

**To forgive or Not to Forgive: The Influence of Attachment Style on Post-  
Transgression Responses and the Mediating Role of Empathy.**

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## Abstract

Past literature has indicated that attachment styles can be reliable predictors of post-transgression responses. Findings have suggested that people with greater attachment security are likely to be more forgiving and have fewer engagements with more unforgiving responses such as rumination and grudge holdings. On the other hand, greater attachment insecurity was reported to have greater tendencies in engaging with more unforgiving responses, which leads to difficulties in forgiving the transgressor.

The present research aimed to evaluate the influence of attachment dimensions, attachment anxiety, and attachment avoidance, on post-transgression responses in parent and child relationships. The post-transgression responses included forgiveness, benevolence, rumination, avoidance, and revenge-seeking. Empathy was considered to have a mediating role in the relationships between attachment dimensions, and post-transgression responses.

Participants were recruited online to complete a questionnaire where they were requested to reflect on their relationship with a parent, and an incident where they were deeply hurt by the parent.

Regression analysis indicated that greater attachment avoidance was positively associated with rumination, avoidance, and revenge-seeking, and negatively associated with benevolence. No relationship was found between forgiveness. Greater attachment anxiety predicted greater benevolence and lower avoidance. The personal distress subscale of empathy was found to be a mediator between attachment anxiety and benevolence, and rumination for participants who focused on their mothers.

## Contents

List of Figures	5
List of Tables	6
Attestation of Authorship	7
Acknowledgments	8
Ethics Approval	9
Literature Review	10
Introduction	10
History of attachment theory research	12
Measuring attachment dimensions	15
Attachment dimension combinations and its influence on behaviour	15
Research on the associations between attachment style, forgiveness, and unforgiving responses	19
Findings of secure attachment styles and its influence on forgiveness and unforgiving responses	22
Insecure attachment styles and its influence on forgiveness and unforgiving responses	26
The potential mediating role of empathy between attachment dimensions and forgiveness, and unforgiving responses	32
Gaps in previous literature	34
The current study	36
Methods	38
Design	38
Participants	38
Materials and instruments	39
Procedure	44
Results	47

	Preliminary analyses	47
	Regression analyses	50
	Mediation analyses	60
Discussion		62
	Aims and hypotheses	62
	Attachment anxiety and post-transgression responses	62
	Attachment avoidance and post-transgression responses	64
	The mediating role of empathy	67
	Gender differences	68
	Strengths	69
	Limitations	70
	Future directions	71
	Conclusions	72
References		74
Appendices		84
	Appendix A	84
	Appendix B	90
	Appendix C	92
	Appendix D	94

## List of Figures

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Figure 1: The Mediating Effect of Personal Distress in the Association Between Attachment Anxiety and Rumination in Mother and Participant Relationships	60
Figure 2: The Mediating Effect of Personal Distress in the Association Between Attachment Anxiety and Benevolence in Mother and Participant Relationships	62

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### List of Tables

Table 1: Descriptive Statistics and Correlations Between All Variables	49
Table 2: Regression Analysis for Attachment Anxiety Among All Participants	51
Table 3: Regression Analysis for Attachment Avoidance Among All Participants	52
Table 4: Regression Analysis of Attachment Anxiety, and Attachment Avoidance in Participant and Mother Relationships	54
Table 5: Regression Analysis of Attachment Anxiety, and Attachment Avoidance in Participant and Father Relationships	55
Table 6: Regression Analysis Between Empathy Subscales and Attachment for Both Parent Relationship	57
Table 7: Regression Analysis Between Empathy Subscales and All Variables for All Participants	59
Table 8: Regression Analysis Between Empathy Subscales and All Variables for Both Parent and Participant Relationships	94
Table 9: Participant Gender	90
Table 10: Participant Age Groups	90
Table 11: Gender and Frequency of Mother versus Father Relationships	90
Table 12: Participant Ethnic Groups	91

### **Attestation of Authorship**

I hereby declare that this submission is my own work and that, to the best of my knowledge and belief, it contains no material previously published or written by another person (except where explicitly defined in the acknowledgments), nor material which to a substantial extent has been submitted for the award of any other degree or diploma of a university or other institution of higher learning.

Signed:

Date: 02.10.2022

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## **Ethics Approval**

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## **Chapter 1:**

### **Introduction**

#### **Literature Review**

Social relationships are considered fundamental to the human experience. Developing and maintaining significant and valued relationships fulfills the social needs of an individual. However, at times, there may be unpleasant situations that put the relationship at risk, such as transgressions. Transgressions are events in which one person has hurt another. This includes infidelity within romantic relationships, abusive treatment of another individual, or hurtful communication (Fincham, 2000; Van Monsjou et al., 2015). Not only is there a victim who feels harmed but the conflict has developed, now posing a threat to the relationship. Forgiveness is seen as an option and adaptive response to repairing the relationship. It is seen as a prosocial behaviour where negative feelings, thoughts, motivations, and resentment towards the transgressor are reduced and replaced with more positive motivations (Lichtenfeld et al., 2019; Struthers et al., 2008; Worthington et al., 2007).

Forgiveness is generally promoted to make amends, but unfortunately, forgiveness does not come easily for some people. It is believed that there are various factors that influence the likelihood of a victim forgiving a transgressor such as the engagement in other post-transgression responses such as avoiding the transgressor, seeking revenge to punish the transgressor, ruminating on negative thoughts and feelings, or holding grudges against the transgressor. Although it may feel beneficial at the time, potentially serving as a self-protection mechanism, it may also be debilitating

(Burnette et al., 2009; Chung, 2014; Fischer, 2011; Van Monsjou et al., 2015). One prominent factor that has been found to influence post-transgression responses is attachment styles. This study will aim to evaluate how the hurt individual's attachment style with the transgressor impacts post-transgression responses.

In attachment theory, attachment style is characterized by certain behaviour and emotional patterns within a bond between two people. Attachment styles occur in a range of relationships, such as parent and child, romantic partners, and friendships. When the relationship is threatened, attachment is said to be 'activated' and patterns of behaviour or emotional responses become more apparent (Hazan & Shaver, 1987). Various studies have reported that individual attachment styles are associated with certain post-transgression responses (Hirst et al., 2019; Lawler-Row et al., 2006; Webb et al., 2006). As past findings report an association, it is important to expand on this to further explore factors that may hinder forgiveness and stimulate responses that are more unforgiving.

Empathy has also been reported to promote the forgiveness of transgressors, and more maladaptive empathy was found to be associated with difficulties with forgiveness (Joireman et al., 2002; McCullough et al., 1997). Furthermore, previous findings suggest that lower levels of empathy are often reported by those with greater attachment insecurity with the transgressor (Kimmes & Durtschi, 2016; Chung, 2014; Khodabakhsh, 2012). This brought in the question of whether empathy could potentially play a mediating role in the relationship between attachment styles and post-transgression responses. Therefore, empathy as a mediator will also be part of the focus of this study as it could provide further information about the tendencies of post-

transgression responses, and if it is another factor worth acknowledging when facing conflict in relationships.

There has been a significant amount of literature focuses attachment styles and post-transgression responses (Hirst et al., 2019), and this study aims to expand on this topic by further exploring this relationship with a particular interest in family relationships, specifically between an adult and their parent. Utilizing similar approaches as past research, this study evaluates and reports on post-transgression responses of individuals as they reflect on their relationship, and attachment bond with a parent, and a past incident where they were deeply hurt by that parent.

### ***History of Attachment Theory Research***

Attachment theory was first developed by British psychoanalyst John Bowlby with the goal of understanding distress displayed in infants who have been separated from their parents for extended periods of time. In Bowlby's work, they observed the infants' behaviors to prevent separation and be reunited with their caregivers. Typical behaviors included clinging to the parent, excessive crying, and searching for the parent. These behaviors were labeled as 'attachment behaviors' and were considered responses to separation from the primary caregiver, also known as the 'attachment figure'. The attachment figure is someone who provides care, support, and protection to the infant. During the infancy stage, infants are vulnerable and heavily depend on the care and protection of adults around them. From an evolutionary perspective, Bowlby argues that these attachment behaviors increase the chances of being near their attachment figure, therefore, being more luckily to survive. Bowlby states that these attachment behaviors are then regulated by an innate motivational system, the attachment behavioral system,

which is believed to be formed through natural selection to promote infant survival (Bowlby, 1969; Fraley, 2022). Bowlby's theory allows insight into the bond between a child and their primary caregiver, and the influence it has on the child's behavior throughout their lifespan.

Attachment theory highlights the significant influence of early childhood experiences in building the beliefs and expectations of the trustworthiness, responsiveness, and reliability of others. When a child expresses attachment behaviors towards their attachment figure, and the caregiver responds by fulfilling the attachment needs, the child is believed to feel a sense of relief, security, and other positive emotions (Gillath et al., 2016). As the child feels that the attachment figure is reliable and responsive, and nearby, the child is observed to be more sociable, comfortably exploring and playing. However, if the child feels that their well-being is threatened, they seek comfort, attention, and closeness with their attachment figure (Fraley, 2002).

Expanding upon Bowlby's work, Mary Ainsworth had significant contributions to the studies of the attachment system and explored the individual differences in attachment behaviors that Bowlby had acknowledged, which resulted in the development of a coding system for different patterns of attachment behaviors: secure, anxious-ambivalent, and avoidant (Gillath et al., 2016). In the 1970s, Ainsworth and colleagues (1970) created a procedure, named 'strange situation', to study attachment between infants and their parents, specifically the mother. The strange situation involved 12-month-old infants being observed as they were separated, then reunited with their primary caregiver in a laboratory setting. Following the procedure, most of the

infants were upset when the parent leaves the room. When the parent returns into the room, the infant is seen to search, move toward the parent, and were easily comforted by the parent. The children who displayed similar patterns of behavior were described as 'secure'. A portion of infants was perceived as uneasy, and during separation from the parent became extremely distressed. As they were being reunited with their parent, these infants were difficult to soothe and stated to have displayed conflicting behaviors where they wanted to be comforted yet 'punish' the parent. This pattern of behavior was associated with children described as 'anxious-ambivalent'. Lastly, a portion of the infants was observed to not have been affected during separation as they lacked clear signs of distress. Upon reunion with the parent, the children did not appear to be interested in their parent's return, avoiding seeking attention, and were occasionally found to turn their attention to playing with the toys instead. These children were described as 'insecure-avoidant' (Ainsworth et al., 1970; Ainsworth et al., 1978). Following the initial categories introduced through the strange situation, a fourth category was later added called disorganized/disorientated attachment. Main and Solomon (1990) describe disorganized/disorientated children who display behaviors that are confusing, contradicting, or uncoordinated in fulfilling attachment system goals, such as suddenly freezing, or lying face down on the floor. The strange situation study was pivotal in attachment theory research as its empirical approach demonstrated and analyzed attachment behaviors and individual differences in child attachment patterns (Duschinsky, 2015).

### ***Measuring Attachment Dimensions***

When attachment theory first emerged, different attachment styles were coded as four different categories where each person would fall. Early research focusing on adult attachment focused on evaluating individual differences in adult attachment, and their perceptions of relationships. Hazan and Shaver (1987) released a questionnaire to measure individual differences. In this questionnaire, participants were provided with three different paragraphs which participants would select that best fit their behaviors, feelings, and thoughts within close relationships. However, current research conceptualizes and measures individual differences in attachment styles dimensionally rather than categorically.

Attachment styles are suggested to vary in degree instead of a category or label. There are two fundamental dimensions that form attachment patterns: attachment-related anxiety, and attachment-related avoidance. High scores in anxiety indicate the tendency to worry if their attachment figure is reliable, available, and responsive. Low anxiety scores indicate more security in the responsiveness and care from the attachment figure. For avoidance, people who score high in avoidance have difficulties being emotionally close to others and prefer not to rely on others. People who score low in avoidance have little difficulty in being close to others and are more secure about relying on others (Brennan et al., 1998).

### ***Attachment Dimension Combinations and its Influence on Behaviour***

Although attachment styles are not seen as categories, different combinations of the scores from the attachment dimensions are interlinked with the original four

categories. Anxious-ambivalent, avoidant, and disorganized attachment styles differ in development and behavior patterns, however, fall under an umbrella term – insecure attachment styles. Insecure attachment is believed to have developed due to repeated inconsistent, insensitive, unreliable, or possibly rejecting care from the attachment figure or primary caregiver. Meanwhile, secure attachment is said to be a result of consistent, supportive, and attentive care from the attachment figure or primary caregiver (McNeil, 2012).

Secure attachment is considered the ‘ideal’ attachment style as it is a bond where the attachment figure has always been consistent in being reliable, supportive, attending to, and fulfilling the emotional needs of the person. These individuals will often score low on both attachment anxiety and attachment avoidant dimensions. People who are more secure often develop a positive view of themselves, and others around them. They are often comfortable with emotional intimacy, seek emotional support from others with ease, report frequently having positive experiences, and have fewer difficulties in developing meaningful relationships with other people. During times of distress, people with more of a secure attachment are found to be more likely to use adaptive emotion regulation strategies such as seeking support, accepting help to problem solve, and being able to soothe themselves (Brennan et al., 1998; Hazan & Shaver, 1987; McNeil, 2012).

