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# The Development of Forgiveness and Other-Focused Love

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## Abstract

This article explores the development of forgiveness and other-focused love and examines the role of spirituality in the relationship between forgiveness and love: (a) Do forgiveness and love develop together? (b) Does love or forgiveness predict the other at a later time? (c) Does one's spirituality moderate the relationship between forgiveness and love? A total of 47 participants from a large Christian university in Central Virginia filled out measures of compassionate love, forgiveness, and dedication to God at Time 1 (T1) and measures of love and forgiveness after 4 weeks at Time 2 (T2). Findings showed that those who gained the most in forgiveness began low in both forgiveness and love. While love at T1 did not predict forgiveness at T1 or T2, forgiveness at T1 positively predicted love at T2 ( $r = .36, p < .05$ ), indicating that forgiveness temporally preceded love. However, the relationship between the two no longer existed after controlling for love at T1. The participants' dedication to God at T1 did not moderate the relationship between forgiveness and love but further explained love at T2. It may be worthwhile to examine the effect of forgiveness interventions on increasing other-focused love.

## Keywords

virtues, forgiveness, other-focused love, positive psychology, values in psychotherapy

Forgiveness and love as separate topics within psychology have been flourishing for the past several decades (Enright et al., 1998; Worthington, 2020; see also Oman, 2011). While the conceptual link between forgiveness and love is often discussed in the literature, there is a need for empirical evidence to demonstrate the relationship between the two. As Kim et al. (2020) showed,

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compassionate love was significantly associated with dispositional forgiveness. Compassionate love also has been found in both transgression-specific forgiveness and transgression-general forgiveness (Kim et al., 2021). Our aim here is to further explore this relationship between forgiveness and love by examining whether love and forgiveness develop together and also by exploring the temporal order between compassionate love and forgiveness. In addition, because the practice of love and forgiveness might be affected by individuals' relationship to God, we examined dedication to God to see whether it moderated the relationship between love and forgiveness. To answer our research questions, we employed a longitudinal design to measure study variables at two different time points with an interval of 4 weeks between T1 and T2. To capture the development of forgiveness in relation to love, we asked participants to report on forgiveness about the same offender at T1 and T2.

Below, we first examine the definition of forgiveness and love.

## **Forgiveness**

Forgiveness psychologists in general agree on what forgiveness is not: it is not forgetting, condoning, excusing offenses, and forgiveness does not necessarily lead to reconciliation (Enright & Fitzgibbons, 2015; Exline et al., 2003). Other definitions exist, but most agree that forgiveness occurs intra-personally without discounting the interpersonal context (Worthington, 2020). Our adopted definition of forgiveness in this study perceives forgiveness as a virtue that starts as a conscious decision to abandon one's right to resentment, judgment, and indifferent behavior toward the offender and involves fostering the undeserved qualities of compassion, generosity, and even love toward the offender (Enright et al., 1998; see Exline et al., 2003 and Worthington, 2020 for definitional issues). Empirical evidence has been accumulated to show forgiveness as a mechanism through which individuals can gain relief from negative emotions, cognitions, and behaviors as well as develop hope and positive affect (see the meta-analyses of forgiveness therapy in Lundahl et al., 2008; Wade et al., 2014, and Akhtar & Barlow, 2018).

As forgiveness is described as a moral virtue by philosophers (Holmgren, 1993; North, 1987) and psychologists (Enright & Fitzgibbons, 2015), it takes time and effort to practice this virtue, and it gradually transforms the emotions, cognitions, and behaviors of the victim from withholding the right of resentment to willfully abandoning this right and responding to the offender "based on the moral principle of beneficence" (Enright & Fitzgibbons, 2015, pp. 26–27). When forgiveness is examined as a moral virtue, it is based on two principles of Aristotelian philosophy, pointed out by Simon (1986): (a) there exists an objective and true perfection (essence) of forgiveness that is not altered by the variations in the expression across historical, religious, and cultural groups; (b) most people do not reach the perfection of practicing forgiveness. McCullough et al. (2003) used a longitudinal approach to study within-person changes toward an interpersonal offense and found that while victims in general had gradual reductions in avoidance and revenge motivations toward offenders, their benevolence did not have a statistically significant increase. It is possible that people are practicing the virtue of forgiveness at different stages as the progression toward its essence. During the process of exercising the virtue, different effects could be measured at varying times. While empirical studies have focused on measuring the effect of forgiveness, including the reduction of negative affect (e.g., angry, anxiety, depression) as well as the development of positive traits (e.g., hope, self-esteem), the mechanism of producing such effects is yet to be explored. Forgiveness has been linked to other-focused love as it cares for others' well-being despite their wrongful actions (Enright & Fitzgibbons, 2015). In the next section, other-focused love will be considered as a character virtue, and its possible relationship with forgiveness will be discussed.

