The present study investigated forgiveness in a traditional cognitive model of stress appraisal and coping and in a more recent model that includes the construct of low control stressors. One-hundred sixty six men and 168 women completed measures of forgiveness, primary stress appraisals, and coping strategies. For men, forgiveness was found to be positively associated with the use of challenge appraisals, and negatively associated with the use of loss appraisals and emotion-focused coping. For women, forgiveness was found to be positively associated with emotion-focused coping and acceptance, and negatively associated with avoidance. The results for women indicate that when forgiveness situations are conceptualized as low-control stressors, we are able to explain the relationships between forgiveness, appraisal, and coping. The results for men are broadly in line with a more traditional model of coping, which does not consider the construct of low control. Crucial differences in the ways that men and women appraise and cope with situations involving forgiveness are discussed. © 2007 Wiley Periodicals, Inc. J Clin Psychol 63: 555–566, 2007.

Keywords: forgiveness; appraisal; coping; sex differences; emotion; low-control
In general theoretical terms, forgiveness is seen as a positive adaptive process, demonstrating an abandonment of feelings, cognitions, and behaviors of resentment towards an individual who has transgressed against the individual, while fostering compassion, generosity, and good will to the person (Enright & the Human Development Study Group, 1991). In situations where people may choose to use interpersonal forgiveness when betrayal, abuse, or victimization has been encountered, individuals typically cope by becoming angry, fearful, hurt, or resentful (Pargament, 1997; Worthington, 1998). They aim to protect themselves and to obtain justice and retribution for the wrong done to them. Pargament and Worthington argue that this appears to be no different from the way that individuals react to other stressors. It is essentially thought to be a conservational method of coping where the aim is to try to maintain the status quo in the face of threats to their established way of being and perceiving the world.

Just as the forgiveness process appears to be conservational in nature, so do existing models of stress and coping (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984). These theories of appraisal and coping make a distinction between (a) primary appraisals, concerned with how individuals evaluate the nature and meaning of a particular transaction (Lazarus & Smith, 1988), and (b) secondary appraisals, by which individuals determine what coping strategies are available to deal with a stressful event (Lazarus, 1966; Lazarus & Folkman, 1984). The focus of the present study was on the relationships among forgiveness, primary appraisals, and coping strategies.

Primary Appraisals

Folkman and Lazarus (1985) identified three primary appraisal processes that individuals engage in when faced with potentially stressful events: threat, loss, and challenge. Threat primary appraisals involve the individual appraising an event as hostile and anxiety provoking. An environment appraised as involving loss is one with the potential for suffering and sadness. Challenge primary appraisals represent the degree to which the environment is perceived as one that allows for personal growth and development. Typically, challenge primary appraisals are found to be related to better psychological adjustment, while threat and loss primary appraisals are found to be related to poorer psychological adjustment (Ferguson, Matthews, & Cox, 1999). The literature conceptualizes forgiveness as a positive process that allows the individual to grow and move on in their life, leaving behind worries and ruminations about the transgression they experienced (Enright & Coyle, 1998; Worthington, 1998). Consequently, those individuals who forgive should make challenge primary appraisals and should not make threat and loss primary appraisals.

Coping Strategies

Central to most theories and research on coping is the distinction between coping strategies that represent direct and successful coping in terms of well-being (problem-focused and rational coping), and those coping strategies that are less successful in terms of psychological well-being and focus around emotion and avoidance (Carver, Scheier, & Weintraub, 1989; Lazarus & Folkman, 1984). Research supports this distinction, suggesting that problem-focused coping strategies are more adaptive strategies than emotion-focused coping strategies (Carver et al., 1989). Because forgiveness is generally conceptualized as an adaptive process, the prediction in terms of traditional coping theory is that forgiveness should be positively associated with problem-focused coping and negatively associated with emotion-focused coping.
Forgiveness and Coping Strategies: The Importance of Control