Anxious-ambivalent, also known as preoccupied or anxious attachment, is believed to be a result of inconsistent, insufficient caregiving from the attachment figure or others. As for attachment dimensions, people who are more likely to have an anxious attachment style score higher on attachment anxiety and lower on attachment avoidant

(Brennan et al., 1998). The person perceives the attachment figure as generally unreliable, yet occasionally attentive. As a result, people who have more of an anxious attachment have been found to be associated with a tendency to use hyperactivated or hypervigilant strategies to seek support, attention, and care from their attachment figure (McNeil, 2012). This could include prolonged and enhanced feelings of distress, exaggerated perceptions of threats, and excessive rumination of negative thoughts or potential threats. Anxiously attached individuals can experience the activation of the attachment system despite there being no clear external threat to them or the relationship. Additionally, anxiously attached people have the tendency to experience fears of abandonment, increased anxiety about relying on others and often doubt themselves (Mikulincer & Shaver, 2003).

Avoidant attachment has been associated with a lack of attention and responsive and supportive care in the relationship which leads one to feel that others are generally unreliable, and neglectful as their emotional needs were not being fulfilled. Avoidant attachment style generally scores high on attachment avoidant and low on attachment anxiety dimensions (Brennan et al., 1998). People who are high on the avoidant dimension are believed to accept that their psychological needs will not be fulfilled, and often suppress their needs and become emotionally distant (McNeil, 2012). People who are high in avoidant attachment often feel uncomfortable with emotional intimacy, and often deny the need to seek support with a preference to be self-reliant. People who have an avoidant attachment often utilize these 'deactivating strategies' which are believed to keep the attachment system inactive, and often ignore external threats,

distancing themselves from the threat to avoid experiencing the need of receiving relief from another (Mikulincer & Shaver, 2003).

Lastly, disorganized attachment, also known as fearful-avoidant, is a combination of high anxiety, and high-avoidant behaviors. When measuring attachment dimensions, these individuals are typically found to have scored high on both attachment anxiety and attachment avoidant dimensions (Brennan et al., 1998). Disorganized attachment is believed to be the result of severe abuse, and trauma (McNeil, 2012). It can also occur when the person has witnessed the attachment figure commit violent, traumatizing acts. For example, a parent abusing their partner. This causes the person to view the attachment figure as someone who is someone of care, but also someone who is to be feared. As adults, people who have a more disorganized attachment crave closeness with others but can suddenly pull away from others and see signs of rejection when there are none. It is suggested that this pattern acts as self-protection from potential rejection (Beeney et al., 2017).

Attachment styles have been found to have a significant influence on multiple aspects of an individual's life starting from an individual's childhood and well into adulthood. For example, researchers have found that individual differences in attachment dimensions may influence people's behaviors, emotion regulation skills, perceptions of others and the self, experiences in empathy, conflict resolution skills, how one navigates close relationships with others, and how someone forgives another.

### ***Research on the Associations between Attachment Style, Forgiveness, and Unforgiving Responses***

Forgiveness and unforgiveness have been highlighted in research as being associated with attachment styles. Throughout a social relationship, it is possible for someone to be harmed by another person, whether it was intentional or unintentional. Following the offense or transgression where the person feels harmed, there are various influences on forgiveness, or the lack of it, towards the offender/transgressor. Research suggests the attachment style between the person (victim) and their attachment figure (transgressor) may be a reliable predictor of forgiveness, and engagement with certain unforgiving responses.

Forgiveness is defined as a prosocial process, the intentional act of releasing or reducing the levels of negative emotions, and thoughts, reducing negative behaviors towards a transgressor, and attempting to engage in more positive thoughts and behaviors (Cheadle & Toussaint, 2015; Marks et al., 2013; Worthington et al., 2007). Research has acknowledged that forgiveness is a distinct concept, differing from other prosocial constructs such as pardoning of offenses, and defense mechanisms. It is perceived to be an adaptive strategy for dealing with interpersonal conflict. Forgiveness may be considered one of the important factors in salvaging, and maintaining positive relationships with others, especially highly valued, or intimate relationships. In addition to its impact on close relationships, research has suggested that forgiveness of others may play a role in improving psychological well-being, positively impacting the overall quality of life (Wulandari & Megawati, 2020). Additionally, forgiveness has been associated with reducing the experiences of negative emotions and could reduce the

likelihood of experiencing mental health issues such as chronic stress, anxiety, or depression. Empirical evidence suggests that people who are more forgiving tend to experience greater levels of positive emotions, have more social support, and have greater levels of life satisfaction, and may be associated with improved physical health (Lawler-Row et al., 2011; Liao & Wei, 2015; Li et al., 2020).

It is completely rational and valid to feel hurt after being harmed by someone, especially someone whom the person may have considered close. Research acknowledges that the initial negative feelings, hurt, or thoughts of the person or situation directly after a transgression has occurred are a completely natural response. However, if some of these feelings, thoughts, or behaviors are prolonged, it could cause further difficulties in the relationship and for the person's well-being. These 'unforgiving responses' could act as a barrier to fully engaging in forgiving others. Unforgiveness is described as a collection of negative emotions, and thoughts towards a transgressor such as feelings of hatred, anger, resentment, or hostility (Cheadle & Toussaint, 2015). Unforgiveness could be demonstrated in various ways, both physically and psychologically. Commonly measured unforgiving responses can include avoidant behaviors, motivations for revenge, and rumination. Avoidant behavior is described as disengagement with an active intent to avoid the transgressor (Vans Monsjou et al., 2015). Motivations for revenge, which may also be called 'hostile revenge', are the desire to bring harm to the transgressor (Schmid, 2005). Rumination is described as the frequent, consistent regurgitation of negative feelings, thoughts, or events (Worthington & Wade, 1999). Findings suggest that some unforgiving responses are associated with specific attachment dimensions.

Research has found that individuals with a secure attachment are more likely to grant forgiveness to the transgressor in comparison to those with an insecure attachment. People with a more secure attachment have been found to be more likely to forgive others and display lower engagement in unforgiving responses towards the transgressor (Lawler-Row et al., 2006; Webb et al., 2006). On the other hand, those with a more insecure attachment are reported to show lower levels of forgiveness and are more likely to demonstrate unforgiveness toward the transgressor as they are believed to have a greater tendency to engage in unforgiving responses. Additionally, insecure attachment styles have been found to be associated with maladaptive strategies when in the face of conflict. Such maladaptive strategies hinder the person's ability to engage and utilize more adaptive strategies that may promote forgiveness. For example, someone who is high on the avoidant dimension engages in emotion-focused coping mechanisms rather than engaging in problem-solving. With greater engagement with unforgiving responses, those with insecure attachment face difficulties with granting forgiveness (Hirst et al., 2019; Lawler-Row et al., 2006; Webb et al., 2006). It is acknowledged that those with an insecure attachment are not necessarily opposed to forgiving others, but face greater emotional, and psychological difficulties to be able to engage in forgiveness and work on repairing the relationship.

Research has shown that there is an association between attachment dimensions/styles, the forgiveness of others, and engagement in unforgiving responses following a transgression. The following sections will further discuss and analyze this relationship.

### ***Findings of Secure Attachment Style and its Influence on Forgiveness and Unforgiving Responses***

Secure attachment is found to be associated with a greater likelihood of forgiving others as they overcome emotional barriers with more ease and are reported to have less engagement with unforgiving responses. For example, securely attached individuals acknowledge negative emotions and thoughts following a transgression but are capable of 'letting go' of the negative emotions to focus more on progressive, adaptive strategies when dealing with psychological distress. More active efforts and engagement in adaptive strategies could potentially deter hurt individuals away from destructive behaviors (Barber et al., 2005; Burnette et al., 2007; Wang, 2008).

Forgiveness has been found to be positively influenced by secure attachment and has been reported across several types of close relationships. Kachadourian et al. (2004) evaluated attachment dimensions and the tendency to forgive in romantic partners, and married couples. Participants were asked to complete questionnaires regarding their attachment security to their partner, relationship satisfaction, and tendency to forgive. Results indicated that those who had a more secure attachment style with their partners had greater tendencies to forgive their partners when they commit transgressions. This was related to increased relationship satisfaction. In the second study which focused on married couples, responses were collected from both husband and wife. Supporting the first study, people who had a more secure attachment style with their partners showed a greater tendency to forgive. However, results indicated gender differences in the tendency to forgive. Kachadourian and colleagues (2004) report that husbands who had either higher positive models of self (low

attachment anxiety) or higher positive models of others (low attachment avoidance) were more likely to forgive. For wives, it was reported that a greater tendency to forgive was only associated with those who had both positive models of self and positive models of others (low anxiety, and low avoidance).

Burnette et al. (2007) had a similar approach to Kachadourian et al. (2004) and measured general attachment styles, focused on close relationships, and forgiveness. As predicted, individuals who had a more secure attachment style were more likely to show forgiveness for others in comparison to others with more insecure attachment styles. Additionally, the authors conducted a second study to evaluate whether the attachment style and forgiveness relationship was mediated by rumination. Findings report that participants with a more secure attachment had lower reports of rumination in comparison to others with more of an insecure attachment style. These findings were supported by findings from Wang (2008) who reported that forgiveness was more likely amongst participants who had more of a secure attachment. Similar to the previous studies, Wang (2008) report was based on self-report questionnaires.

Findings in a study with a similar focus conducted by Van Monsjou and colleagues (2015) concluded that those who had a more secure attachment style were associated with higher levels of forgiveness and scored lower in unforgiving responses which included avoidant behavior, holding grudges, and revenge motivations. The first study relied on self-report questionnaires; however, participants were required to write about a transgression that they experienced and that had a moderate to severe impact on them. These transgressions were not focused on any specific relationship. However,

for the second study, the authors utilized an experimental approach to evaluating attachment styles and forgiveness.

In this study, the relationship in focus was between the participant and a confederate or an actor. The attachment type was said to be manipulated by influencing the working models of self and others. The model of self was altered during a rigged word game, and models of others were altered during a closeness-building activity. To develop the secure condition, participants were provided with a partner who was responsive and available and provided positive feedback alongside their partner. To induce an anxious or preoccupied condition, participants were provided a responsive partner but received negative feedback in comparison to their partner. For an avoidant or dismissing condition, the partners were unresponsive and unavailable, but the participant received positive feedback. Lastly, a fearful condition was developed by the participant having an unresponsive and unavailable partner and receiving negative feedback. Once the attachment was manipulated, the actor would commit a transgression against the participants by cheating in a game similar to Jenga, accidentally knocking over a tower of blocks but claiming to the researcher that the participant knocked the blocks over, causing the actor to win unfairly. This is then followed by a self-report questionnaire. The results indicate that those in the secure condition scored greater in forgiveness than unforgiveness. These findings are consistent with and support the previous studies.

As briefly mentioned, people who have a more secure attachment have less engagement in unforgiving responses. It is believed that those with a secure attachment can acknowledge their negative emotions and thoughts, and express them in an

appropriate, less destructive manner with the use of adaptive coping strategies (McNeil, 2012). For example, Burnette et al. (2007) focused on the mediating role of angry rumination between attachment and trait forgiveness, and it was reported that forgiveness was more likely amongst those with greater secure attachment bonds and stated that lower scores of angry ruminations may have influenced the likelihood of forgiveness. Additionally, Lawler-Row et al. (2006) found that people who have more of a secure attachment bond had lower scores in avoidant behaviors and revenge motivations in comparison to those with more of an insecure attachment. This is further supported by the work of Van Monsjou et al. (2015) where those with more of a secure attachment were found to be less likely to hold grudges against the transgressor, and less likely to be vengeful.

People with a more secure attachment are found to make more benign attributions regarding the transgressor's behavior has been reported to be positively linked with forgiveness. Following an offense committed by a romantic partner, those with more of a secure attachment continue to view their partner in a positive light, while having realistic evaluations of their actions and intents. However, feelings of anger were reported if hostile intent was explicitly clear (Kimmes & Durtschi, 2016). It is theorized that those who have a more positive model of others may have a greater tendency to forgive others as they may make benign attributions of the offender's actions, seeing the transgression as circumstance based, and are inclined to engage in more adaptive strategies that would improve the situation (Burnette et al., 2007; Kachadourian et al. 2004).

Overall, greater secure attachment has been associated with greater levels of forgiveness, and lower tendencies to engage with more unforgiving responses which may act as barriers to forgiveness. More adaptive coping strategies, alongside more positive perceptions of the transgressor, encourage the hurt individual to shift their focus on rebuilding the relationship, developing a greater likelihood of forgiveness occurring.

### ***Insecure Attachment Styles and its Influence on Forgiveness and Unforgiving Responses***

Insecure attachment styles have been found to be associated with lower levels of forgiveness in comparison to a secure attachment style. Findings suggest those with a more insecure attachment style tend to face more difficulties in forgiving others. Following a transgression, it has been reported that individuals with a more insecure attachment style have greater tendencies to use maladaptive strategies when dealing with conflict such as poor coping mechanisms, excessive rumination, being in denial, or suppressing emotions. It is theorized that the greater tendency to use maladaptive strategies hinders the individual's ability to engage in more adaptive strategies, such as better self-regulation strategies, actively focusing on problem-solving, or more ease in expressing their distress, which may promote forgiveness (Hirst et al., 2019; Lawler-Row et al., 2006).