## Love, *Agape* Love, and Compassionate Love

First of all, we assume that love is a virtue in this article (Beck, 2012). If there is no such assumption, love could vary from definition to definition that is subjectively and culturally created. Based on the assumption that love is a moral virtue, it then can be examined within the philosophy of Aristotelian realism: (a) there exists an objective and true perfection (essence) of love that is not altered by the variations in the expression across historical, religious, and cultural groups; (b) most people do not reach the perfection of practicing love. The philosopher Kreeft (n.d.) pointed out that the word love is misunderstood in modern society as it means to most people either sexual love or a feeling of affection, or a vague love-in-general. C. S. Lewis (1960) precisely distinguished the four kinds of loves based on their original conceptualization in ancient Greece: *agape* (the kind of love Christ taught and showed); *storge* (natural affection between parent and child); *eros* (romantic love of desire); and *philia* (brotherly love or friendship). *Agape*, as extremely and specifically other-focused love, shows the willingly and unconditionally giving of the self, at a cost to the giver, to the other for that person's good. However, *agape* love has only been scientifically investigated within romantic relationships (Hendrick & Hendrick, 1986, 1990), which is depicted as "involving extreme sacrifice, including suffering, for the sake of one's romantic partner" (Fehr et al., 2014, p. 583).

In comparison, compassionate love, as a type of other-focused love, has been conceptually and methodologically well explored with various populations in different scientific fields, including neuroscience, evolutionary psychology, healthcare, and child development (Oman, 2011). Compassionate love is defined as a general tenderness (including affective, cognitive, and behavioral attitudes) toward all people (Sprecher & Fehr, 2005). Compassionate love also involves sacrifice and selflessness, but not as extreme and potentially costly as *agape*. Compassionate love is conceived as a kind of love that can be experienced for a variety of targets including close others (friends and family), strangers, or even all of humanity. We argue that *agape* love could certainly be expressed beyond romantic partners, including close others, and even strangers. Unlike compassionate love, *agape* is focused on particular persons instead of humanity in some abstract or general way. In fact, it is more costly in that the one offering it is willing to suffer for the good of others. *Agape* love comes from a free will (we choose it), a good will (we are concerned for others' needs and welfare), a strong will (we carry on despite the difficulty), and always is expressed by concrete actions.

## Links Between Forgiveness and Other-Focused Love

The unconditionality expressed in *agape* love has been conceptually linked to forgiveness in an empirical study investigating the cognitive-developmental stages of forgiveness reasoning, which showed the highest reasoning of forgiveness is when one sees it as unconditional love for the one who acted unfairly (Enright et al., 1989). Pettigrove (2012), from a philosophical perspective, also points out the relationship between love and forgiveness. He notes that love, as involving cognitive, affective, and volitional dimensions of valuing others, ought to yield forgiveness because the lover's commitment to the other's wellbeing ought to remain despite the other's flaws. Forgiveness and *agape* love are two closely related virtues because of the following two characteristics in forgiveness, which also are found in *agape* love: (a) the essence of forgiveness emphasizes "extreme sacrifice, including suffering"; (b) forgiveness is expressed to specific people (the offender in most cases) as is *agape* love. In the context of romantic relationships, forgiveness was positively correlated with *agape* love in a sample of 60 moral exemplars (Oliner, 2005). Compassionate love is related to forgiveness as they both have the right motivation (one's goodwill), which is expressed in emotion, cognition, and behavior (Kim et al., 2020, 2021). The two differences are, first, forgiveness is only limited to offenders while compassionate love is expressed to all humankind (Oman,

2011); second, those with compassionate love do not necessarily have to suffer, but those who forgive others for grave offenses often do suffer. Because forgiveness is a virtue that has to be continuously practiced achieving its perfection, and even though *agape* love is closer to the essence (perfection) of forgiveness, the general tenderness (universal feeling) developed in compassionate love may serve as a doorway for the further attainment of concrete actions revealed in *agape* love and forgiveness. Although compassionate love is distinct from *agape* love, we denote that they are both other-focused love that share the important aspect of forgiveness—focusing on the wellbeing of others. It is meaningful to examine the relationship between compassionate love and forgiveness to see how strong a general tenderness toward others (not limited to the offender) will be associated with forgiving the offender. If forgiving can lead to an increase in compassionate love, this new or deeper feeling of love may serve to strengthen and increase forgiving responses in the future. As the feelings connected to compassionate love increase with forgiving, then, perhaps people may develop what Aristotle calls the love of the virtue (in our case, the virtue of forgiveness) which is a mark of a mature forgiver (Aristotle, 1999, book 10, section 9, passage 8).