However, there are questions about the effectiveness of problem-focused coping strategies in low-control situations. Carver et al. (1989) argued that in low-control situations some problem-focused strategies will still be adaptive, but the effects will be weaker than in high control situations. In contrast, Roth and Cohen (1986) suggested that in such circumstances, problem-focused strategies may impact negatively on adjustment because the situation cannot be changed, resulting in frustration and unproductive worry. Terry and Hynes (1998) made a distinction between problem-management (i.e., attempts to deal directly with the problem) and problem-appraisal strategies (i.e. attempts to evaluate the situation differently). In a study of women’s adjustment to failed in vitro fertilization, Terry and Hynes found that problem-management strategies, such as active coping, planning, suppression of competing activities, and restraint coping, were associated with poorer adjustment particularly in the 2 weeks following the attempt. Problem-appraisal strategies, such as accepting and stepping back from the problem, were associated with better adjustment. In line with this finding, Carver et al. (1993) argued that acceptance, as an aspect of problem-appraisal coping, should be particularly beneficial in low-control situations because it is a necessary precursor to adjustment.

Several authors have argued that in low-control situations emotion-focused coping should be more adaptive as it allows for the ventilation of associated emotions and the feelings of hopelessness and helplessness that accompany such stressors (Conway & Terry, 1992; Terry & Hynes, 1998). Pennebaker, Kiecolt-Glaser, and Glaser (1988) pointed out that identifying and expressing negative emotional reactions facilitate the release of physiological and psychological tensions, which encourages positive adjustment as, in low-control situations, tension reduction cannot be achieved by directly managing the situation. In other words, focusing on venting of emotions and seeking emotional social support (emotion-focused coping strategies) may be helpful strategies (Carver et al., 1993). In support of this assertion, Vitaliano, DeWolfe, Maiuro, Russo, and Katon (1990) found that in low-control situations, emotion-focused coping was related to better adjustment. Similar results were obtained by Conway and Terry (1992) and Terry and Hynes (1998).

Avoidance is another coping strategy often used in low-control situations. Avoidance coping is typified by attempts to distance, deny, apply selective attention, disengage from, and minimize the importance of the stressful event. Several authors agree that avoidance coping strategies will be maladaptive in low-control situations because they prevent eventual acceptance of the situation (Carver et al., 1989; Terry & Hynes, 1998). Avoidance tends to result in increased unwanted ruminations about the event, and it requires high amounts of emotional energy for its maintenance, thus depleting the individual’s emotional resources (Stanton & Snider, 1993).

We propose that forgiveness may be a potential coping response that people may use, and may be a consequence of a low-control situation. Forgiveness occurs following a transgression by one individual towards another individual, over which the recipient of the transgression has little control. Therefore, within the conceptualization of forgiveness, this may alter the view that forgiveness will be associated with problem-focused coping strategies, and leads to the suggestion that acceptance and emotion-focused strategies may be positively associated with higher levels of forgiveness.

Sex Differences in Forgiveness and Coping

There is no strong evidence that there are sex differences in forgiveness for scores across a number of forgiveness measures (Barber, Maltby, & Macaskill, 2005; Brown & Phillips,
2005; Maltby, Day, & Barber, 2004), though sometimes results are mixed and women have been found to score significantly higher on some measures (Walker & Gorsuch, 2002). However, sex differences occur in coping strategies. Taylor et al. (2000) suggested that, rather than employing fight or flight response to stress proposed by Cannon (1932), women, because of their biobehavioral care-giving system, are more likely to seek social support and develop social groups to reduce stress. Therefore women, more than men, may naturally adopt emotion-focused and social support coping strategies. There is research evidence that supports this view. Ptacek, Smith, and Zanas (1992) found that, in response to stress, men tended to be instrumental problem-solvers, whereas women were more emotionally expressive. Therefore, because of these sex differences in coping, there may be sex differences in the relationship between forgiveness, primary appraisals, and coping strategies; therefore, possible sex differences should be observed.

Rationale and Aims of the Present Study

Two competing theories emerge when speculating on the possible relationship between forgiveness, primary appraisals, and coping. The first involves the traditional coping theory, and predicts forgiveness should be positively associated with problem-focused coping and negatively associated with emotion-focused coping. The second involves the theory that the need for forgiveness emerges from a low-control situation and suggests acceptance and emotion-focused strategies will be positively associated with higher levels of forgiveness. Further to this, there is a need to consider sex differences in the relationship between forgiveness, primary appraisals, and coping because men are more likely to employ problem-focused coping strategies than women, and women are more likely to use emotion-focused coping strategies than men. Consequently, the aim of the present study was to examine the relationship between forgiveness, primary appraisals, and coping among men and women separately.