Amongst the insecure attachment styles, studies have found those who are high in attachment anxiety have been found to be more inclined to forgive others in comparison to those who have more of an avoidant, or fearful attachment style.

However, findings also suggest that there are still engagements with unforgiving responses which may influence reaching forgiveness to be difficult (Burnette et al., 2007; Hirst et al., 2019; Lawler-Row et al., 2006; Van Monsjou et al., 2015). Findings have suggested that individuals with an anxious attachment style have a great tendency to use maladaptive emotion regulation strategies, particularly hypervigilant strategies, which are believed to act as a potential barrier to forgiving a transgressor (Kachadourian et al., 2004; McNeil, 2012). People who tend to be hypervigilant are described to be on guard regularly, extremely cautious of potential threats, and tending to 'overreact' to situations. This could be shown as heightened, excessive, prolonged experiences of distress, or being unable to soothe themselves. Despite having difficulties in self-soothing techniques, being more inclined to hold grudges, and excessively ruminating on transgressions, those with high attachment anxiety are generally more inclined to be more forgiving of those with more of an insecure attachment style. Some findings suggest that those who have developed a more anxious attachment style have the tendency to make more pessimistic attributions about the other person following a transgression, which in turn is interlinked with less forgiveness (Kimmes & Durtschi, 2016). It is believed that forgiveness is considered challenging as more anxious individuals often unintentionally have their focus gravitate towards other information that feeds into their internal fears of abandonment and rejection by their attachment figure, the transgressor. The fear of abandonment, rejection, the need for closeness, or an attempt to salvage a significant, and highly valued relationship, the act of forgiveness can be perceived as an adaptive strategy to maintain or rebuild the relationship (Bartholomew & Horowitz, 1991).

For those who are high in attachment anxiety, studies have shown that the most likely unforgiving response experienced is excessive rumination and grudge-holding. Van Monsjou et al. (2015) hypothesized that those with a more anxious attachment style would be more likely to hold grudges than other attachment styles. Additionally, it was predicted that those high in attachment anxiety are more likely to experience grudges in comparison to other unforgiving responses such as avoidance and revenge.

Findings from both studies only supported the latter hypothesis. Findings from Chung (2014) indicate that high attachment anxiety was associated with excessive rumination, and negatively affected forgiveness as well as marital satisfaction. Some research suggests that some people who are more prone to holding grudges against transgressors are driven by the need to protect themselves, a defense mechanism, or an attempt to regain control of the situation. However, the long-term impact of holding grudges may not be desirable as it is believed that grudges may maintain the person in a victim mindset or role. It may also increase the likelihood of the person ruminating the negative emotions and thoughts of the situation or the transgressor themselves, which could maintain or increase the strong feelings of anger and distress (Bushman, 2002; Van Monsjou et al., 2015; Witvliet et al., 2001). Additionally, high attachment anxiety has been found to be associated with the excessive rumination of negative thoughts and resentment as a response to a transgression. Burnette et al. (2007) found that rumination mediated the relationship between insecure attachment style and forgiveness. The increased likelihood of excessive angry rumination is suggested to lead those with more insecure attachments through difficulties in forgiving others.

Findings have suggested that people who are high in attachment avoidance face great difficulties in forgiving others. Van Monsjou et al. (2015) reported that forgiveness was low for those with an avoidant attachment style than for other attachment styles in both the self-reported questionnaire and through the experimental approach. This is believed to be difficult due to the behaviors commonly associated with avoidant attachment dimensions. For example, when dealing with psychological or emotional distress, those who are high in attachment avoidance are more likely to engage in deactivating strategies such as physically avoiding the transgressor, emotionally withdrawing, or suppressing negative emotions. Such strategies are predicted to be used subconsciously as a form of self-protection from further emotional pain and to establish an emotional boundary or distance between themselves and the transgressor (McNeil, 2012; Kimmes & Durtschi, 2016; Reynolds et al., 2014). Forgiveness requires some level of emotional engagement with the transgressor, the use of disengaging strategies would lower the chances of forgiving others over time. In contrast to this, avoidant behavior may have some benefits after an offense is committed. This could include providing distance and space for both parties to cool down, offering time for the transgressor to apologize to the victim, or avoiding the transgressor to reduce negative feelings (Gollwtizer & Okimoto, 2021).

Following a transgression, people with a more avoidant attachment style are more likely than others to display avoidant behavior such as keeping a physical and emotional distance from the transgressor, self-isolation, distracting themselves with different activities, suppressing negative emotions, and avoiding certain places. Engagement in avoidant behaviors is often believed to be driven by the desire for self-

protection from the transgressor, or the offense itself. As the victim has established the perception of their transgressor being unreliable, and untrustworthy alongside dealing with an offense committed by the attachment figure, this further strengthens the negative perceptions of the attachment figure. People who are high in attachment avoidance have greater tendencies to make negative attributes of the attachment figure's actions, believing that the action was consistent with the transgressor with no external influence (Guzman-Gonzalez et al., 2020; McNeil, 2012; Van Monsjou et al., 2015).

In some situations, people may engage in potentially destructive responses after a transgression, such as revenge-seeking or revenge motivations, as an attempt to punish the transgressor. Studies report that those who have high attachment avoidance, or high attachment anxiety have been found to be associated with revenge motivations after experiencing a transgression, especially moderate to severe transgressions (Feeney, 2005; Van Monsjou et al., 2015). Revenge motivations tend to be more prominent among males (Martin et al., 2019). However, some findings argue that revenge motivations do not align with attachment avoidance dimensions. Revenge motivations would require the victim to reflect and ruminate on the transgression, then put effort into determining the punishment (Kimmes & Durtschi, 2016). If a transgressor has been punished for their actions, the hurt individuals may experience satisfaction, however, it is only temporary, as it could be followed by negative feelings of the vengeful act as they would have reflected upon the transgression that motivated this behavior (Eder et al., 2021). Research suggests that some individuals experience difficulties in forgiving others if they excessively dwell on motivations for revenge

despite the conflict being over, especially for victims who wish to not forgive the transgressor (Barber et al., 2005). Interestingly, Kimmes and Durtschi (2016) findings reported high levels of revenge motivations for participants who scored high in attachment anxiety. The engagement in revenge motivations goes against previous research theorizing the fear of abandonment, and desire for closeness that those with high attachment anxiety tend to experience, especially when the relationship is threatened. Expanding upon avoidant behaviors and revenge motivations, Barnes et al. (2009) claim that there may be a link between avoidance and revenge motivations, avoidant behavior could be driven by both the need for self-protection from the transgressor, but also a method of punishing the transgressor through social rejection. The feelings of exclusion and uncomfortable feelings of social rejection shown through avoidant behaviors may serve as a satisfying punishment to the transgressor as social connectedness is believed to be vital for the human experience.

As the relationship is threatened and attachment systems are activated, certain attachment dimensions or styles have been found to be associated with specific post-transgression behaviours. Findings indicate that those with greater attachment insecurity face greater difficulties with forgiveness, while are reported to exhibit greater unforgiving behaviours such as avoiding the transgressor, holding grudges, ruminating on negative emotions, and potentially harboring motivations for revenge which may result in further issues in the relationship.

### ***The Potential Mediating Role of Empathy between Attachment Dimensions and Forgiveness, and Unforgiving Responses***

Empathy is believed to be a key role in a person's social life, affecting relationships, cooperation with others, social cognition, and influencing prosocial behaviors. Findings have suggested that empathy may play a role in the relationship between attachment dimensions, forgiveness, and unforgiving responses. Studies have depicted that greater levels of empathy are associated with a greater likelihood of forgiving others (McCullough et al., 1997; Joireman et al., 2002; Toussaint & Webb, 2005).

The definition of empathy has been inconsistent over the years of research. Many researchers have offered various definitions of empathy, some definitions focused on different themes of empathy (Cuff et al., 2014). For example, Davis (1983) defined empathy as a person's reactions to observing the experiences of another person. On the other hand, Pavey and colleagues (2012) define it as an experience of concern and sympathy for another person in distress. A review article by Eklund and Meranius (2021) found four themes of empathy commonly identified in previous research. These themes include understanding, feeling, sharing, and differentiation of self and others. In summary, understanding is considered cognitive, involving the mental state of the other person. A sub-theme would be perspective-taking. The feeling theme is stated to be an appropriate affective response to the other person's situation. The sharing theme involves the similar emotional states experienced to what the other person is experiencing. Lastly, self-other differentiation is the acknowledgment that there is a differentiation between themselves and the other person. These four themes are believed to be interconnected and offer a more complete idea of what empathy may be. For this paper, the definition of empathy

will follow Cuff et al (2014) who described empathy as experienced emotions that are like their perceptions (imagined or directly experienced) and understanding the stimulus emotion while recognizing that the source of these emotions is not their own. Cuff et al. (2014) definition of empathy encompasses the four commonly identified themes identified by Eklund and Meranius (2021).

Insecure attachment styles have been found to have a negative association between insecure attachment styles, and empathy. Greater levels of attachment anxiety and greater levels of attachment avoidance have been found to be associated with lower levels of empathy (Chung, 2014; Khodabakhsh, 2012; Joireman et al., 2002; Kimmes & Durtschi, 2016). The study by Kimmes and Durtschi (2016) depicted a direct association between avoidant attachment and lower levels of forgiveness through the lack of empathy. These findings were consistent with and supported by Chung (2014) and Burnette et al. (2009) who also reported that lower levels of empathy have a negative impact on the forgiveness of others, specifically for those who have higher attachment avoidance. However, the forgiveness of others was mediated and negatively impacted by excessive rumination among those with high attachment anxiety (Burnette et al., 2009; Chung, 2014; Kimmes & Durtschi, 2016).

Findings from Turnage et al. (2012) suggest that forgiveness of others is influenced by empathy. It was stated that individuals who had greater reports of empathy find little difficulty in separating the transgressor from the offense. This could increase the likelihood of the victim forgiving the transgressor. This is consistent with findings from Zechmeister and Romero (2002) which suggest that hurt individuals with high levels of dispositional empathy are more likely to forgive the offender as they tend to make positive

attributes related to the offense. For example, perceiving the offense to be influenced by contexts and situations. Macaskill et al. (2002) suggest that forgiving a transgressor may be more likely if the victim is able to empathize with the transgressor and attempt to view the situation from their perspective while maintaining positive views of themselves. Additionally, findings suggest that those who have greater levels of empathy tend to care for the offender's well-being, acknowledging any guilt or pain they may be experiencing. This is believed to encourage rebuilding or maintaining positive contact with the offender, therefore promoting forgiveness (McCullough et al., 1997).

### ***Gaps in Previous Literature***

Evaluating the empirical and theoretical research on the relationship between attachment dimensions and styles, forgiveness, and unforgiving responses, findings suggest that there is a stable relationship between these variables. However, there are clear gaps in the literature regarding this specific relationship worth acknowledging. One of the major gaps in the literature is that many studies focused on various relationships, and family relationships were not focused on as much as romantic relationships were. As for romantic relationships, some studies covered relationships that varied in status and length (Hirst et al., 2019). Moreover, some studies focused on forgiveness and attachment styles of all different relationship types. For example, the initial study by Van Monsjou et al. (2015) recorded transgressions committed within close relationships, such as romantic partners and family, but also co-workers, and even strangers. Additionally, Lawler-Row et al. (2006) had only two categories for relationship types: parents and non-parents. It is highly possible that a transgression committed by a stranger, and a transgression from a parent or a romantic partner, would not elicit the

same responses. Findings from studies that have combined responses from various relationship types could be questioned. As previously mentioned, there is a heavy focus on attachment styles in romantic relationships, and their influence on forgiveness. Lawler-Row et al. (2006) found that participants of both insecure, and secure attachment styles were more forgiving of parent offenders than non-parent offenders. Additionally, participants were generally more empathetic toward parent offenders than non-parent offenders as well. Based on this report, it is entirely possible that post-transgression responses differ for relationship types. Findings which have combined reports of all relationship types may not be reliable and may not provide an accurate picture of post-transgression responses. Overall, there is a clear lack of focus on various family relationships such as parent and child or sibling relationships.

Additionally, multiple studies were correlational studies. As correlation does not explicitly indicate a cause-and-effect relationship occurring, it is perceived as a limitation as there may be other variables influencing the relationship which may have not been considered. However, due to the nature of this topic and phenomenon, it is difficult to avoid. Manipulation of attachment conditions within long-term, valuable relationships would be difficult and may have some ethical limitations. Van Monsjou et al. (2015) utilized an experimental approach by priming participants with different attachment conditions. Findings from the experimental approach did support past research, but this experiment relied on participants' brief interactions with confederates, who were assumingly strangers. Despite this, an experimental approach progressive feat for the literature as more experimental, and longitudinal studies would be beneficial in

analyzing the relationship between attachment styles, and forgiveness (Hirst et al., 2019).