The empirical link between forgiveness and compassionate love was examined, although the evidence was correlational, and was found at the trait levels only ( $r = .23$ ) (Neto & Menezes, 2014). It was found that the degree of valuing warmth-based traits (generosity, compassion, and love) is highly associated with forgiveness in crime victims (or are friends or family members of victims); in comparison, perceived justice and empathy are not significantly associated with forgiveness (Berry et al., 2005). In fact, compassionate love was found to predict forgiveness above and beyond trait empathy (Kim et al., 2021). In addition, compassionate love, as a predictor for dispositional forgiveness, predicts over and above all the other measures, including emotional distress (anger, anxiety, and depression), and subjective wellbeing (Kim et al., 2020). All these studies examined thus far were correlational in nature and so no evidence suggesting the causal link between forgiveness and love has been found. Furthermore, we do not know whether forgiveness and compassionate love are likely to develop in a similar pattern. If they develop together, we are unsure whether a person with a higher level of compassionate love would develop further forgiveness or the person with a higher level of forgiveness would develop further compassionate love.

## Spirituality, Forgiveness, and Love

Spirituality has been found to affect both process (Richards & Bergin, 1997) and the outcomes of counseling (Davis et al., 2013; Smith et al., 2007). Spirituality has been culturally, historically defined by various professionals and scholars in psychological research and practice (Oman, 2013). In this study, we adopt Hill et al.'s (1998) definition of spirituality as “the feelings, thoughts, experiences, and behaviors that arise from a search for the Sacred” (p. 21). Based on the definition, spirituality can be assessed in many ways, such as a personality-like trait that is relatively stable across situations (Tsang & McCullough, 2003), or a relational state that reflects the fluctuating feelings of closeness, connection, and dedication toward the Sacred (God) (Davis et al., 2009).

It was worthwhile to examine this factor, the individual's relationship with God, in our analysis because love and forgiveness both have divine origins (Drabkin, 1993). Love and forgiveness are within many different religious beliefs and practices (McCullough & Worthington, 1999; Templeton, 1999). For example, the ideology for love in Christianity is love of God, which contains both love by God and love for God (Talbot, 2014). Love is deliberately mentioned in many places in the Christian Scriptures, such as “God is love” (1 John 4:8); and the “Greatest Commandments” in the Gospels (Matt. 22:34–40; Mark 12:28–31): when Jesus was asked which commandment is the greatest, he responded by quoting Shema (a Jewish prayer)—“Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength” (Deut. 6:5), and a commandment from Leviticus 19:18—“Love your neighbor as yourself.” The theme of forgiveness could be traced as early as in the book of Genesis in Hebrew writings—Joseph, who had been

awfully treated by his 10 half-brothers, decided to forgive them and had mercy on them when his brothers came to Egypt to seek famine relief while he was the authority of Egypt at that time. In the Christian Bible, God removes sins and reunites with people through their repentance and acceptance of Christ's redemption. A Christian who has been forgiven by God is expected to forgive others (Matthew 18:21–22). From a theological perspective, once the relationship with God has been established, the particular beliefs about the love of God will lead to the action of loving the neighbor, including the “enemy” or “transgressor” who is in need of forgiveness (M. Lewis, 1980). As the spiritual belief represents the meaning, purpose, and values in people's lives, it in many ways informs psychotherapy. From the perspective of counseling, some think that love of God is a driving force for forgiveness (Cheong & DiBlasio, 2007), while some other regard forgiveness as a direct product of unconditional, other-focused love (Aponte, 1998). From a psychological perspective, both motives and virtues can shape forgiveness (Worthington et al., 2006). To forgive, people have to stop ruminating on the injustice and shift the focus from conscientiousness-based virtues (e.g., justice) to warmth-based virtues (e.g., love). Empirical evidence was found that people who valued the warmth-based virtue were more likely to forgive (Berry et al., 2005), but there was no evidence showing whether people who valued the virtue of love also were motivated by their relationship with God. Since the relationship with God was speculated as motivation for Christians to exercise altruistic love to produce forgiveness (Worthington et al., 2006), further empirical evidence is needed to support this speculation.

## Current Study

We are interested in the inter-relationship between forgiving and loving because of the conceptual links between them and the limited empirical evidence connecting the two. Note that we focus on the relationship between forgiveness and compassionate love in this study. As discussed, forgiveness and *agape* love are more closely related in the essence, but in the continuum of practicing forgiveness as a virtue, the general tenderness in compassionate love is possible to enhance the further attainment of concrete actions (such as sacrificially suffering at a greater level) revealed in *agape* love. Although compassionate love is a universal attitude toward humanity and *agape* love involves a self-sacrificial action toward a specific person (the offender in the context of forgiveness), it is our conjecture that as a person struggles to forgive and discovers the insight of the inherent worth of the offender and of the self, this might generalize into compassionate love for people in general. As one of the Aristotelian views, no virtue should be isolated from the others because isolation tends to distort that virtue (Aristotle, 1999, p. 371), we believe that compassionate love is a virtue that is cultivated when forgiveness is practiced. Compassionate love is measured as a dispositional variable, which represents its encompassing and enduring nature (Sprecher & Fehr, 2005). Given that compassionate love is a character virtue practiced in a continuum in our study context, change is possible to happen in the same individual across different times. Forgiveness is measured toward specific people for specific offenses (Enright & Fitzgibbons, 2015). The relationship with God is measured by the Dedication to Sacred (God) scale because it allows the victim to relate the Sacred (God) to themselves, the offender, and the specific offense (Davis et al., 2009).