Method

Sample

Participants were 334 adults (166 men and 168 women) from the north of England, aged between 25 to 75 years ($M = 34.52; SD = 12.4$). The most frequently cited demographic categories were White ($n = 208$), married ($n = 193$), employed ($n = 203$), and high school equivalency educational level ($n = 100$).

Measures

The Enright Forgiveness Inventory. The Enright Forgiveness Inventory (EFI; Subkoviak et al., 1995) is a 65-item scale designed to measure six dimensions of forgiveness related to a specific transgression encompassing cognitive, affective, and behavioral components: (a) negative affect, (b) negative judgment, (c) negative behavior, (d) positive affect, (e) positive judgment, and (f) positive behavior. The inventory measures nonpositional forgiveness of another person for a specific transgression (Yamhure-Thompson & Synder, 2003).

Cronbach's (1951) alpha for all subscales are high ($\alpha > 0.93$), and test-retest reliability for all subscales are satisfactory ($>0.67$; McCullough, 1999). Validity has been shown for the EFI by the scales' correlation with each other, single-item measures of the
constructs, and lower anxiety within intimate relationships (Subkoviak et al., 1995; McCullough, 1999).

**Appraisal of Life Events Scale.** The Appraisal of Life Events Scale (ALE; Ferguson, Matthews, & Cox, 1999) is a 16-item adjective checklist designed to elicit respondents’ primary appraisals of a stressful situation. The 16 adjectives comprise three dimensions: challenge, threat, and loss. Ferguson (2000) reports that Cronbach’s (1951) alphas for the three subscales range from .74 for loss to .91 for threat and test-retest reliabilities for a single event over 1 month are above .77. Concurrent validity for the subscales of the ALE has been found with expected significant correlations with neuroticism, extroversion, coping, behavior, and health (Ferguson, 2000; Ferguson et al., 1999).

**The COPE questionnaire.** The COPE questionnaire (Carver et al., 1989) was used to measure coping strategies. The questionnaire is a 53-item scale comprising thirteen 4-item conceptually distinct subscales (these are listed in Table 1). The scales validity has been well established as demonstrated by expected correlations with a number of personality, cognitive, subjective well-being, and health variables (Lyne & Roger, 2000). To meet the aims of our study, a number of different aspects of coping needed to be measured. There was a need to assess not only problem and emotion-focused coping, but also the types of coping that have been implicated in research on low-control situations, such as acceptance and avoidance. The COPE is appropriate for such a purpose. Additionally, Lyne and Roger (2000) suggested that the COPE is best represented by a 3-factor structure, consistent with other measures of coping, comprising rational (problem-focused), emotion-focused and avoidance coping (Endler & Parker, 1990; Parker & Endler, 1992; Roger, Jarvis, & Najarian, 1993).

**Procedure**

Participants were recruited from a number of workplaces in Sheffield, UK. Respondents were approached beforehand to ask whether they would like to take part in the study and the questionnaire was provided at a later date. Overall 373 questionnaires were distributed; 11 questionnaires were returned incomplete (a 97% return rate). Scales within the

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Table 1</th>
<th>Mean, Standard Deviation, and t-Test Scores for the Variables by Sex</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Men ( (n = 166) )</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Forgiveness (Enright Forgiveness Scale)</td>
<td>242.02 (68.4)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Challenge appraisal factor score</td>
<td>.004 (1.0)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Threat appraisal factor score</td>
<td>-.004 (1.1)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Loss appraisal factor score</td>
<td>.040 (0.9)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Avoidance coping factor score</td>
<td>.179 (1.2)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Problem-focused coping factor score</td>
<td>-.026 (1.1)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Emotion coping factor score</td>
<td>-.039 (1.0)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Acceptance factor score</td>
<td>.291 (0.9)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

\*p < .05. **p < .01.
questionnaire were counter-balanced. However, the first question asked participants to recall a stressful event, in accordance with the Enright Forgiveness Inventory, in which the respondents is asked to report the types of hurts and/or who hurt them. Respondents were then asked to recall this event when completing each of the three scales.

Of the remaining 362 questionnaires, respondents’ responses were assessed in terms of the Enright Forgiveness Inventory 5-item pseudo-forgiveness scale. In accordance with the manual, 28 respondents who scored at a certain level on the pseudo-forgiveness scale were eliminated from the analyses, which led to 334 respondents’ data being used for the current study.