Another general limitation of the research could be the use of questionnaires or surveys to evaluate attachment dimensions, forgiveness, and unforgiving responses. Similar to the issue of correlational studies, the use of questionnaires is difficult to avoid due to the nature of the topic. Questionnaires have diverse benefits such as ease of distribution, data collection, and gathering large quantities of data for evaluation. It is entirely possible that participants will make reports that may not accurately align with real-time behaviors due to their perceptions of their experiences with emotions, and behaviors. Perceptions of one's own behaviors may be different from what someone else would perceive them to be. With a topic of this nature, some unforgiving responses may be perceived as 'negative' or 'undesirable' by some people. However, the use of questionnaires or surveys allows participants to remain anonymous which may relieve participants of any fears of judgment, and to respond more transparently in comparison to making responses with others nearby or observing.

### ***The Current Study***

This current study will focus on attachment styles and their influence on forgiveness, and unforgiving responses within family relationships, specifically between adult children, and a parent. It will also explore if this relationship is mediated by empathy. Data collected from the New Zealand general population will be used to assess the levels of forgiveness, unforgiveness, and empathy of adults after reflecting on a transgression committed against them by a parent.

This study will aim to answer the following questions:

1. Does attachment style influence forgiveness post-transgression within adult children and parent relationships?
2. Does empathy mediate the relationship between attachment style, forgiveness, and unforgiving responses?

It is hypothesized that participants who have a more secure attachment style with their selected parent will show greater levels of forgiveness of others, have lower scores in unforgiving responses, and show higher levels of empathy. For those who are high in attachment anxiety, it is predicted that participants will show greater signs of rumination, and moderate scores in empathy and forgiveness. Lastly, participants who are high in attachment avoidance are predicted to show greater scores in avoidance behaviors and the lowest scores in forgiveness and empathy in comparison to other attachment dimensions. Due to the type of relationship being evaluated, it is hypothesized that the differences between forgiveness and unforgiving responses will not be significantly different across all attachment dimensions.

Family relationships were chosen to become a core focus of this study as past research has had a heavy focus on romantic relationships ranging from young dating to marriages, or a combination of relationships including work colleagues. There was sparse research done focusing on family relationships such as siblings, and parent and child bonds. As attachment insecurity has been found to influence empathy and post-transgression responses within romantic relationships or studies that combined relationship types, it raised the question of if these post-transgression responses can be found in certain family bonds. Based on past findings, it is highly likely that attachment

insecurity in parent and child relationships influences empathy and post-transgression responses.

The post-transgression responses focused on in this study will include rumination, revenge motivations, avoidant behaviour, and benevolence. Following a transgression, victims will experience reactions and responses to the transgressor and the situation. Such responses could be attempts of punishing the transgressor, forgiving them, or being a coping mechanism. Previous studies focused on these common post-transgression responses. As some studies solely focused on singular or selected post-transgression responses, this study combines various responses which allows the opportunity to compare responses, and to see if there are potential relationships between the post-transgression responses. Furthermore, research has shown an emphasis on romantic relationships. This study will attempt to evaluate the same post-transgression responses in a family context to find potential similarities and differences. As previously discussed, empathy is considered a broad term that is made up of different themes. This study will evaluate empathy on a trait level, and empathy will be analyzed through the scale subscales. Each subscale emphasizes different themes of empathy, and it is plausible for one of these themes to be a driving factor in trait empathy. Evaluating these subscales could provide deeper insight into potential drivers of empathy which may aid in future directions of research.

## **Chapter 2:**

### **Methods**

#### **Design**

This study used a correlational research design to explore the relationship between attachment style, forgiveness, and unforgiving responses in an adult child and parent relationship. For this study, the predictor was attachment anxiety and attachment avoidance. Forgiveness and unforgiving responses were the criterion variables. Empathy, including personal distress, empathic concern, and perspective-taking subscales, was the proposed mediator of this relationship. Data collection was conducted utilizing an online questionnaire created on Qualtrics and distributed on online platforms.

#### **Participants**

Participants were recruited from December 2021 to June 2022 primarily on various Facebook groups and pages including the researcher's personal Facebook page. Information about the research was posted on various local community groups and pages in New Zealand, as well as international community groups and pages related to research participation and recruitment. Information about the research was also shared on various Auckland University of Technology course pages on Blackboard. Participants used the link provided with the information to access the information sheet on Qualtrics before whether to proceed to the questionnaire.

After filtering through uncompleted or partially completed questionnaires and removal of participants who met the exclusion criteria ( $n =$ ), there were a total of 183 participants. There was a total of 157 females, 23 males, and 3 gender-diverse participants. More than half of the participants identified between the ages of 18 – 24 (56.8%) followed by ages 25 – 29 (16.4%). In terms of ethnic groups, 63.4% of participants identified as NZ European/Pakeha, and 16.4% identified as Māori. For this study, 129 (70.5%) participants focused on their relationships with their mothers, and 54 (29.5%) focused on their relationships with their fathers.

## **Materials and Instruments**

### ***Attachment Style***

Attachment orientation was measured using the Close Relationships Version of the Adult Attachment Scale (Collins, 1996). As this questionnaire focused on the individual's relationship with a parent, the wording of the statements in this scale was edited to ensure the participant focused on a specific parent. For example, the general statement "I find it easy to get close to others." is altered to "I find it easy to get close to my mother/father". Participants were required to read each statement item and click on the response they believe is accurate to how they felt. There are three subscales, each with six items. This scale consisted of 18 items in total. Responses are measured on a 5-point scale ranging from 1 (*not at all characteristics of me*) to 5 (*very characteristic of me*). The three subscales include Close, Depend, and Anxiety. The Close subscale

measures the extent to which a person feels comfortable with intimacy and closeness. The Depend subscale measures the extent to which a person feels that he or she can depend on others around them when needed. The Anxiety subscale measures the extent to which the person worries about being unloved or rejected. The original scoring procedure involves combining scores in each subscale to indicate an attachment style. For example, someone scoring high on the Close scale, high on Depend, and low on Anxiety would show a more secure attachment. However, this study will use alternative scoring which follows attachment dimensions, where attachment styles are perceived as more of a continuum, rather than placing individuals into different categories of attachment styles. The alternative scoring will focus on two attachment dimensions: attachment anxiety (i.e., models of self) and attachment avoidance (i.e., models of other) (Brennan et al., 1998). An individual who has a more secure attachment style would score low in both attachment anxiety (positive model of self) and attachment avoidance (positive model of others). Individuals who score high in both or one attachment dimension would indicate a greater likelihood of an insecure attachment. Scores for each attachment dimension were created by combining responses for each subscale. The attachment anxiety dimension consisted of six items, with scores ranging from 6 to 30. The attachment avoidance dimension was created by combining scores from the Close and the Depend subscales and consisted of 12 items, and scores ranged from 12 to 60. Some items were reverse-coded prior to being combined for final scoring. The original scoring of this scale was reported to be valid and reliable (Shevlin et al., 2014). However, the use of the alternative scoring in this study was found to not be a reliable and valid scale as the internal consistency of the scale is low, with a

Cronbach's  $\alpha$  of 0.69 for attachment avoidance and a Cronbach's  $\alpha$  of 0.60 for attachment anxiety.

### ***Trait Forgiveness***

The Trait Forgiveness scale (TFS) (Berry et al., 2005) was used to measure participants' trait forgiveness. Forgiveness is defined as the replacement of negative emotions with positive emotions. Berry et al. (2005) described trait forgiveness as the tendency to forgive interpersonal transgressions across different situations and over time. This scale consisted of 10 items, asking participants to indicate on a scale of 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 5 (*strongly agree*) how relevant the statements were regarding their own perceptions of forgiveness of others. This included statements such as "I try to forgive others even when they do not feel guilty for what they did.", and "People close to me probably think I hold a grudge too long.". Five items out of 10 were reversed prior to the final scoring. Following this, the responses between 1-5 are combined to create the final score, higher scores reflecting higher levels of trait forgiveness. Scores ranged between 10 to 50. Higher scores indicated greater levels of trait forgiveness. The validity and reliability test showed that the internal consistency of this scale was acceptable with a Cronbach's  $\alpha$  of 0.68.

### ***Unforgiving responses***

Two different psychometric scales were used to measure and evaluate unforgiving responses. The Transgressions Related Interpersonal Motivations Inventory

(TRIM-18) developed by McCullough (1998) was used to measure revenge, avoidance, and benevolence. The original scale contains 18 items in total across the three subscales. In this study, 17 items were included in the questionnaire due to human error. Specifically, an item for the benevolence subscale was unaccounted for. There was a total of 5 items for revenge, 7 items measuring for avoidance, and 5 items for benevolence. Participants indicate how relevant each statement was for themselves using a 5-point scale from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 5 (*strongly agree*). For revenge, this included statements such as “I’ll make him/her pay.”. An example of avoidance includes “I am trying to keep distance between us as much as possible.”. Benevolence included statements such as “Despite what she/he did, I want us to have a positive relationship.”. Levels of benevolence, avoidant, and revenge motivation will be based on the final scores of each subscale. Scoring ranged from 5 to 25 for the revenge subscale and benevolence subscale, and scores ranged from 7 to 35 for the avoidance subscale. Higher scores indicated a greater tendency toward avoidance, revenge motivation, or benevolence. Cronbach’s  $\alpha$  for the revenge subscale was .26, .37 for the benevolence subscale, and .20 for the avoidance subscale. The internal consistency for this scale was unexpectedly low.

### ***Rumination***

Rumination was measured through the Rumination-Reflection Questionnaire (Trapnell & Campbell, 1999). For this study, only the rumination scale was used. Rumination is described as the frequent and constant contemplation of negative thoughts, feelings, or events (Worthington & Wade, 1999). The subscale consisted of 12

items, measured on a 5-point scale. Participants were required to choose a response between 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 5 (*strongly agree*) based on how relevant each statement is. Examples of statements include “I never ruminate or dwell on myself long.” and “Sometimes it is hard for me to shut off thoughts about myself.” Cronbach’s  $\alpha$  of 0.86 was found for the rumination subscale, internal consistency is acceptable therefore making this scale reliable and valid. For the final scoring, three items are reverse coded. Higher scores indicate greater levels of rumination. The maximum score for this subscale is 60, and the lowest potential score is 12.

### ***Empathy***

The Interpersonal Reactivity Index (IRI) (Davis, 1980) will be used to measure participants’ trait empathy. This scale had four different subscales: perspective-taking, empathic concern, personal distress, and fantasy. Perspective-taking is a person’s tendency to adopt another person’s psychological point of view. Empathic concern covers a person’s level of sympathy and concern for others. Personal distress focuses on the person’s feelings of anxiety around intense interpersonal situations. Fantasy focuses on a person’s tendencies to imaginatively place themselves into the actions and feelings of fictional characters in movies, books, or plays (Davis, 1983). For this specific study, the Fantasy subscale was not used. Fantasy included statements such as “I really get involved with the feelings of the characters in a novel.” and “Becoming extremely involved in a good book or movie is somewhat rare for me.”. In the context of participants reflecting upon a past transgression with a parent, the relationship with their parent, and their responses to the transgressions, the Fantasy subscale did not seem to

be directly related to the topic. It included 21 items (seven items in each subscale), and all were measured on a 5-point scale. Participants were required to respond to the statements by indicating on a scale from 1 (*does not describe me well*) to 5 (*describes me well*). Examples include “I sometimes find it difficult to see things from the ‘other guy’s point of view.”, “I sometimes feel helpless when I am in the middle of an emotional situation.”, “I would describe myself as a pretty soft-hearted person.”. Seven items were reverse-coded for the final scoring. Responses to items were combined to determine the final score for the scale. Scoring in each subscale ranged from 7 to 35. A greater score would indicate higher levels of empathy. The internal consistency of the scale was deemed satisfactory, and reliable with Empathetic Concern scoring a Cronbach’s  $\alpha$  of 0.75, Perspective-Taking at 0.71, and Personal Distress at 0.74.

## **Procedure**

Participants had access to this research by clicking on a link on a social media page, primarily on the platform *Facebook*. The link will bring participants to an information sheet covering important information for participants including the purpose of the study, what they could expect to take part in the study, eligibility criteria, and participants being made aware of possible emotional risks due to the topic. Participants were also informed of how they can end participation, provided contact information if they would like to seek help for emotional distress, and were given the option of joining a prize draw at the end of the questionnaire. Participants will be required to provide consent for participation, and to indicate if they were enrolled in specific courses at Auckland University of Technology at the time of participation. The eligibility criteria

required participants to not be a student of a research supervisor during the data collection period to avoid any misconceptions that participation in the study would contribute to the course grade. Additionally, there were questions regarding the participant's fluency in English, and if they had a current, ongoing relationship with at least one parent.

Following this, participants were asked to focus on one parental relationship of their choice. Although the general structure and measurements in the questionnaire remained the same, the wording of some statements differed depending on the parental relationship. Before the psychometric scales were presented, participants were provided a large text box and presented with this statement: "While thinking about your relationship with your mother/father, use the space below to write about a situation within the past 2 years where she had committed a moderate to severe wrongdoing where you were left deeply hurt." The purpose of this segment was to have participants focus on a particular event within the same time frame and prepare participants to reflect on their responses to transgression. Recall of a previous transgression is a commonly used approach in forgiveness research, alongside hypothetical scenarios (Hirst et al., 2019).