To explore the empirical evidence on the relationship between other-focused love and forgiveness, the first goal of this study was to investigate whether love and forgiveness, as two virtues, develop together. To achieve the goal, our first question centers on the general patterns of growth in forgiveness: Do those who gained the most in forgiveness began with higher or lower forgiveness when compared with those who gained the least in forgiveness? In other words, if part of the sample already is high in forgiving, are these more-advanced forgivers poised to grow even faster than others across time or is it possible that they will grow more slowly because they already have reached, for them, an optimal level of growth in this virtue? If there is a pattern of growth in those who gained the most in forgiving and those who gained the least in this virtue, then our next

question is this: Do these two virtues of forgiveness and love work together? We can ascertain this by checking whether the growth of compassionate love follows the same pattern as forgiving.

Our second research goal is to investigate the temporal order of forgiveness and love. If we found love and forgiveness growing together, then this second goal would have direct relevance for forgiveness therapy and education programs: Does growth in forgiving predict growth in compassionate love? In other words, as people grow in forgiveness, are they then more likely to have compassionate love follow this growth in forgiveness by also showing growth? If this is the case, then we have our rationale for doing forgiveness interventions as a way to help people grow in other-focused love.

Our third goal in this study is to examine the impact of individuals' relationship with God on practicing the virtues of love and forgiveness. During the process of forgiving, some victims may imbue sacred meaning to the relationship with the offender or the offense by treating forgiveness as a sacred, God-ordained act (Davis et al., 2009). If the relationship with God promotes the process of forgiving, it is then helpful to emphasize this religious aspect when helping clients with forgiveness therapy or administering education programs in schools especially among populations with faith.

To explore the relationship between compassionate love, forgiveness, and relationship with God, a short-term longitudinal design is adopted by measuring participants' love, forgiveness, and dedication to God at T1 and then measuring love and forgiveness again at T2. This approach allows us to answer the following research questions:

1. Is there a difference in forgiveness at T1 between those who gained the most from T1 to T2 and those who gained the least in forgiveness from T1 to T2? If there is, who initially had higher forgiveness: those who gained the most in forgiveness or those who gained the least in forgiveness?
2. Is there a difference in compassionate love at T1 between those who gained the most from T1 to T2 and those who gained the least in forgiveness from T1 to T2? If there is, who initially had higher compassionate love: those who gained the most in forgiveness or those who gained the least in forgiveness?
3. Which group shows larger growth in compassionate love: those who gained the most in forgiveness from T1 to T2 or those who gained the least in forgiveness from T1 to T2?
4. Do participants' level of forgiveness or love lead to greater compassionate love or forgiveness 4 weeks later? In other words, does one of the two variables temporally precede the other?
5. Does one's dedication to God moderate the relationship between love and forgiveness?

For the first research question, we hypothesized that those who had the most gain in forgiveness would begin with lower forgiveness compared to those who had the least gain in forgiveness (Hypothesis 1). This may be the case because those already high in forgiveness might have reached their developmental potential in forgiving. For the second research question, we hypothesized that those who had the most gain in forgiveness would begin with lower compassionate love compared to those who had the least gain in forgiveness (Hypothesis 2). For the third research question, we hypothesized that those who had the most gain in forgiveness also would have a significantly larger gain in compassionate love while those who had the least gain in forgiveness would not (Hypothesis 3). We expected this to be the case based on the assumption that forgiveness and love are likely to grow in a parallel way.

To answer these initial questions, we chose one group that consists of 14 people who had the least gain in forgiveness, and another group consisting of 14 people who had the most gain in forgiveness across two time periods. If those who gained the least in forgiveness are initially higher in forgiving and those who gained more are initially lower in forgiving, it suggests that those who are

low in forgiveness still have potential for significant growth in this moral virtue and that those who are initially high in forgiveness, as stated above, already may have reached a relatively high developmental potential. If the growth pattern of forgiveness is observed, we then can investigate whether love and forgiveness grow together by checking whether (a) the group with the most gain in forgiveness had significantly lower compassionate love initially, in comparison to the group with the least gain in forgiveness; and (b) the group with the most gain in forgiveness had significantly larger growth in love while that is not the case with the group with the least gain in forgiveness.

For the fourth research question (RQ4), we examined the associations of compassionate love and forgiveness at T1 and T2 to determine the temporal relationship between the two. No particular direction of the temporal relation was hypothesized as this was the first empirical study of its kind.

For the fifth research question, we hypothesized that dedication to God would lead to a stronger correlation between love and forgiveness (Hypothesis 4). Checking the moderating effect of dedication to God on the relationship of forgiveness and compassionate love would allow us to answer this question.

