, forgiveness-granting strategies, and relational outcomes were calculated.

Data Analysis

RQ1 and RQ2 both assessed two variables. An independent sample t-test was used to analyze the data. RQ1 focuses on the difference between the forgiveness-seeking strategies employed by Black and White transgressors. The data showed whether a statistically significant difference existed. The same type of analysis was also used for RQ2 to discover whether a significant difference exist between Black and White victims' use of forgiveness-granting strategies. Lastly, RQ3 and RQ4 assessed whether there is a correlation between the five forgiveness-seeking strategies and the five forgiveness-granting strategies used by White and Black women and the three relational outcomes. A correlation analysis was conducted in order to identify any statistically significant positive correlations between the variables.

Results

Forgiveness-seeking Strategies

RQ1 focused on whether a significant difference existed between the reported forgiveness-seeking strategies used by the friends (transgressor) of Black and White participants (victims).

According to the results of the independent samples test, there was a significant difference between Black victims ($M=2.45$, $SD=.45$) and White victims ($M=1.3$, $SD=.78$) in their reports of the transgressors' use of the *explicit acknowledgement* strategy for seeking forgiveness ($t(20) = 3.8$, $p=.001$). Respondents. Results revealed a significant difference in reports from White victims ($M=1.5$, $SD=.91$) and Black victims ($M=2.45$, $SD=.33$) that the transgressors used the *explanation* strategy ($t(20) = 4.4$, $p<.001$). Furthermore, there were a non-significant difference between Black victims' ($M=1.7$, $SD=.73$) and White victims' ($M=1.4$, $SD=.73$) accounts of the transgressors' use of *nonverbal assurance* ($t(20) = 1.1$, $p<.28$). Finally the difference between White victims ($M=.82$, $SD=.93$) and Black victims of the transgressors' use of *humor* was nonsignificant ($t(20) = -.18$, $p<.86$).

Forgiveness-granting strategies

The second research question explored the difference in forgiveness-granting strategies used by White victims and Black victims. An independent samples t-test revealed a non-significant difference between Black victims' ($M=1.5$, $SD=.80$) and White victims' ($M=.81$, $SD=.95$) use of a minimizing strategy to grant forgiveness ($t(20) = 1.6$, $p=.12$). Furthermore, although not significant, it is important to report that there was a difference in Black ($M=1.5$, $SD=1.0$) and White victims' ($M=1.9$, $SD=1.2$) accounts of their use of a *discussion* strategy ($t(20) = -.71$, $p=.49$). No significant difference between Black ($M=1.1$, $SD=.91$) and White ($M=.96$, $SD=.87$) victims' reports of *nonverbal display* ($t(20) = .25$, $p=.80$) was discovered in the results. Results also showed non-significant results for White ($M=.86$, $SD=.88$) and Black ($M=.83$, $SD=.73$) respondents' reports of their friends' use of a *conditional* strategies ($t(20) = -.06$, $p=.95$) as means of granting forgiveness.

Correlation between forgiveness-seeking strategies and relational outcomes

RQ3 questioned whether a relationship existed between both Black and White victims' reports of the relational outcomes and the forgiveness-seeking strategies used by their White or Black transgressors. The correlation analysis revealed that there was a significant positive correlation

between Black victims who reported having a *strengthened* relationship and their transgressors' use of an *explanation* strategies ($r(20) = .83, p = .04$). Furthermore, the transgressors' use of this strategy was also positively correlated to a *normal* relational outcome ($r(20) = .80, p = .06$). Additionally, the *explicit acknowledgment* ($r(20) = .66, p = .15$) and *humor* ($r(20) = .36, p = .49$) strategy used by White transgressors were both positively correlated with the Black victims' reports of a *strong* relational outcome; however, these results were non-significant.

The use of *nonverbal assurance* by the Black transgressors was positively correlated to a *normalized* relational outcome ($r(20) = .61, p = .054$). Moreover, Black transgressors' use of the forgiveness-seeking strategy--*explicit acknowledgement* ($r(20) = -.71, p = .11$), *nonverbal assurance* ($r(20) = -.52, p = .29$), *explanation* ($r(20) = -.31, p = .55$), and *humor* ($r(20) = -.37, p = .47$) were negatively correlated with White victims' reports of a *weakened* relational outcome. The analysis also showed that the Black transgressors' use of *explicit acknowledgement* ($r(20) = .57, p = .03$), *nonverbal assurance* ($r(20) = .59, p = .03$), and *explanation* ($r(20) = .71, p = .004$) was significantly positively correlated with White victims' reports of a *strong* relational outcome. Furthermore, the use of *humor* was the only strategy negatively correlated with both a *weakened* ($r(20) = -.30, p = .29$), and *normalized* ($r(20) = -.96, p = .74$), relational outcome. *Humor* was positively correlated to a strong relational outcome ($r(20) = -.43, p = .13$).