Participants would press "next" when they were ready to progress. After the participants had recalled a past transgression, participants were then presented with the Transgression Reflection scale. This was then followed by the TRIM-18 scale, the Rumination scale, the Adult Attachment Scale, the TFS, and then the IRI. After the measurements were completed, participants were given the opportunity to present any further details of their relationship with their focus parent. Additionally, a series of

demographic questions were presented. This included questions regarding the participants' ethnicity, age group, and gender.

At the end of the questionnaire, details of well-being support were provided as it is acknowledged that the topic of this questionnaire may cause emotional distress. Following the reminder, participants were asked if they were interested in participating in a prize draw (as previously mentioned in the information sheet prior to the questionnaire). If participants were interested, they were required to press the hyperlink and were redirected to a Google Forms page where their email addresses were requested. This was to ensure that their personal details were not interlinked with the completed questionnaire.

## **Chapter 3:**

### **Results**

General preliminary analyses included testing for normality, identifying outliers, collecting descriptive statistics for all variables, and conducting correlation analyses between all the variables. Linear regression models were analysed using IBM SPSS Statistics (2021) for correlation and regression tests to investigate each research question. PROCESS Macro was used for mediation analyses (Hayes, 2021).

#### **Preliminary Analyses**

##### ***Exclusion Criteria***

Participants who did not complete the full questionnaire or provided evidence of inattentive responding, alongside participants who reported being part of certain AUT courses were excluded from the analysis.

##### ***Correlation Amongst Variables***

The Pearson correlation coefficients for the relationships among all are presented in Table 1. For attachment dimensions, attachment anxiety had a positive significant correlation with benevolence and total empathy, indicating that higher attachment anxiety correlates with higher scores in benevolence and total empathy. Attachment anxiety had a significant negative correlation with avoidant behaviors which indicates that higher attachment anxiety is associated with lower avoidant behaviors. Moreover, attachment avoidance has a significant and negative correlation with forgiveness and benevolence, indicating that higher attachment avoidance correlates

with lower reports of forgiveness and benevolence. Attachment avoidance had significant positive correlations with rumination, revenge, and avoidant behaviors. This indicates that higher attachment avoidance correlates with higher scores of ruminations, revenge, and avoidant behaviors. Forgiveness was found to have significant negative correlations with rumination, revenge, and avoidant behaviors, indicating that as forgiveness increases, revenge, ruminations, and avoidant behaviors decrease. Forgiveness has significant, positive correlations with benevolence, and empathy. This indicates that as forgiveness increases, benevolence and empathy scores increase. Finally, empathy had significant positive correlations with attachment anxiety and forgiveness.

**Table 1***Descriptive Statistics and Correlations Between All Variables*

Scale/Subscale	<i>M (SD)</i>	Pearson Correlations								
		1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	
1. Attachment Anxiety	15.97 (3.59)	--								
2. Attachment Avoidance	33.55 (8.29)	-.02	--	-	.					
3. Forgiveness	45.13 (10.46)	.13	-.04	--	-					
4. Rumination	45.57 (7.84)	-.01	.23**	-.34**	--					
5. Revenge	7.33 (2.98)	.06	.45**	-.15*	-.02	--				
6. Benevolence	18.67 (4.36)	.19*	-.49**	.32**	-.16*	-.48**	--			
7. Avoidant Behaviours	16.69 (7.86)	-.21*	.69**	.15*	.15*	.57**	-.68**	--		
8. Empathy Total	75.25 (9.11)	.17*	.14	.34**	.09	-.06	.00	.03	--	

Note: \* $p < .05$ . \*\* $p < .01$

## **Effects of Attachment Style on Forgiveness and Unforgiving Responses**

The first aim of this study was to determine if attachment styles influence forgiveness post-transgression within adult child and parent relationships. It was hypothesized that attachment dimensions would influence forgiveness and unforgiving responses post-transgression. Regression analysis was used to evaluate the effects of attachment dimensions in predicting forgiveness and unforgiving responses. Independence of observations, homoscedasticity, and linearity was checked and showed that the data met the assumptions for regression analysis.

Table 2 and Table 3 indicate that attachment style does not significantly influence forgiveness. However, this was marginal for attachment anxiety. Attachment style was found to significantly influence other variables. Findings displayed in Table 2 indicate that attachment anxiety significantly predicts avoidant behaviors, and data suggest that attachment anxiety negatively affects avoidant behaviors. Furthermore, attachment anxiety significantly predicts benevolence, suggesting that attachment anxiety positively affects benevolence. Forgiveness appears to be affected by attachment anxiety; this indicates that attachment anxiety slightly increases forgiveness. Lastly, attachment anxiety significantly predicts empathy, indicating that attachment anxiety slightly increases empathy.

As for attachment avoidance, it was found to be negatively associated with benevolence, and positively associated with rumination, revenge, and avoidance. Attachment avoidance significantly predicts rumination, avoidant behavior, and revenge, results indicate that attachment avoidance slightly increases rumination, while moderately increasing revenge, and avoidant behavior. Benevolence is shown to be

significantly predicted by attachment avoidance, with data suggesting that attachment avoidance decreases benevolence. Additionally, it was found to be marginally associated with empathy.

**Table 2**

*Regression Analysis for Attachment Anxiety Among All Participants*

	<i>b</i>	<i>SE</i>	$\beta$	<i>t</i>	<i>p</i>	<i>95% CI</i>	
						<i>LL</i>	<i>UL</i>
Forgiveness	.37	.22	.13	1.74	.08	-.01	.80
Rumination	-.00	.16	-.01	-.13	.89	-.34	.30
Revenge	-.05	.06	.06	-.80	.43	-.17	.07
Avoidance	-.46	.16	-.21	-2.86	.01	-.77	-.14
Benevolence	.23	.09	.19	2.56	.01	.05	.40
Empathy	.43	.19	.17	2.33	.02	.07	.80

**Table 3***Regression Analysis for Attachment Avoidance Among All Participants*

	<i>b</i>	<i>SE</i>	$\beta$	<i>t</i>	<i>p</i>	<i>95% CI</i>	
						<i>LL</i>	<i>UL</i>
Forgiveness	-.05	.09	-.04	-.51	.61	-.23	.14
Rumination	.22	.07	.23	3.23	.001	-.09	.36
Revenge	.16	.02	.45	6.77	<.001	.12	.21
Avoidance	.66	.05	.69	12.88	<.001	.56	.76
Benevolence	-.26	.03	-.49	-7.59	<.001	-.33	-.19
Empathy	.15	.08	.14	1.89	.061	-.01	.31

***Gender Differences in the Influence of Attachment Style, Forgiveness, and Unforgiving Responses***

As attachment styles seem to affect a number of variables, we investigated whether these effects varied by participants' gender. Regression analyses were conducted between attachment dimensions, forgiveness, and unforgiving responses for all gender groups, and the results indicate that there are differences between men and women. Attachment anxiety was associated with avoidant behaviour ( $\beta = .52$ ,  $p = .01$ ) and revenge ( $\beta = .53$ ,  $p = .01$ ) amongst men. For women, attachment anxiety was associated with avoidant behaviour ( $\beta = -.31$ ,  $p < .001$ ), revenge ( $\beta = -.20$ ,  $p = .01$ ), and benevolence ( $\beta = .24$ ,  $p < .01$ ). Our sample of gender-diverse participants ( $n = 3$ ) was too small to conduct meaningful analyses.

As for attachment avoidance, men were found to be negatively associated with benevolence ( $\beta = -.83, p < .001$ ), and positively associated with revenge ( $\beta = .62, p < .01$ ) and avoidant behaviour ( $\beta = .89, p < .001$ ). For women, attachment avoidance was found to be negatively associated with benevolence ( $\beta = -.45, p < .001$ ), and positively associated with rumination ( $\beta = .23, p = .04$ ), revenge ( $\beta = .46, p < .001$ ), avoidant behaviour ( $\beta = .67, p < .001$ ) and the personal-distress subscale ( $\beta = 1.66, p = .04$ ) of empathy.

### **Differences Between Mother and Father Relationships**

For this study, participants had the option of focusing on their relationship with their mother or father. We were also interested to see if there were differences between participant and mother versus participant and father relationship findings.

Focusing on relationships between adult children and their mothers, Table 4 shows that attachment anxiety significantly predicts forgiveness, and benevolence, suggesting that forgiveness, empathy, and benevolence increase as participants' reports of attachment anxiety with their mothers increase. Results also indicate that attachment anxiety significantly predicts avoidance, as attachment anxiety increases avoidant behavior decreases. Table 4 also indicates that attachment avoidance within adult child and mother relationships may be associated with multiple variables. Participants who had reported greater attachment avoidance with their mothers showed more rumination, revenge, and avoidant behaviours, as well as lower levels of benevolence.

**Table 4**

*Regression Analysis of Attachment Anxiety, and Attachment Avoidance in Participant and Mother Relationships*

	Attachment Anxiety				Attachment Avoidance			
	$\beta$	<i>t</i>	<i>p</i>	95% CI	$\beta$	<i>t</i>	<i>p</i>	95% CI
Forgiveness	.21	2.47	.02	.12, 1.09	-.03	-.31	.76	-.26, .19
Rumination	.00	.05	.96	-.08, .09	.21	2.47	.02	.04, .37
Revenge	-.07	-.83	.41	-.20, .08	.42	5.17	<.001	.09, .21
Avoidance	-.23	-2.61	.01	-.81, -.11	.63	9.03	<.001	.45, .70
Benevolence	.18	2.06	.04	.01, .41	-.41	-5.12	<.001	-.31, -.14

**Table 5**

*Regression Analysis of Attachment Anxiety, and Attachment Avoidance in Participant and Father Relationships*

	Attachment Anxiety				Attachment Avoidance			
	$\beta$	$t$	$p$	95% CI	$\beta$	$t$	$p$	95% CI
Forgiveness	.08	.56	.58	-.63, 1.11	.15	-1.10	.28	-.49, .15
Rumination	-.11	-.79	.43	-.98, .43	-.31	2.38	.02	.05, .54
Revenge	-.07	-.53	.60	-.33, .19	.56	4.82	<.001	.11, .27
Avoidance	-.19	-1.40	.17	-1.28, .23	.83	10.75	<.001	.69, .54
Benevolence	.24	1.79	.08	-.04, .72	-.68	-6.62	<.001	-.46, -.25

Table 5 displays the regression tests for attachment anxiety, and attachment avoidance for participant and father relationships. Attachment anxiety was found to be a marginal predictor of benevolence. Attachment anxiety did not significantly predict other variables. It also indicated that attachment avoidance predicted rumination, revenge, avoidant behavior, and benevolence. Attachment avoidance does not predict forgiveness or empathy on a significant level.

## **Empathy as a Potential Mediator of Attachment and Post-Transgression**

### **Responses**

It was hypothesized that lower reports of attachment anxiety and attachment avoidance would positively predict forgiveness and lower reports of unforgiving responses. Additionally, it was hypothesized that empathy will mediate this relationship. An additional series of regression analyses were conducted to investigate this. Regression analyses were conducted for total empathy and attachment dimensions for each parent and participant relationship. For mother and participant relationships, attachment anxiety ( $\beta = .25, p < .01$ ) and attachment avoidance ( $\beta = .20, p = .02$ ) were found to be positive predictors of total empathy. However, no significant effects were found for father and participant relationships.

Further analyses consisted of regression tests between attachment dimensions and each subscale of empathy as there may be a potential underlying driver for total empathy scores. As shown in Table 6, attachment anxiety and attachment avoidance in mother and participant relationships were found to have significant effects on the personal distress subscale. There were no other significant effects found in mother-and-participant relationships, and no significant effects were found in father-and-participant relationships.

**Table 6**

*Regression Analysis Between Empathy Subscales and Attachment for Both Parent Relationship*

	Empathy Concern				Perspective Taking				Personal Distress			
	$\beta$	<i>t</i>	<i>p</i>	95% CI	$\beta$	<i>t</i>	<i>p</i>	95% CI	$\beta$	<i>t</i>	<i>p</i>	95% CI
The associations between attachment and empathy subscales for mother and participant relationships												
Attachment Anxiety	.04	.48	.63	-.12, .20	.02	.27	.79	-.21, .28	.28	3.25	.00	.14, .57
Attachment Avoidance	.06	.67	.51	-.05, .10	.16	1.81	.07	-.01, .21	.21	2.41	.02	.02, .22
The associations between attachment and empathy subscales for father and participant relationships												
Attachment Anxiety	.04	.32	.75	-.27, .36	.03	.18	.86	-.37, .45	-.09	-.62	.54	-.50, .27
Attachment Avoidance	-.03	-.17	.85	-.13, .11	-.19	-1.36	.18	-.25, .05	.21	1.54	.13	-.03, .25

Furthermore, Table 7 displays the effects of each empathy subscale on forgiveness and unforgiving responses. Forgiveness was found to be significantly predicted by empathy concern, and perspective-taking. Empathic concern was also found to be a negative significant predictor of avoidant behaviour. Perspective-taking was found to be a positive significant predictor of benevolence as well. Personal distress was a positive significant predictor of rumination and revenge, and a negative significant predictor of benevolence. Several dimensions of empathy were found to be associated with our outcome variables, but only the personal distress dimension was related to attachment anxiety and attachment avoidance between participants and their mothers. Therefore, mediation analyses were conducted on attachment anxiety to forgiveness, rumination, revenge, benevolence, and avoidant behaviour with personal distress as potential mediators.