## Methods

### *Participants and procedure*

Upon receiving IRB (institutional review board) approval, we recruited participants from students taking a psychology course at a nonprofit Christian university. A total of 47 participants completed surveys at both T1 and T2. Out of 120 who filled out the initial survey, 50 came back for the survey at T2 (participants were required to remember the offender they selected at T1 to participate in the survey at T2, which contributed to the low retention rate.). There was no treatment between T1 and T2 as the aim of the study was to see the natural unfolding of forgiveness and love over time. Two participants were removed because of missing data and one because of pseudo-forgiveness (not seeing that there was an injustice) in the final analysis. Participants received a small amount of course credit for their participation. All 47 participants were Christians and ranged in age from 18 to 25 (age  $M=18.81$ ,  $SD=1.45$ ), and 41 participants were White females (91.5% White; 2% Latinx; 1% Black/African Americans; 1% Other).

### *Measures*

We randomly presented the Enright Forgiveness Inventory (EFI-30; Subkoviak et al., 1995) and the Compassionate Love for Humanity Scale (CLHS; Sprecher & Fehr, 2005) following the demographic questionnaire at T1. The Dedication to the Sacred Scale (DSS; Davis et al., 2009) was presented immediately following the EFI-30 to assess participants' current relationship with God in light of the transgression that they experienced reported in the EFI-30. EFI-30 and CLHS again were randomly presented to participants who returned at T2.

**Forgiveness.** Participants filled out the Enright Forgiveness Inventory (EFI-30; Subkoviak et al., 1995), a 30-item version of the widely used measure of state forgiveness. It is a self-report measure of interpersonal forgiveness that includes six subscales: Positive and Negative Affect; Positive and Negative Cognition; and Positive and Negative Behavior. In the instruction, it asks each participant to recall a most recent experience of unfair and deep injustice from someone. Each participant is asked to rate the offender on a 6-point Likert-type scale ranging from 1 = *strongly disagree* to 6 = *strongly agree on the basis of one's current emotions, cognitions, and behaviors*. EFI-30 scores range from 30 to 180 with higher scores representing higher levels of forgiveness. Sample items from the subscales include "I do not feel bitter toward the person" (absence of negative emotions), "I do not view the person as below me" (absence of negative cognitions), "I will not act negatively



**Table 1.** Frequency of the Offender Type.

Type of the offender	Frequency for 47 participants
Friend of opposite gender	18 (38.3%)
Friend of the same gender	17 (36.2%)
Relative	11 (23.4%)
Employer	1 (2.1%)

toward the person” (absence of negative behaviors), “I feel close to the person” (presence of positive affect), “The person deserves forgiveness” (presence of positive cognitions), and “I’ll show friendship” (presence of positive behaviors). The word “forgiveness” is not used. Five items are included for each of the six subscale categories. Internal consistency reliability for EFI-30 was high in the current sample ( $\alpha = .97$  at T1 and  $.97$  at T2).

*Compassionate love.* We used the Compassionate Love for Humanity Scale (CLHS; Sprecher & Fehr, 2005), a 21-item measure of one’s other-focused love that involves affect, behavior, and cognition toward unknown others. CLHS is a psychometrically sound measure that has been used in past empirical studies. Participants responded to 21 items about their attitudes toward humanity (non-acquaintances) such as “I very much wish to be kind and good to fellow human beings” on a scale of 1 (*not at all true of me*) to 7 (*very true of me*). The conceptualization of compassionate love is less extreme and lacks the aspect of suffering for the other as in *agape* love; however, in CLHS, two items do tap into such extreme forms of love, but more in the aspects of emotion and cognition rather than behavior. Some examples reflecting the theme of *agape* love in CLHS are: “I would rather suffer myself than see someone else (a stranger) suffer,” and “If given the opportunity, I am willing to sacrifice in order to let the people from other places who are less fortunate achieve their goals.” The total score of CLHS ranges from 21 to 147 where the higher scores indicate the greater amount of compassionate love. Internal consistency reliability in the current sample was high ( $\alpha = .95$  at T1 and  $.93$  at T2).

*Relationship with God.* Participants’ relationship with God was assessed by the Dedication to the Sacred Scale (DSS; Davis et al., 2009), a five-item measure of one’s state dedication to God. DSS has sufficient psychometric adequacy (Davis et al., 2009). Participants rate agreement on the five-item test scale to evaluate their relationship with God, especially during times of hardship. Examples are, “I want my relationship with the Sacred to stay strong no matter what rough times I may encounter,” “I like to think of the Sacred and me more in terms of ‘us’ and ‘we’ than ‘me’ and ‘him/her/it,’” and “It makes me feel good to sacrifice for the Sacred.” By measuring the relationship with God, some items reflect the extreme form of love—with willingness to sacrifice, toward God. The total score of DSS ranges from 5 to 35 with higher scores indicating a higher dedication to God. Internal consistency reliability in the current sample was adequate ( $\alpha = .70$ ).