Correlation between forgiveness-granting strategies and relational outcomes

The last research question focused on the relationship between the reported forgiveness-granting strategies used by Black and White victims and the relational outcome they reported. According to the correlation analysis, Black victims' use of a *minimizing* strategy to convey forgiveness was significantly negatively correlated with relational *weakening* ($r(20) = -.95, p = .004$) and although not statistically significant, *minimizing* also positively correlated with the relationship returning to *normal* ($r(20) = .77, p = .07$) as well as a *strengthened* relationship ($r(20) = .67, p = .15$).

Other non-significant results from the correlation analysis revealed that Black victims' use of *nonverbal display* was negatively correlated to their report of a *weakened* relational outcome ($r(20) = -.56, p = .25$) and positively correlated to a *strengthened* ($r(20) = .23, p = .66$) and *normal* outcome ($r(20) = .69, p = .13$). The use of *discussion* as a forgiveness-granting strategy for Black victims positively correlated to a *weakened* ($r(20) = .46, p = .37$), *normal* ($r(20) = .11, p = .83$), and *strengthened* ($r(20) = .23, p = .66$) relational outcome. Finally, there was a negative correlation between Black victims' reports of granting *conditional* forgiveness and also reporting normal relational outcome ($r(20) = -.08, p = .89$). *Conditional* forgiveness positively correlated with both a *weakened* ($r(20) = .59, p = .22$) and *strengthened* ($r(20) = .16, p = .77$) relational outcome.

Although there were no statistically significant correlations between White victims' use of forgiveness-granting strategies and relational outcomes, *nonverbal display* was shown to be negatively correlated with a *weakened* relational outcome ($r(20) = -.09, p = .76$) and positively correlated to both *strengthened* ($r(20) = .42, p = .14$) and *normalized* ($r(20) = .01, p = .96$) relational outcome. The same was true for White victims using the *minimizing* strategy; it was negatively correlated with reports of a *weak* outcome ($r(20) = -.05, p = .87$) and positively related to both *strong* ($r(20) = .47, p = .89$) and *normal* outcomes ($r(20) = .42, p = .09$). *Conditional* forgiveness was positively correlated with each relational outcome (*weak*, $r(20) = .35, p = .22$; *normal*, $r(20) = .49, p = .80$; *strong*, $r(20) = .11, p = .70$). Finally, White women's reports of using the *discussion* strategy to grant forgiveness was positively correlated to their reports of a *weakened* ($r(20) = .34, p = .24$) and *strengthened* ($r(20) = .37, p = .19$) relationship and negatively correlated with their report of the relationship returning to *normal* ($r(20) = -.08, p = .78$).

Discussion

Although one must use caution when interpreting the results of studies with small sample sizes, as was the case in the current study, this research project was unique in that previous studies focusing on forgiveness communication did not focus on women involved in friendships with a

woman of a different racial background. Many scholars have asserted that people's different cultural backgrounds often result in divergent communication rules (Hecht et al., 1989; Hughes & Baldwin, 2002; Martin, et al., 2001). Furthermore, interracial communication often creates conflict (hooks, 1984; Houston, 1994; Samter & Burleson, 2005). For example, a Black person's directness or assertiveness could be perceived as aggressive behavior by a White person because of possible stereotypes and the different styles of communication (Collins, 2000; Martin, et al., 2001). The current study aimed to discover if a difference exists in the ways in which Black women and White women communicate forgiveness.

Women in the United States have historically been oppressed due to the belief that women are inherently mentally, physically, and emotionally inferior to men (hooks, 1984). Because of this belief, women have been and still continue to be targets of prejudice, discrimination, and systematic disadvantages based on their gender (Wood, 2011). Although women are marginalized in this patriarchal society, not all women are marginalized based solely on gender. Other social identities such as race, age, and social class intersect to create a unique experience, but this can also lead to further oppression. For example, White women face sexism in our society; however, Black women are subjected to both sexism and racism, creating a different experience from both White women and Black men (hooks, 1984; Houston, 2000).