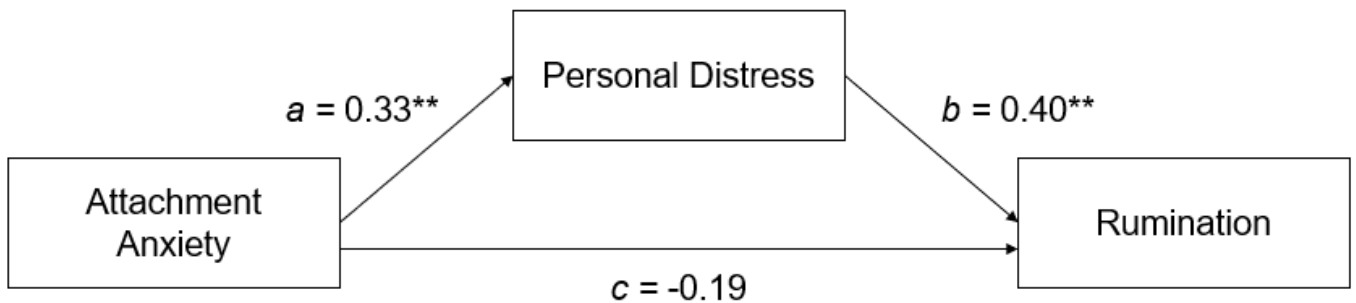
For further regression analysis of each empathy subscale with each outcome variable, please refer to Table 8 in Appendix C.

**Table 7***Regression Analysis Between Empathy Subscales and All Variables for All Participants*

	Empathy Concern				Perspective Taking				Personal Distress			
	$\beta$	$t$	$p$	95% CI	$\beta$	$t$	$p$	95% CI	$\beta$	$t$	$p$	95% CI
Forgiveness	.19	2.55	.01	.13, 1.01	.46	6.90	<.001	.68, 1.23	-.07	-.93	.35	-.49, .18
Rumination	.05	.70	.48	-.22, .45	-.10	-1.33	.19	-.38, .08	.24	3.28	.00	.16, .65
Revenge	-.16	-2.21	.03	-.27, -.02	-.13	-1.74	.08	-.16, .01	.16	2.18	.03	.01, .20
Avoidance	-.08	-1.04	.30	-.51, .16	.02	.20	.84	-.21, .26	-.13	-1.66	.10	-.77, .07
Benevolence	.09	1.27	.21	-.07, .31	.17	2.37	.02	.03, .28	-.19	-2.56	.01	-.31, .04

## Figure 1

*The Mediating Effect of Personal Distress in the Association Between Attachment Anxiety and Rumination in Mother and Participant Relationships*

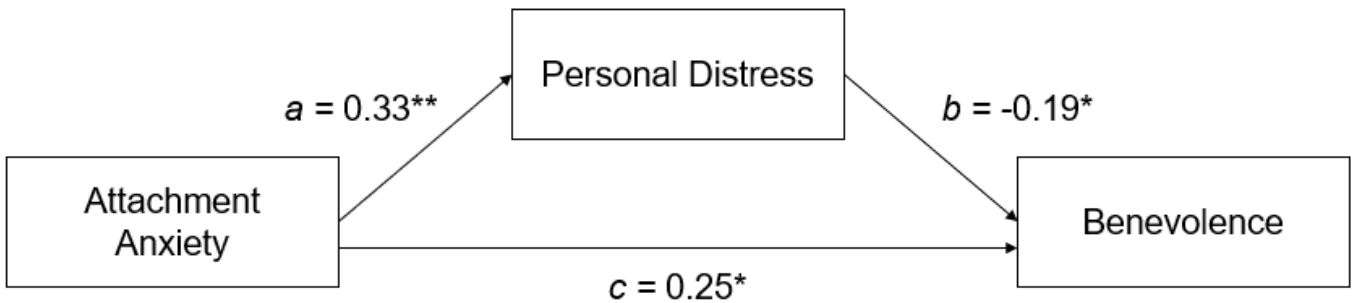


Note: \* $p < .05$ , \*\* $p < .01$

A mediation analysis showed that within mother and participant relationships attachment anxiety was indirectly associated with rumination through its association with personal distress. As seen in Figure 1, greater reports of attachment anxiety were interlinked with personal distress ( $a = 0.33$ ,  $p < .01$ ), and greater personal distress was related to greater reports of rumination ( $b = 0.40$ ,  $p = .01$ ). A 95% confidence interval based on 5000 bootstrap samples indicate that the indirect effect ( $ab = 0.14$ ) was above zero (0.02 to 0.31). This indicates a significant, positive indirect effect.

## Figure 2

*The Mediating Effect of Personal Distress in the Association Between Attachment Anxiety and Benevolence in Mother and Participant Relationships*



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

Additionally, a mediating relationship was found for attachment anxiety and benevolence. As presented in Figure 2, higher reports of attachment anxiety were related to personal distress ( $a = 0.33$ ,  $p < .01$ ), and lower reports of personal distress were associated with increased benevolence ( $b = -0.19$ ,  $p = .02$ ). The 95% confidence interval based on 5000 bootstraps indicates that the indirect effects ( $ab = 0.25$ ,  $p = .01$ ) were below zero (-0.14 to -0.00). This indicates a significant, negative indirect effect. Greater reports of benevolence continued to occur after accounting for the indirect effects of attachment anxiety through personal distress ( $c = 0.25$ ,  $p = .01$ ).

No other significant mediating effects were found between attachment anxiety and avoidance ( $ab = 0.03$ , -0.08, 0.14), revenge ( $ab = 0.03$ , -0.03, 0.09), and forgiveness ( $ab = -0.03$ , -0.19, 0.10)

## **Chapter 4:**

### **Discussion**

#### **Aims and Hypotheses**

This study examined how adult attachment shapes forgiving and unforgiving responses within the context of parent-child transgressions. Additionally, this study aimed to determine if the relationship between attachment styles and post-transgression responses is mediated by empathy. It was hypothesized that greater attachment security would be associated with greater forgiving responses, and lower unforgiving responses (i.e., rumination, revenge, and avoidance). It was also hypothesized that empathy would mediate the relationship between attachment security and forgiveness. More specifically, it was hypothesized that greater empathy mediated the relationship between greater attachment security and greater forgiveness. The results indicated that attachment anxiety or attachment avoidance was not associated with forgiveness as anticipated. However, it was found that greater attachment anxiety and attachment avoidance were associated with more unforgiving responses. As for attachment security, post-transgression responses were not evidently clear. However, it was anticipated for greater security attachment to be associated with greater forgiveness, and benevolence, as well as lower rumination, revenge, and avoidance.

#### **Attachment Anxiety and Post-Transgression Responses**

Attachment anxiety did not predict forgiveness as anticipated. The findings from this study were not consistent with previous research (Burnette et al., 2007; Chung, 2014; Kimmes & Durtschi, 2016; Van Monsjou et al., 2015). It was theorized that

forgiveness for the offender is difficult to achieve for those with greater attachment anxiety especially if they engaged in unforgiving responses such as holding grudges (Kimmes & Durtschi, 2016). On the other hand, Bartholomew and Horowitz (1991) suggest that people with greater attachment anxiety have a tendency to harbor fears of abandonment or rejection from the attachment figure which may drive them to forgive the transgressor as an attempt to maintain or salvage the relationship with the attachment figure. Interestingly greater forgiveness was predicted by greater attachment anxiety among participant and mother relationships. This was not found for participant and father relationships.

Benevolence was reported to be associated with greater attachment anxiety. Despite dealing with the feelings of hurt from the transgression, those with greater attachment anxiety continue to view the attachment figure, the transgressor, in a positive light and still wish to maintain a relationship with the transgressor. This was expected as greater attachment anxiety is believed to be associated with a desire for closeness with their attachment figure and reported to be less likely to avoid the transgressor (McNeil, 2012; Martin et al., 2019). It was anticipated for greater attachment anxiety to be associated with greater benevolence, and forgiveness. However, it appears that even when forgiveness is difficult to offer, the desire to maintain a relationship remains.

Past research has indicated that greater attachment anxiety was associated with excessive rumination as a post-transgression response (Burnette et al., 2007; Chung, 2014; Van Monsjou et al., 2015). Surprisingly, this was not consistent with the findings of this study. Rumination was not found to be associated with attachment anxiety as the

literature indicated. Chung (2014) and Burnette et al. (2007) found significant associations between attachment anxiety and excessive rumination of negative emotions, thoughts, or even resentment following transgressions which negatively impacted opportunities for forgiveness, and levels of satisfaction within the relationship. It was theorized that those with greater attachment anxiety can be overly preoccupied and hyper-fixated on the availability of the attachment figure leading to excessive rumination, especially following a transgression where the relationship is threatened (Burnette et al., 2007; Hazan & Shaver, 1987). However, this does not seem to be the case in this current study.

As anticipated, greater attachment anxiety was found to be associated with lower levels of avoidance. This was consistent with previous literature and interlinked with theories surrounding attachment anxiety and tendencies to seek closeness with the attachment figure (Bartholomew and Horowitz, 1991; McNeil, 2012). Van Monsjou et al. (2015) reported those with greater attachment anxiety to have the lowest reports of avoidance in comparison to other attachment styles. This was shown in both correlational and experimental designs presented by Van Monsjou and colleagues (2015). This was anticipated as avoidant behaviors, such as ignoring the transgressor, physically avoiding them, or having minimal interactions with the transgressor are the opposite of reported behaviours of those with greater attachment anxiety (Hirst et al., 2019; McNeil, 2012).

### **Attachment Avoidance and Post-Transgression Responses**

Greater attachment avoidance was found to be associated with multiple post-transgression responses. Specifically, greater attachment avoidance was found to be

associated with lower benevolence. On the other hand, greater attachment avoidance was found to be related to greater engagement with excessive rumination, revenge, and avoidance. Multiple studies report that greater attachment avoidance was associated with a lower likelihood of forgiveness (Chung, 2014, Lawler-Row et al., 2006; Hirst et al., 2019; Van Monsjou et al., 2015). However, findings from this paper do not explicitly and significantly predict forgiveness. This was unexpected yet interesting as attachment avoidance had significant associations with all but one variable.

Based on prior literature, it was expected for greater attachment avoidance to be associated with avoidance following transgressions. This is consistent with and supports the findings from Van Monsjou et al. (2015) where those with greater attachment avoidance reported greater avoidant behaviours when dealing with a transgression and is generally consistent with theories of associated behaviours of people with greater attachment avoidance. This suggests that following a transgression, those with greater attachment avoidance have a greater tendency to disengage with the transgressor by physically avoiding the parent, emotionally withdrawing from the parent, or evading the situation entirely. With greater levels of attachment avoidance, the individual has already established more negative perceptions of the parent's availability, care, and trustworthiness. The transgression may be perceived to be consistent with these perceptions and may rely on avoidance as a form of self-protection from further distress (McNeil, 2012; Kimmes & Durtschi, 2016; Reynolds et al., 2014). Gollwitzer and Okimoto (2021) emphasized that the results of avoidance are not entirely negative. Time spent away from the transgressor, or the situation could be perceived as beneficial for the hurt individual, allowing them to process the situation, allowing time for both

parties to cool down, or simply disconnect from a person who is, intentionally or unintentionally, hurting them.

As hypothesized, greater attachment avoidance was associated with greater tendencies to experience revenge motivations against the transgressor. Findings from Feeney (2004), Martin et al. (2019), and Van Monsjou et al. (2015) indicated that greater attachment avoidance was associated with revenge motivations especially when severe transgressions were committed. Current findings are consistent with past research. However, based on findings from Lawler-Row et al. (2006), revenge motivations were indicated to be more prominent in non-parent relationships in comparison to parent relationships. Thus, the association between greater attachment avoidance and revenge motivation is surprising. Kimmes and Durtschi (2016) argued that an association between attachment avoidance and revenge motivations is unlikely due to it requiring some emotional engagement with the transgressor and offense and requires the hurt individual to reflect and ruminate on the hurt to be motivated to punish the transgressor. If greater attachment avoidance is associated with greater tendencies toward avoidance, then the likelihood of revenge motivations is low. Interestingly, an association was found between greater attachment avoidance and rumination which was not initially predicted. This was also reported by Martin et al. (2019), whose unexpected findings reported greater attachment avoidance predicting revenge motivations which contrasts with past literature which suggests an association with greater attachment anxiety. Following Kimmes and Durtschi's (2016) statement, there may be a connection between predicted rumination and revenge motivations within this study. It is possible that as some individuals with greater attachment avoidance

experience excessive rumination of negative emotions and thoughts, it may lead some people to want to punish the transgressor for hurting them. This would require further analysis and research to determine if there are associations.