## Results

We had a nonclinical sample of 47 participants who responded to the survey at two time points (T1 and T2). In the forgiveness inventory completed at T1, participants reported the level of hurt and the offender type in the most recent injustice. Table 1 shows the frequency of each type of offender reported by all participants. See Table 2 for descriptive statistics and correlations of all study variables at both T1 and T2. We first inspected the final data set for normality, and there was no significant issue with skewness (max =  $|.95|$ ) or kurtosis (max =  $|.90|$ ). For Research Questions 1 to 3, we selected 14 people who gained the most in forgiveness from T1 to T2 and 14 people who gained

**Table 2.** Descriptive Statistics and Correlations of All Study Variables ( $N=47$ ).

	1	2	3	4	5
1. EFI at T1	1	–	–	–	–
2. EFI at T2	.69**	1	–	–	–
3. CLH at T1	.28	–.01	1	–	–
4. CLH at T2	.36**	.063	.81**	1	–
5. DSS at T1	.08	–.14	.44**	.32*	1
<i>M</i>	130.06	138.34	114.06	115.23	30.74
<i>SD</i>	27.87	27.13	21.04	16.66	3.65
$\alpha$	.97	.97	.95	.93	.70

EFI: Enright Forgiveness Inventory-30; CLHS: Compassionate Love for Humanity Scale; DSS: Dedication to the Sacred Scale; T1: Time 1; T2: Time 2.

\* $p < .05$ , \*\* $p < .01$ .

the least in forgiveness from T1 to T2. The gender was balanced in each group (2 males and 12 females). For Research Questions 4 and 5, we used the full sample.

### Research Questions 1 and 2: Comparisons between high- and low-growth groups

An independent-samples  $t$ -test was conducted to compare the initial levels of forgiveness between those who gained the most ( $n=14$ ,  $M_{change}=32.57$ ,  $SD=14.72$ ) and the least in forgiveness from T1 to T2 ( $n=14$ ,  $M_{change}=-15.21$ ,  $SD=14.45$ ). Note that for the least gain group, on average they declined in forgiveness. A significant difference on their initial levels of forgiveness between those who gained the least in forgiveness ( $n=14$ ,  $M_{forgiveness}=140.00$ ,  $SD=26.04$  at T1) and gained the most in forgiveness ( $n=14$ ,  $M_{forgiveness}=116.71$ ,  $SD=23.95$  at T1) was found,  $t(26)=2.46$ ,  $p=.021$ ,  $d=.93$ . The effect size is large, showing that the small sample size is not adversely affecting the results. Hypothesis 1 was supported because those who had the most gain in forgiveness had significant lower forgiveness scores at T1, compared to those who had the least gain in forgiveness.

An independent samples  $t$ -test was conducted to compare the initial levels of love between those who gained the most and the least in forgiveness from T1 to T2. According to Levene's Test, the assumption of homogeneity of variance across two groups on their initial levels of love was violated,  $F(1, 26)=13.42$ ,  $p=.001$ . Therefore, the  $t$ -test results with the corrected degrees of freedom are reported. A significant difference on their initial levels of love between those who gained the least in forgiveness from T1 to T2 ( $n=14$ ,  $M_{love}=126.21$ ,  $SD=10.18$  at T1) and gained the most in forgiveness from T1 to T2 ( $n=14$ ,  $M_{love}=106.43$ ,  $SD=25.78$  at T1) was found,  $t(16.96)=2.67$ ,  $p=.016$ ,  $d=1.01$ . The large effect size again shows that the small sample size is not adversely affecting the results. Hypothesis 2 was supported: those who gained the most in forgiveness began with significantly lower compassionate love, in comparison to those who gained the least in forgiveness.

An independent samples  $t$ -test was conducted to compare the level of hurt (measured in the EFI-30 at T1) between those who gained the most and the least in forgiveness from T1 to T2. There was no significant difference on the level of hurt between those who gained the least in forgiveness ( $M=3.93$ ,  $SD=0.83$ ) and gained the most in forgiveness ( $M=3.86$ ,  $SD=.77$ ).

### Research Question 3: Growth in compassionate love

To compare the amount of growth in love from T1 to T2 between those who gained the most and the least in forgiveness from T1 to T2, paired samples  $t$ -test comparing participants' level of love

at T1 and T2 were conducted separately for those who gained the most ( $n=14$ ) and the least in forgiveness ( $n=14$ ). For both the least growth in forgiveness group ( $M_{diff.}=-1.86, SD=8.78$ ) and the most growth in forgiveness group ( $M_{diff.}=3.29, SD=11.14$ ), there were no significant differences in love between T1 and T2,  $t(13)=-.79, p=.44, d=.21$  for the least growth in forgiveness group and  $t(13)=1.10, p=.29, d=.30$  for the most growth in forgiveness group. Hypothesis 3 was not supported because for both groups, the growth in compassionate love from T1 and T2 were not statistically significant. We could only see a trend in the expected direction as there was a small gain in compassionate love from T1 and T2 for the least growth in forgiveness group (not statistically significant) while there was a small loss in compassionate love from T1 and T2 for the most growth in forgiveness group (not statistically significant).