Additionally, this study was conducted to discover whether the past and present forms of racial discrimination in our society can influence how individuals in friendships involving a dominant racial group member (i.e., a White person) and a marginalized racial group member (i.e., a Black person) communicate with one another during and after a hurtful event. Interactions between Black women and White women have been rooted in servitude and shaped by distrust because of the historical racial discrimination in this society (hooks, 1984; Houston, 1994; McCullough, 1999). With knowledge of historical power imbalances between dominant groups and marginalized groups,

and the knowledge that culture may create divergent communication styles, this study sought to explore this dynamic in terms of forgiveness communication.

The first research question sought to discover whether a significant difference exists between Black transgressors' and White transgressors' use of forgiveness-seeking techniques. One potential reason that the White transgressors may have explained themselves in order to seek forgiveness could lie in their awareness of racial prejudice, discrimination and oppression. Having a close friendship with a member of a targeted racial group may allow White women (members of a dominant racial group) to engage in discourse regarding prejudice in America and its effects on racial minorities. The ongoing discussion of inequality between these two groups of women may result in White women having created a standpoint that allows them to identify ways in which their view could be prejudiced. According to Standpoint theorists, having knowledge of oppression is not only imperative to having a standpoint but also to managing their behavior in order to overcome the oppression.

In Diggs' and Clark's (2002) study of their interracial friendship, Diggs (a Black woman) accounts a time when Clark (a White woman) jokingly said to another friend that she was so "obedient" and that she took direction "willingly," in reference to Clark's request that Diggs put away some earrings in a bag. After overhearing the comment, Diggs became offended because it sounded like a comment a person "would say about their animal." Because Black people have been historically considered sub-human, the comment was seen as a discriminatory remark, even though Clark meant no harm. Clark claimed that she was unaware of the prejudicial undertones of her remark. Once Diggs explained to Clark that the comment was racially offensive, Clark became more aware of the way she communicated and how it could be prejudiced. Perhaps White transgressors felt the need to explain the nature of the offense, because they have had discussions with their Black friends and have come to understand how their behavior can be perceived as offensive. Moreover,

explaining themselves could be a means of proving that they are not prejudiced. Shelton (2003) found that White people who were told not to appear prejudiced in an interaction with a Black person were perceived as more likeable than Whites who were not told to suppress prejudice. Using an explanation could be a means of attempting to be perceived as likeable both as a friend and as a member of a dominant group.

Another purpose of the study was to determine if there was a significant difference between the forgiveness-granting strategies that Black victims used and the strategies employed by White victims. The results revealed that Black victims were more likely to minimize the offense when accepting the transgressors' plea for forgiveness. There could be several interpretations of these findings. Perhaps one reason Black women used a minimizing strategy more than their White counterparts may have involved the type of offense. According to Kelley and Waldron (2005), participants reported in their studies that they considered the type of transgression before granting forgiveness. For example, a transgression involving infidelity might involve the use of compensation strategy to grant forgiveness, whereas forgetting to take out the trash might result in use of a minimizing strategy. The same could be true for the current study. The transgressions being recounted in the study may have not been perceived as needing compensation or discussion before granting forgiveness.

Another interpretation of the findings can possibly contradict the arguments made by Standpoint theorists. It is possible that minimizing an offense could be a result of recognizing that certain behavior such as assertiveness from a Black woman could be perceived as aggressiveness by her White friend. The Black women in this study could use a minimizing strategy in order to appear friendlier and less argumentative. By not attempting to perpetuate a negative stereotype or not to appear prejudiced, Black women and White women are not working to create a standpoint which

includes taking oppositional stance against the stereotypes that allow oppression and privilege to continue.

The third research question in this study focused on whether a positive correlation exists between the forgiveness-seeking strategies that the transgressors' used during the forgiveness process and the victims' perception of the relational outcome. Standpoint theory may explain the results described in the "Correlation between forgiveness-seeking strategies and relational outcomes" section of this report. An explanation strategy involves the transgressor giving an account of the reasons for the offense (Waldron & Kelley, 2008) and can involve extra energy to rectify a situation. Explicit acknowledgement (saying "I'm sorry"), nonverbal assurance (hug), compensation (gift), and humor (joking), on other hand, may not require the cognitive energy that it takes to offer a logical explanation. Therefore, in interracial friendships involving members of dominant and marginalized racial backgrounds, an explanation may strengthen the relationship because it means that the transgressor who is a dominant group member is extending herself to clarify her actions in order to build mutual understanding. The other strategies almost entirely ignore the transgression itself, which means that the implications behind the offense are never addressed. An explanation, on the hand, places the transgression and transgressor at the center of the forgiveness episode, allowing the victim and transgressor to explore possible ways in which the behavior could have been racially offensive or merely a minor misunderstanding.