Expanding upon this, greater attachment avoidance was found to be associated with lower levels of benevolence. Those with greater attachment avoidance are predicted to have lower levels of benevolence which may act as a barrier to forgiveness and may have indirect influences on the experiences of avoidance, revenge motivations, and ruminations. This was generally consistent with past literature as those with greater attachment avoidance are more inclined to avoid the transgressor following an offense, and generally feel uncomfortable with emotional intimacy, those high in attachment avoidance may be less inclined to have benevolent feelings towards their transgressor (McNeil, 2012; Mikulincer & Shaver, 2005).

### **The Mediating Role of Empathy**

The second aim of this study was to determine if empathy mediated the relationship between attachment style and post-transgression responses. The relationship between attachment anxiety and rumination and benevolence in mother and participant relationships was mediated by personal distress. Previous literature focused on empathy and its associations with attachment styles and forgiveness, such as Kimmes and Durtschi (2016), and Chung (2014). It was expected for empathy to mediate the relationship between greater attachment avoidance and forgiveness. Burnette et al. (2009) reported that forgiveness was difficult to reach due to the lack of empathy associated with greater attachment avoidance. This was further supported by Chung (2014) and Kimmes and Durtschi (2016). Current findings suggest that

individuals high in attachment anxiety experience transgressions. Those with greater attachment anxiety with their mothers may have difficulties coping or feel uncomfortable with the anxiety or distress of tense situations which increases their chances of ruminating about themselves, their relationship, or situation. It also suggests that it reduces the likelihood of the individual experiencing benevolent feelings towards their transgressor. Perspective-taking and empathic concern was not found to mediate any associations. A large proportion of participants focused on their relationships with their mothers (70.5%), it is acknowledged that this could influence the lack of findings for father and child relationships.

### **Gender Differences**

Gender differences were noted for certain post-transgression responses. Greater attachment anxiety for men was found to be associated with greater avoidance and revenge. On the other hand, greater attachment anxiety in women was associated with lower revenge and benevolence. As attachment avoidance became greater, lower benevolence was predicted for men as well as greater revenge and avoidance. For women, greater attachment avoidance was associated with greater rumination, revenge, avoidance, and personal distress. Martin et al. (2019) reported that men were more inclined to experience revenge motivations. Additionally, Lawler-Row et al. (2006) found that men reported higher scores in revenge and avoidance in comparison to women. Findings are consistent with past literature as both greater attachment anxiety, and attachment avoidance for men were associated with further tendencies to experience revenge motivations or avoidant behaviours as a response to a transgression. Rumination was only found to be significant amongst women, alongside

the personal distress subscale of empathy. It was unexpected for an association to be found between attachment avoidance and rumination based on previous literature. It is unclear if the role of gender is significant as a large majority of participants were women (85.8%) while there were fewer men.

### **Strengths**

The main strength of this study is its focus on family relationships, which is a clear gap from the past literature. As previously discussed, past research had a heavy focus on evaluating the effects of attachment dimensions and forgiveness within romantic relationships. For example, Chung (2014) and Kachadourian et al. (2004) focused on marital relationships. Moreover, some studies combined different relationships together such as romantic partners, co-workers, friends, and even strangers (Lawler-Row et al., 2006; Hirst et al., 2019; Van Monsjou et al., 2015). It is important to assess forgiveness in family relationships as it has not been a significant focus in past literature. Lawler-Row et al. (2006) reported differences in post-transgression responses between parent, and non-parent relationships. Regardless of levels of attachment bonds, participants were more inclined to be more forgiving with parents and had lower reports of revenge and avoidance than in non-parent relationships. This suggested that there may be differences in post-transgression responses based on relationship type. This is further supported by the theory that attachment bonds differ for each relationship in everyone (Fraley, 2002). For example, a person who may have developed a more secure attachment relationship with their closest parent, and closest friend. However, they may have developed a more insecure attachment bond, and experience high attachment anxiety in romantic relationships.

Another example may be a person who has developed an insecure attachment relationship with their closest parent, one that is high in attachment avoidance but experiences greater attachment security, low in both attachment anxiety and attachment avoidance, with their closest friend. A focus on parent and child relationships not only contributes to the gap in current literature but also ensures participants are solely focused on a single type of relationship.

### **Limitations**

There were various limitations to this study that should be acknowledged. Firstly, the sample size of this study is small. Initial data collection included approximately 250 responses. After filtering through uncompleted questionnaires, responses that were clearly inattentive, and those that met the exclusion criteria, a maximum of 183 responses were viable for analyses. For this type of experiment, greater numbers would be ideal. Additionally, there was an unbalanced ratio in the gender of participants. There was a significant difference between the number of men and women in this study, including three gender-diverse individuals. This made gender comparisons slightly difficult as there were a significantly larger number of women in this current study.

As participants had the choice of selecting a parent to focus their responses on, this study found that many participants focused on their relationships with their mothers. A total of 129 participants focused on their mothers, while 54 participants focused on their fathers. Furthermore, 117 women focused on their relationships with their mothers, and 40 women focused on their relationships with their fathers. Of the men, 14 men focused on their fathers, and nine men focused on their mothers. Lastly, all gender-diverse individuals focused on their mothers. It is acknowledged that the findings were

consistent between mother and father relationships, however, comparisons may be difficult due to the disparity in numbers.

The use of self-report questionnaires and correlational design may be a limitation. Self-report questionnaires have their strengths in ease of data collection, but recorded responses may not be accurate representations of participants' behaviour in real-time as participants were requested to reflect on a past transgression. It is also possible that some participants may feel more inclined to provide responses that align with social norms. For example, some participants may feel uncomfortable when reporting on responses on revenge motivations with a parent and may be unlikely to report it despite experiencing revenge motivations greatly in real-time following a transgression. Similar to the use of self-report questionnaires, the correlational design is difficult to avoid. With the nature of the attachment phenomenon, attachment styles are difficult to manipulate, especially so with lifelong relationships such as parent and child bonds.

There were various factors that may have been mediating factors in this study that were not analysed. One of these factors includes cultural context. This study had not considered the influence cultural backgrounds may have on the relationship between attachment styles and post-transgression responses. In some cultures, there may be post-transgression responses that are considered the norm but may not be considered common in another culture. For example, cultures that are perceived as 'tighter' may feel that transgressors ought to be punished for their actions, therefore the likelihood of forgiveness may be low, or it may be considered taboo or inappropriate to express negative emotions towards one's parent. On the other hand, in more 'loose'

cultures it may be seen as normal to display negative emotions towards a parent's transgression. In the context of parent and child relationships, responses following a transgression could be complex, especially in a cultural background where filial piety or a close-knit family bond is highly valued and emphasized on. Therefore, the lack of analysis of the cultural factor was a limitation of this study as it could have had a significant influence on individual responses but was not accounted for that may be a plausible explanation for the inconsistencies found within this study alongside previous research.

Unfortunately, the internal consistency of the TRIM-18 scale was very low which raises concerns regarding the findings of this study, and whether the findings from this scale provide valuable information or noise. The TRIM-18 scale is a commonly used scale that measured benevolence, avoidance, and revenge motivations following a transgression. Previous research utilizing this scale had reported adequate internal consistency and deemed a reliable measure of some post-transgression responses. There may be multiple causes of the low internal consistency of this scale in this study, for example, a low sample population and variances in responses. The variance in transgression severity between participants can be considered a limitation as well. Although participants were able to respond to transgressions that they felt were hurtful, it is likely that one participant may have a more serious transgression in comparison to another. In this instance, it is expected that some responses from participants were based on less serious transgressions with moderate responses, and some may be focused on severe transgressions where they had intense responses to their

transgressor. It is considered a limitation as there was no control over the scenario participants were responding to which may impact the outcome of this study.

### **Future Directions**

There are various improvements that could be made to this study. Future studies may incorporate the use of different scales to measure attachment dimensions, and forgiveness may be beneficial. The use of more popular scales such as the Close Relationships-Revised (ECR-R) by Fraley et al. (2000) may improve this study greatly as it is a more reputable scale for attachment dimensions. A measure of forgiveness that is more extensive, including subscales, would be more beneficial as it allows the opportunity to explore potential drivers behind forgiveness occurring or lack of it. Expanding the number of participants would be greatly beneficial, as well as obtaining a well-balanced ratio of men and women in the study. Additionally, obtaining a balanced number of responses focusing on mother and father relationships would be beneficial, giving an opportunity to make comparative analyses that could not be conducted for this study.

For future studies, it is suggested that analysing participants' attachment relationships with both parents may produce interesting results. As research indicates that attachment bonds are unique to each well-established relationship, a comparison study of each parent relationship could provide deeper insights into the association between attachment styles, forgiveness, and unforgiving responses following transgressions occurring. Another suggestion for future directions is the exploration of

differences in gender and parent relationships. Specifically, a focus on mothers and daughters, sons and mothers, sons and fathers, and daughters and fathers. This could provide interesting insights into this phenomenon as this study suggests that there are differences between men and women, and their parents.

It would also be beneficial to evaluate whether cultural backgrounds are a significant mediating factor and influence attachment insecurity and post-transgression responses. This may contribute valuable insight into why some complex combinations of responses occur following a transgression.

## **Conclusion**

The current study presented mixed findings. Attachment anxiety and attachment avoidance were not significant predictors of forgiveness in parent and child relationships as anticipated. Furthermore, greater attachment anxiety was a reliable predictor of greater tendencies of unforgiving responses, and a lower likelihood of more forgiving responses post-transgression. This suggests that people who have developed greater avoidant attachment bonds with a parent face greater difficulties with forgiving after that parent has caused them harm. Forgiveness is not assumed to be entirely impossible for those with greater attachment insecurity but may be difficult to achieve due to the unforgiving responses which may act as psychological or emotional barriers.

Personal distress was found to mediate the associations between attachment anxiety, rumination, and benevolence within mother and child relationships. It was anticipated for dispositional empathy to have a mediating role. However, it seems underlying mechanisms of empathy drive these associations. It is interesting that these

associations were only found in mother and child relationships. Further exploration in large sample size would be beneficial to determine if this association was also present in father and child relationships.

In summary, it appears that attachment dimensions do influence post-transgression responses within parent and child relationships. Despite there being some uncertainty with forgiveness and attachment dimensions, greater attachment avoidance seems to play a significant role in predicting tendencies of specific responses. Many of these responses are believed to affect the likelihood of the hurt individual's ability to forgive their parent. Findings were consistent between mother and child, and father and child relationships. Further exploration of post-transgression responses within family relationships would be greatly beneficial for the current literature.

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## Appendices

### Appendix A: Ethics and Information Sheet

#### *Information Sheet*

Title: To forgive or not to forgive: The influence of attachment orientation on forgiveness and the mediating role of empathy.

#### **An Invitation**

My name is Anny and I am currently completing my Master of Arts degree in Psychology at Auckland University of Technology. This research project will contribute to the completion of this qualification. The aim of this research project is to investigate the influence of attachment orientation on forgiveness and how empathy plays a role in this relationship. If you have a current relationship and are in consistent contact with at least one parent, I would like to invite you to participate in this study. There is no conflict of interest, and your choice to participate will not have any positive or negative impact on you.

#### **What is the purpose of this research?**

Previous research has shown that attachment orientation influences forgiveness of others. However, the research often focuses on romantic relationships and there is a lack of findings of this association specifically within family relationships. Additionally, empathy will be analysed as a mediator as research has shown that empathy influences forgiveness. This study aims to investigate the relation between attachment and forgiveness within family relationships, specifically parent and child relationships. Participants will be required to complete an online questionnaire which will assess attachment styles, forgiveness, and empathy in a parent and child relationship. The results of this study will contribute to a Master qualification in Psychology. The findings may also be used for academic publication or presentations.

#### **How was I identified and why am I being invited to participate in this research?**

The population of interest are adults of the age 18 and above. The sample will consist of adults who still have a current, ongoing relationship with at least one parent.

Participants will be recruited through AUT Blackboard, and on public online platforms. You received this information sheet because you have clicked on the survey link distributed with the advertisement.

If you are a current AUT student, you are only eligible to participate if you are **not** currently enrolled in PSYC580, PSYC683, PSYC780, PSYC782, PSYC880 or PSYC882, and currently have an ongoing relationship with at least one parent.

### **How do I agree to participate in this research?**

Your participation in this study is voluntary (your choice) and whether or not you choose to participate will not have any advantages or disadvantages against you.

Completion of the online questionnaire will be taken as indicating your consent to participate.

You may withdraw from the survey at any point you'd like until your responses have been submitted. Once you have submitted your responses, your data cannot be identified and withdrawn.

### **What will happen in this research?**

All the data collected from the questionnaires will be anonymous. Once data has been collected, it will be statistically analysed. The results of the statistical analysis will be written in a thesis report and submitted to AUT as part of my qualification.

### **What are the discomforts and risks?**

There are no physical discomforts or risks involved in participating in this research.