#### **Research Question 4: Temporal order between forgiveness and love**

Findings showed that love at T1 and T2 ( $r=.81, p<.01$ ) and forgiveness at T1 and T2 ( $r=.69, p<.01$ ) were positively associated, showing autocorrelations over the course of 4 weeks. Also, forgiveness at T1 positively predicted love at T2 ( $r=.36, p<.05$ ) but not love at T1; however, love at T1 did not predict forgiveness at T1 or T2. This suggests that in this sample, forgiveness temporally preceded love or predicted love at a later time. In other words, it appears that there is the potential of manipulating forgiveness at an earlier time leading to improvement on love at a later time. Note that forgiveness and love at T1 were approaching statistical significance with a  $p$  value of .059 (two-tailed).

Although the evidence suggests that forgiveness at T1 predicts love at T2, we wanted to see whether it is due to the initial level of love. Thus, we ran regression analyses by entering both love at T1 and forgiveness at T1 in predicting love at T2. The overall model was statistically significant as expected given the strong autocorrelation between forgiveness at T1 and forgiveness at T2,  $F(2, 244)=45.44, p<.001, R^2=.66$ . Interestingly, the effect of forgiveness at T1 on love at T2 ( $\beta=.149, p=.10$ ) disappeared while love at T1 remained statistically significant ( $\beta=.767, p<.001$ ), which suggests the mediating role of love at T1 in the relationship between forgiveness at T1 and T2. In other words, greater forgiveness predicts greater love at a later time because of the greater baseline of love at T1. Implications of this finding will be discussed.

#### **Research Question 5: The role of the relationship with God**

The dedication to God at T1 was positively associated with love at both T1 ( $r=.44, p<.05$ ) and T2 ( $r=.32, p<.05$ ), but not with forgiveness at T1 or T2. Also, the dedication to God did not moderate the relationship between forgiveness at T1 and love at T2, so Hypothesis 4 was not supported. However, upon further analysis, we found that both forgiveness ( $\beta=.340, p<.01$ ) and dedication to God ( $\beta=.290, p<.05$ ) explained about 22% of the total variance in love at T2,  $F(2, 44)=6.02, p<.01$ . When the dedication to God was entered first to the regression model in Step 1 and then forgiveness in Step 2, forgiveness at T1 accounted for about 12% additional variance in the model,  $F_{change}(1, 44)=6.45, p<.01$ , showing that forgiveness is a positive predictor of love at a later time even after controlling for the impact of participants' current relationship with God. See Table 3 for the hierarchical regression table.

## **Discussion**

This study was aimed at investigating the development of compassionate love and forgiveness across time using a short-term longitudinal approach. In addition, if love and forgiveness develop across time, what then is the temporal order of this development? Furthermore, the theme of dedication to God was included to examine whether or not people's transcendent belief system has a

**Table 3.** Hierarchical Regression Analysis Showing the Relationship Between Love, Forgiveness, and Dedication to God.

Predictor			
Criterion Variable: CLHS at T2			
	$R^2$	$\beta$	$\Delta R^2$
Step 1	.10		.10*
DSS		.32*	
Step 2	.22		.12**
DSS		.29*	
EFI at T1		.34*	

EFI: Enright Forgiveness Inventory-30; CLHS: Compassionate Love for Humanity Scale; DSS: Dedication to the Sacred Scale; T1: Time 1; T2: Time 2.

\* $p < .05$ , \*\* $p < .01$ .

moderating effect on the relationship between forgiveness and compassionate love. Using the longitudinal approach to investigate the development of forgiveness and compassionate love, the study identified a growth pattern of forgiveness as well as a trend of growth in other-focused love with a nonclinical sample. The results showed that people who have grown the most in forgiveness across time tended to be less forgiving at the beginning while people who have grown the least on forgiveness across that same time tended to be more forgiving at the beginning (Hypothesis 1). The growth pattern of forgiveness in this study has implications for helping those struggling to forgive: individuals with a lower level of forgiveness in the beginning can be seen as having a greater amount of potential for later forgiveness. This is supported by many empirical studies in which clients initially low in forgiving reported significant improvement in their later forgiving those who deeply hurt them if given sufficient time, about 12 weeks or more (Akhtar & Barlow, 2018). These empirical findings together with the findings from this current study might be a cause for hope in clients. As Rogers (1961) observed, hope in the initial stages of psychotherapy is an important sign of success in therapy (Irving et al., 2004; Rogers, 1961). Thinking of low forgiveness not as a cause of despair but as a cause of hope might open up more people to see the possibility of later forgiveness. However, it should also be noted that those who began at a higher level of forgiveness on average declined in forgiveness instead of staying at the high level of forgiveness, which suggests that the initial level of high forgiveness is not guaranteed to remain high and, even though clients might appear to be forgiving initially, there is a chance that their initial forgiveness might not indicate that they have truly forgiven. These findings are supported by past research where it was shown that decreases in avoidance toward the offender at earlier times were linked to later increases while increases in avoidance at earlier times were linked to later decreases (Tsang et al., 2006).