Statistical Analysis

There was one statistical procedure that is necessary to note in detail. To ensure clear measurement of the primary appraisal and coping variables, we computed factor scores derived from principal components analysis and oblimin rotation of the extracted factors (with the number of factors determined by a scree test). Principal components analysis of the ALE scale replicated Ferguson et al.’s (1999) findings and consequently factor scores were computed representing each of the primary appraisal variables: challenge, threat, and loss. With the COPE scale we replicated the findings of Lyne and Rogers’ (2000) findings that suggested that the COPE comprised general rational (problem-focused), emotion-focused, and avoidance coping factors. There was one inconsistency with Lyne and Rogers’ findings, which was that the acceptance subscale loaded singularly on the fourth component. However, it was felt necessary to include a consideration of acceptance as Carver et al. (1993) argued that acceptance, as an aspect of problem-appraisal coping, should be particularly beneficial in low-control situations because it is a necessary precursor to adjustment. Therefore, we felt this was relevant to the present consideration of forgiveness. Consequently, factor scores were computed for avoidance, problem-focused, emotion-focused, and acceptance coping.

Results

Table 1 shows the scores for all the variables in this study for both men and women. Factor scores are centered around the mean ($M = 0, SD = 1$). There were no sex differences on either the forgiveness or the factor scores derived from the appraisal of life events scale. However, there were sex differences among some of the COPE scale factor scores, with men scoring significantly higher than women on the avoidance and acceptance coping factor scores. No sex differences were found for scores on the problem-focused or emotion-focused coping factor scores.

To investigate the moderating effect of gender on the relationship between (a) primary appraisal and forgiveness, and (b) coping and forgiveness, a multiple regression analysis was conducted. The dependent variable was forgiveness and the main predictors were gender, the primary appraisal variables, and the coping variables. Interaction variables were created by taking the product of gender and each of the primary appraisal and coping variables. To avoid multicollinearity the main predictors were centered before being computed into product terms (Aiken & West, 1991).

Gender was the first variable to be entered into the regression equation. On its own, gender was not able to predict forgiveness ($F = .07, df = 1, 332, p < .793$). Next, the appraisal variables were entered as a group, and were found to provide an $R^2$ Change = .015, which failed to reach statistical significance ($F = 1.62, df = 3, 329, p < .184$),


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indicating that the appraisal variables considered in isolation were unable to predict forgiveness. The coping variables were then entered as a group, yielding a statistically significant $R^2$ Change = .049 ($F = 4.26, df = 4, 325, p < .002$). Acceptance was the only coping variable to have a regression coefficient that reached statistical significance ($t = 3.99, df = 1, 325, p < .001$). Evidently, acceptance is able to explain variation in forgiveness that is unexplained by other predictors entered thus far. A higher level of acceptance is associated with a greater degree of forgiveness.

Finally, the interactions of gender with each of the appraisal and coping variables were entered as a group, and achieved a statistically significant $R^2$ Change = .121 ($F = 6.76, df = 7, 318, p < .001$). Gender was found to have a statistically significant moderating effect on the relationship between forgiveness and the following four variables: loss appraisals ($t = 2.55, df = 318, p < .011$), avoidance coping ($t = -2.18, df = 318, p < .030$), emotion-focused coping ($t = 5.61, < = 318, p < .001$) and acceptance coping ($t = 2.34, df = 318, p < .020$).

Figures 1 to 4 depict the nature of the interactions. The x-axis of each graph is scaled in standard deviation units. Each interaction represents a comparison of the male and female slopes in a graph. There were statistically significant differences between male and female slopes for each of the four variables. The interactions were followed up with simple slope analysis (Aiken & West, 1991).

Figure 1 shows that among men forgiveness was negatively related to loss appraisals, whereas among women there was little or no relationship between forgiveness and loss appraisals. Simple slope analysis indicated that the male slope was significantly less than zero ($t = -3.35, df = 321, p < .001$), whereas the female slope did not differ significantly from zero ($t = -1.47, df = 321, p < .143$).

Figure 2 reveals that in men, there was virtually no relationship between forgiveness and avoidance, but in women forgiveness was negatively related to avoidance. Simple slope analysis indicated that the male slope did not differ significantly from zero ($t = .14, df = 321, p < .889$), whereas the female slope was significantly less than zero ($t = -2.49, df = 321, p < .013$).