However, it is acknowledged that there are psychological risks involved in this research as reflection upon past negative events or a parental relationship may illicit negative feelings and memories, causing some psychological distress.

**How will these discomforts and risks be alleviated?**

AUT Student Counselling and Mental Health is able to offer three free sessions of confidential counselling support for adult participants in an AUT research project. These sessions are only available for issues that have arisen directly as a result of participation in the research and are not for other general counselling needs. To access these services, you will need to:

- drop into our centre at WB203 City Campus, email [counselling@aut.ac.nz](mailto:counselling@aut.ac.nz) or call 921 9998.
  - let the receptionist know that you are a research participant and provide the title of my research and my name and contact details as given in this Information Sheet.
- You can find out more information about AUT counsellors and counselling on <https://www.aut.ac.nz/student-life/student-support/counselling-and-mental-health>

**What are the benefits?**

By participating in this research, you have the opportunity to enter a draw to win one of five \$100 Westfield vouchers. Participants will be given the opportunity to reflect on their responses to a transgression committed by a close relative, and how unforgiving behaviours could be obstacles to forgiving others easily. The findings from the study would contribute to current knowledge of attachment styles and forgiveness in parent-child relationships.

This research project will contribute to the completion of my qualification.

**How will my privacy be protected?**

The online questionnaire is completely anonymous. I will not be able to link your questionnaire responses to your identity. If you wish to enter the draw to win a Westfield voucher, this will be separate from the questionnaire and your questionnaire responses will remain anonymous.

**What are the costs of participating in this research?**

The questionnaire will take approximately 20 minutes to complete. There is no financial cost to participate in this research.

**What opportunity do I have to consider this invitation?**

This questionnaire will be available until 1st April 2022

**Will I receive feedback on the results of this research?**

If you would like to receive a summary of the findings at the end of the study, please follow the link below which will contain a summary of the research results:

[https://docs.google.com/document/d/1hlxnglUPS\\_5LKgXxxOoeZo1oQLJkAnIIJAiOz972tBQ/edit?usp=sharing](https://docs.google.com/document/d/1hlxnglUPS_5LKgXxxOoeZo1oQLJkAnIIJAiOz972tBQ/edit?usp=sharing)

**What do I do if I have concerns about this research?**

Any concerns regarding the nature of this project should be notified in the first instance to the Project Supervisor Dr Rachel Low, [rachel.low@aut.ac.nz](mailto:rachel.low@aut.ac.nz), (+649) 921 9999 ext 8578.

Concerns regarding the conduct of the research should be notified to the Executive Secretary of AUTEK, [ethics@aut.ac.nz](mailto:ethics@aut.ac.nz), (+649) 921 9999 ext 6038.

**Whom do I contact for further information about this research?**

Please keep this Information Sheet and a copy of the Consent Form for your future reference. You are also able to contact the research team as follows:

***Researcher Contact Details:***

Anny Kim [zzq9045@aut.ac.nz](mailto:zzq9045@aut.ac.nz)

***Project Supervisor Contact Details:***

Dr Rachel Low [rachel.low@aut.ac.nz](mailto:rachel.low@aut.ac.nz), (+649) 921 9999 ext 8578

***AUTEK Approval***

18 August 2021

Rachel Low

Faculty of Culture and Society

Dear Rachel

**Re Ethics Application:** 21/303 To forgive or not to forgive: The influence of attachment orientation on forgiveness and the mediating role of empathy

Thank you for providing evidence as requested, which satisfies the points raised by the Auckland University of Technology Ethics Committee (AUTEC).

Your ethics application has been **approved** for three years until.

### **Non-Standard Conditions of Approval**

1. Remove the following statement from the Information Sheet 'You are able to withdraw from the study at any time. If you choose to withdraw from the study, you will be offered the choice to have any data that is identifiable as belonging to you removed or allowing it to continue to be used. However, once findings have been produced, removal of your data may not be possible'.

Non-standard conditions must be completed before commencing your study. Non-standard conditions do not need to be submitted to or reviewed by AUTEC before commencing your study.

### **Standard Conditions of Approval**

1. The research is to be undertaken in accordance with the Auckland University of Technology Code of Conduct for Research and as approved by AUTEC in this application.

2. A progress report is due annually on the anniversary of the approval date, using the EA2 form.

3. A final report is due at the expiration of the approval period, or, upon completion of project, using the EA3 form.

4. Any amendments to the project must be approved by AUTEK prior to being implemented. Amendments can be requested using the EA2 form.
5. Any serious or unexpected adverse events must be reported to AUTEK Secretariat as a matter of priority.
6. Any unforeseen events that might affect continued ethical acceptability of the project should also be reported to the AUTEK Secretariat as a matter of priority.
7. It is your responsibility to ensure that the spelling and grammar of documents being provided to participants or external organisations is of a high standard and that all the dates on the documents are updated.
8. AUTEK grants ethical approval only. You are responsible for obtaining management approval for access for your research from any institution or organisation at which your research is being conducted and you need to meet all ethical, legal, public health, and locality obligations or requirements for the jurisdictions in which the research is being undertaken.

Please quote the application number and title on all future correspondence related to this project. For any enquiries please contact [ethics@aut.ac.nz](mailto:ethics@aut.ac.nz). The forms mentioned above are available online through <http://www.aut.ac.nz/research/researchethics>

(This is a computer-generated letter for which no signature is required)

The AUTEK Secretariat

**Auckland University of Technology Ethics Committee**

Cc: [zzq9045@aut.ac.nz](mailto:zzq9045@aut.ac.nz); Jay Wood

## Appendix B: Frequency Tables of Participant Demographics

**Table 9**

Participant Gender

Gender	Frequency	Percentage
Women	157	85.8
Men	23	12.6
Gender-Diverse	3	1.6
Total	183	100

**Table 10**

Participant Age Groups

Age Groups	Frequency	Percentage
18 - 24	104	56.8
25 – 29	30	16.4
30 – 34	16	8.7
35 – 39	15	8.2
40 – 45	9	4.9
45 – 49	5	2.7
50 - 55	4	2.2

**Table 11**

Gender and Frequency of Mother versus Father Relationships

Relationship Type	Men	Women	Gender-Diverse	Total
Mother and Child	9	117	3	129
Father and Child	14	40	0	54

**Table 12**

## Participant Ethnic Groups

Ethnic Group	Frequency	Percentage
NZ European/Pakeha	116	63.4
Māori	30	16.4
Pacific Peoples	20	10.9
Asian	35	19.1
Middle Eastern/Latin American/African	4	2.2
Other Ethnicity	14	7.7

## Appendix C: Regression Analysis Table of Each Empathy Subscale and Post-Transgression Responses

**Table 8**

*Regression Analysis Between Empathy Subscales and All Variables for Both Parent and Participant Relationships*

	Empathy Concern				Perspective Taking				Personal Distress			
	$\beta$	$t$	$p$	95% CI	$\beta$	$t$	$p$	95% CI	$\beta$	$t$	$p$	95% CI
The associations between the empathy subscale and all variables for participant and mother relationships												
Forgiveness	.13	1.47	.14	-.14, .93	.38	4.69	<.001	.45, 1.10	.02	.20	.85	-.35, .42
Rumination	.20	2.33	.02	.70, .86	.06	.66	.51	-.18, .35	.20	2.29	.02	.04, .61
Revenge	-.18	-2.07	.04	-.31, -.01	-.17	-1.95	.05	-.20, .00	.17	1.96	.05	-.00, .22
Avoidance	-.04	-.46	.65	-.48, .30	.11	1.22	.23	-.10, .41	-.02	.20	.85	-.25, .31
Benevolence	.08	.90	.37	-.12, .33	.16	1.80	.08	-.01, .28	-.16	-1.80	.08	-.30, .02

The associations between the empathy subscale and all variables for participant and father relationships

Forgiveness	.30	2.22	.03	.08, 1.55	.62	5.68	<.001	.85, 1.77	-.29	-2.17	.04	-1.25, -.05
Rumination	-.24	-1.80	.08	-1.15, .06	-.45	-3.59	<.001	-1.20, -.34	.33	2.50	.02	.12, 1.08
Revenge	-.11	-.83	.41	-.33, .14	-.00	-.02	.99	-.18, .18	.13	.97	.34	-.10, .28
Avoidance	-.14	-1.05	.30	-1.02, .32	-.18	-1.32	.19	-.85, .18	.28	2.12	.04	.03, 1.09
Benevolence	.12	.87	.39	-.20, .49	.20	1.50	.14	-.07, .46	-.26	-1.93	.06	-.53., .01

## **Appendix D: Scale Items**

### ***Adult Attachment Scale Items***

1. I find it relatively easy to get close to others.
2. I do not worry about being abandoned.
3. I find it difficult to allow myself to depend on others.
4. In relationships, I often worry that my partner does not really love me.
5. I find that others are reluctant to get as close as I would like.
6. I am comfortable depending on others.
7. I do not worry about someone getting too close to me.
8. I find that people are never there when you need them.
9. I am somewhat uncomfortable being close to others.
10. In relationships, I often worry that my partner will not want to stay with me.
11. I want to merge completely with another person.
12. My desire to merge sometimes scares people away.
13. I am comfortable having others depend on me.
14. I know that people will be there when I need them.
15. I am nervous when anyone gets too close.
16. I find it difficult to trust others completely.
17. Often, partners want me to be closer than I feel comfortable being.
18. I am not sure that I can always depend on others to be there when I need them.

### ***Rumination Items***

1. My attention is often focused on aspects of myself I wish I'd stop thinking about.
2. I always seem to be "re-hashing" in my mind recent things I've said or done.
3. Sometimes it is hard for me to shut off thoughts about myself.
4. Long after an argument or disagreement is over with, my thoughts keep going back to what happened.
5. I tend to "ruminate" or dwell over things that happen to me for a really long time afterward.
6. I don't waste time re-thinking things that are over and done with.

7. Often I'm playing back over in my mind how I acted in a past situation.
8. I often find myself re-evaluating something I've done.
9. I never ruminate or dwell on myself for very long.
10. It is easy for me to put unwanted thoughts out of my mind.
11. I often reflect on episodes in my life that I should no longer concern myself with.
12. I spend a great deal of time thinking back over my embarrassing or disappointing moments.

### ***Interpersonal Reactivity Index (IRI) Items***

#### ***Perspective-Taking Subscale Items***

1. I sometimes find it difficult to see things from the "other guy's" point of view.
2. I try to look at everybody's side of a disagreement before I make a decision.
3. I sometimes try to understand my friends better by imagining how things look from their perspective.
4. If I'm sure I'm right about something, I don't waste much time listening to other people's arguments.
5. When I'm upset at someone, I usually try to "put myself in his shoes" for a while.
6. I believe that there are two sides to every question and try to look at them both.
7. Before criticizing somebody, I try to imagine how I would feel if I were in their place.

#### ***Empathic Concern Subscale Items***

1. I often have tender, concerned feelings for people less fortunate than me.
2. Sometimes I don't feel very sorry for other people when they are having problems.
3. Other people's misfortunes do not usually disturb me a great deal.
4. When I see someone being treated unfairly, I sometimes don't feel very much pity for them.
5. I am often quite touched by things that I see happen.
6. I would describe myself as a pretty soft-hearted person.

7. When I see someone being taken advantage of, I feel kind of protective towards them.

***Personal Distress Subscale Items***

1. In emergency situations, I feel apprehensive and ill-at-ease.
2. I sometimes feel helpless when I am in the middle of a very emotional situation.
3. When I see someone get hurt, I tend to remain calm.
4. Being in a tense emotional situation scares me.
5. I am usually pretty effective in dealing with emergencies.
6. I tend to lose control during emergencies.
7. When I see someone who badly needs help in an emergency, I go to pieces.

***Trait Forgiveness Scale***

1. People close to me probably think I hold a grudge too long.
2. I can forgive a friend for almost anything.
3. If someone treats me badly, I treat him or her the same.
4. I try to forgive others even when they don't feel guilty for what they did.
5. I can usually forgive and forget an insult.
6. Even after I forgive someone, things often come back to me that I resent.
7. I feel bitter about many of my relationships.
8. There are some things for which I could never forgive even a loved one.
9. I have always forgiven those who have hurt me.
10. I am forgiving person.

***TRIM-18 Scale***

***Avoidance Subscale***

1. I am trying to keep as much distance between us as possible.
2. I am living as if he/she doesn't exist, isn't around.
3. I don't trust him/her.
4. I am finding it difficult to act warmly toward him/her.
5. I am avoiding him/her.

6. I cut off the relationship with him/her.
7. I withdraw from him/her.

### ***Revenge Motivations***

1. I'll make him/her pay.
2. I wish that something bad would happen to him/her.
3. I want him/her to get what he/she deserves.
4. I'm going to get even.
5. I want to see him/her hurt and miserable.

### ***Benevolence Motivations***

1. Even though his/her actions hurt me, I have goodwill for him/her.
2. I want us to bury the hatchet and move forward with our relationship.
3. Despite what he/she did, I want us to have a positive relationship again.
4. Although he/she hurt me, I am putting the hurts aside so we can resume our relationship.
5. I have given up my hurt and resentment.