The final research question involved discovering whether there was a correlation between the forgiveness-granting strategies that respondents used during the forgiveness episode and their reports of the relational outcomes after forgiveness was granted. Because researchers argue that women of different racial backgrounds communicate differently, the results that revealed that both Black and White victims' minimized the offense when granting forgiveness were surprising. Although there was no formal hypothesis that Black victims' and White victims' would

communicate forgiveness differently, there was a presumption that there might be a difference given the findings of previous research. Once again, Shelton's (2003) analysis, as stated earlier in this discussion, may offer a better explanation for both groups of women who found that minimizing the offense was helpful in restoring and strengthening their relationship. Choosing to minimize an offense may be a strategy Black and White victims used to prevent their transgressors from using negative racial stereotypes to judge their behavior during the forgiveness episode. A Black victim may think that if she tries to discuss the transgression, she may seem as though she is aggressive to the White transgressor, which is a negative stereotype she does not want to perpetuate. On the other hand, a White victim who uses conditional forgiveness as a strategy to grant forgiveness might realize that she is exerting power in the relationship and chose to minimize the offense in order to show that she is not prejudiced. Although each solution may be an attempt to prevent racial tension, both reasons may, over time, weaken the relationship.

This study introduces the idea that perhaps divergent communication styles of individuals involved in forgiveness episodes can be critical in determining the outcome of their relationship. By understanding which forgiveness-granting and forgiveness-seeking behaviors strengthened a relationship or returned them to normal, and which strategies weakened a relationship, individuals who counsel women involved in interracial friendships can be more effective in mediating conflict or transgressions between these women. For example, Resident Assistants (RAs) asked to mediate roommate conflicts between Black and White women may find the information helpful in that it not only places the conflict at the center of the discussion, but it allows them to see the issue as an intergroup conflict in which race is a salient factor. RAs can facilitate students belonging to dominant groups in exploring the underlying feeling of prejudice students of color may experience in conflict with a dominant group member. Moreover, RAs may find that ignoring the race of the student may be, in effect, ignoring the problem and preventing conflict resolution and/or

forgiveness of a transgression. Finally, once students are culturally competent, meaning they are aware of the way in which their background can be a factor in divergent communication styles, they can work to tailor their messages in a way that creates mutual understanding.

As our society attempts to become more accepting of people of all social identities, and students expand their circle of friends to include people of diverse backgrounds, it is becoming increasingly important that students become equipped with skills to address topics of race in multiple contexts such as forgiveness episodes. While transgressions themselves can be hurtful, they can become even more traumatic in interracial friendships if and when individuals do not acknowledge race as potential or even salient factor in an offense.

Limitations

The number of White female participants ($n=14$) was almost double that of Black female respondents ($n=8$); this fact, along with the small sample size, resulted in very few statistically significant findings. Due to time constraints and limited access to a larger target audience, the present study's researcher was only able to gather a small number of completed surveys. Therefore, the results must be interpreted with caution. In order to increase both internal and external validity, future studies should attempt to replicate these findings with larger samples.

The current study identified the forgiveness-seeking and forgiveness-granting strategies used by Black and White women in interracial friendships and reports of relational consequences. However, in order to best use Standpoint Theory and intersectionality to explain the forgiveness communication between members of different racial groups, it may be helpful to investigate respondents' reasons for using a particular strategy. This would allow the researcher to pinpoint the more salient factors (i.e., race, personality, severity of transgression) that influence the manner in which forgiveness was sought and granted. Furthermore, a standpoint is not shaped by merely belonging to a particular social group: "a standpoint is achieved through critical reflection on power

relations and through engaging in the struggle required to construct an oppositional stance” (Wood, 2005, p.61). This means that as Black women and White women create and maintain their friendships with each other, they will need to explore or revisit the concepts of privilege and oppression and work to understand and manage the ways in which these factors can negatively influence communication in an interracial friendship. Having a standpoint gives women the ability to change the way they communicate in a forgiveness episode because they can identify the behaviors that overcome or perpetuate privilege and oppression.

Final Thoughts

On the surface, a transgression may appear to be the main focus during the forgiveness process; however, a person’s identity and delivery of forgiveness messages play a major role in the way these messages are interpreted (Kelley & Waldron, 2008). Furthermore, we must realize that transgressions are inevitable. Therefore, we must attempt to understand how our differences make us unique yet potentially misunderstood in our communication with each other. Perhaps recognizing differences is one way to explore the root of transgressions and can be helpful in building and maintaining cross-cultural relationships.

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