The growth pattern in compassionate love suggested the same trend as that of forgiveness: those who have grown the most in forgiveness from T1 to T2 tended to show the least amount of compassionate love at T1 compared to those who have grown the least from T1 to T2 (Hypothesis 2). In other words, for both love and forgiveness, the least amount of forgiveness at an earlier time suggests a greater amount of potential for growth at a later time.

When compared the level of compassionate love from T1 to T2 separately for the most growth in forgiveness group and the least growth in forgiveness group, the changes in compassionate love from T1 to T2 for both groups were not statistically significant (Hypothesis 3). As our study was done with a relatively small sample ( $N=47$ ) in a general population (college students), we postulate that with this sample, compassionate love might grow more slowly, compared to the development of forgiveness without any specific treatment.

The current study found empirical evidence for the temporal order of the development between forgiveness and love: forgiveness temporally precedes love at a later time or predicts love at a later time (RQ4). However, upon a further examination, we found that the link between forgiveness and love was explained by the initial level of love, suggesting the importance of fostering love as one engages in forgiveness that leads to greater love at a later time.

Forgiveness can be described as a practice of love at a time when it is challenging to love (Enright, 2012). In accordance with the idea that character develops through challenging times, the current study shows a possibility that as one grows in the virtue of forgiveness (toward a specific offender), the person might experience growth in love toward others in general, thus becoming a more loving person (through the act of forgiveness toward a particular offender). In theory, this idea seems to have merit because being able to love the most unlovable (i.e., one's offender) might make loving others in general comparably easy. However, the current study done with a non-clinical sample suggests that forgiveness would lead to greater love only when the initial level of love supports such a link.

This suggests that forgiveness interventions might be effective in helping those struggling with a hurt from the past grow in other-focused love, but directly fostering one's level of love should be incorporated as a part of the forgiveness intervention program so that love that develops through the process of forgiveness can lead to greater love at a later time.

Another interesting finding from this study was that though there was no moderating effect of dedication to God on the relationship between forgiveness and love as hypothesized (Hypothesis 4, which is our fifth research question), dedication to God predicted love (both concurrently and at a later time) and that forgiveness predicted love at a later time even after accounting for the effect of dedication to God, providing empirical support for the unique contribution of forgiveness above and beyond one's relationship with God. Given that there was no moderating effect of dedication to God on the strength of the relationship between love and forgiveness found, the implication here is that forgivers independent from their transcendent belief system are still able to grow in a general other-focused love as they grow in forgiveness.

This study has its limitations. We used a small homogeneous sample of college students, which limits the generalizability of our findings. It is uncertain whether the growth pattern of forgiveness and love would still be the same if the study was done with a larger sample with more diverse backgrounds or if the interval between T1 and T2 was longer than a month. However, the immediate challenge in this study was participants who did not express any serious unforgiveness issue were expected to remember what happened to them over the period of 4 weeks. To account for this issue, it might be necessary to recruit from a pool of participants who had experienced deeper injustice so that the natural growth or decline of forgiveness can be examined for a longer period of time.

Because there was no manipulation between two measurement periods (T1 and T2), we cannot make any causal claims, but implications can be made regarding the natural unfolding of forgiveness over time: The natural growth of forgiveness especially for those who had the lowest level in forgiveness at T1 might have been triggered by the first measurement, the short form of the Enright Forgiveness Inventory (EFI-30) that asked participants to identify a person who offended the participant in the past. Such an exercise of recalling an incident of injustice might trigger the participant's natural growth of forgiveness, such as paying more attention to the relationship with the person who offended, processing the incident internally, and even attempting to mend the relationship. However, the converse also might be true if such an exercise of recalling an incident of injustice triggers the participant's natural decline in forgiveness if the offended person reacts against the memory of the injustice recalled.

As pointed out by Kim et al. (2020), it is time to extend forgiveness interventions with adults to not only focus on psychological healing of the unjustly treated but also to investigate the development of other-focused love. The evidence from this study, together with findings from

other empirical studies (Kim et al., 2020, 2021), have only begun to examine the development and relationship between forgiveness and love. Further research needs to be done to document in what ways one's practice of forgiveness results in greater love toward others. To be more specific, we suggest that future studies be conducted with both adults and children. Compassion and empathy are two important elements (in Step 12, Work Phase) in the Enright Process Model of forgiveness (Enright & Fitzgibbons, 2015), which is one of the most widely used models for forgiveness interventions. *Agape* love and compassion are both included in the curriculum guides for teachers who teach forgiveness education programs for children (Enright et al., 2007; Holter et al., 2008). The measurement of adults' and children's growth on other-focused love after forgiveness intervention through therapy or education programs seems to be a reasonable goal for the future. A further investigation could possibly include examining the effect of forgiveness therapy on the growth in general other-focused love (compassionate love) compared with specific other-focused love (*agape* love). All these are worthwhile research projects in the future, and our current study is opening up the door for such vast possibilities.


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