Figure 3 makes it clear that among men forgiveness varied negatively with emotion-focused coping, whereas among women forgiveness varied positively with emotion-focused coping. Simple slope analysis showed that the male slope was significantly less than zero ($t = -3.36, df = 321, p < .001$), whereas the female slope was significantly greater than zero ($t = 4.37, df = 321, p < .001$).

Figure 1. Graph shows the interaction between sex and loss appraisals on the Enright Forgiveness Inventory scores. The x-axis is scaled in standard deviation units.
Figure 4 discloses that in men there was virtually no relationship between forgiveness and acceptance coping, whereas in women forgiveness was positively related to acceptance coping. Simple slope analysis demonstrated that the male slope did not differ significantly from zero ($t = .97, df = 321, p = .331$), whereas the female slope was significantly greater than zero ($t = 4.64, df = 321, p < .001$).

Discussion

The first aim of the present study was to examine the relationship between forgiveness and both primary appraisals and coping strategies within a traditional model of coping. It was predicted that, among men, there would be a significant positive association between forgiveness and both challenge primary appraisals and problem-focused coping strategies, and a significant negative association with both threat and loss primary appraisals and emotion-focused coping.

These predictions were partially supported for men. The findings suggest that men who show higher levels of forgiveness tend not to make loss appraisals. The findings also
suggest that men who show higher levels of forgiveness use less emotion-focused coping. Therefore, men who are more forgiving tend to seek less social support and express less emotion. These findings for men are consistent with traditional models of coping that suggest that emotion-focused coping strategies are less adaptive (Carver et al., 1989). However, the predicted positive association between forgiveness and both challenge primary appraisals and problem-focused coping strategies was not supported.

The second aim of the present study was to explore the relationship between forgiveness and coping strategies while taking into account that forgiveness contexts are generally low-control situations. It was predicted that among women forgiveness would have a significant positive relationship with emotion-focused coping, and significant positive associations with specific problem-focused strategies, such as acceptance.

For women, forgiveness was positively related to emotion-focused coping. Women who are more forgiving adopt emotion-focused strategies to allow the expression of the negative emotions and feelings of helplessness associated with low-control stressors and this aids their adjustment. This result is consistent with the results of Conway and Terry (1992) and Terry and Hynes (1998). It is also in line with the theoretical view of Taylor et al. (2000) who reported that women in stressful situations seek social support and develop social groups to reduce their stress. For women, forgiveness was negatively associated with avoidance. The research on coping in low-control situations suggests that avoidance prevents assimilation and eventual acceptance of the situation (Carver et al., 1989; Terry & Hynes, 1998). Forgiveness was also positively associated with acceptance among women. This finding is consistent with the work of Terry and Hynes (1998) who found that singular problem-appraisal strategies, such as acceptance, were associated with better adjustment among women in low-control situations. These findings support a model of coping where forgiveness scenarios are conceptualized as low-control situations. This model of coping in low control situations can be used to explain the relationship between forgiveness and coping strategies, but only among women.

Thus, men and women appraise and cope differently in forgiveness situations. Women are more likely to treat the forgiveness process as one where they have little control. Those women who forgive tend to accept the transgression and seek social and emotional support. An explanation for this difference may reside in differing male and female perceptions of control around the transgression. Therefore, it may be that men do not perceive themselves as powerless in forgiveness situations, and consequently may

Figure 4. Graph shows the interaction between sex and acceptance on the Enright Forgiveness Inventory scores. The x-axis is scaled in standard deviation units.
not perceive forgiveness as a low-control situation. Clearly, the degree of control that men and women perceive themselves to have in a variety of forgiveness situations is worthy of further examination. This finding is particularly useful in terms of Lamb’s (2002) exploration of the idea of sex differences and forgiveness in light of the traditional oppression of women who find themselves in positions of less control when compared to men in Western societies.

There are some clear limitations to the present study. Some of the relationships between forgiveness, primary appraisals, and coping strategies, although statistically significant, are not strong. In light of this, the present findings need replication. Future studies could more usefully identify, and in more detail, the nature and severity of the transgression leading to the need for forgiveness and the presence or absence of factors like apologies, attempts at retribution, or attempts to regain control, which may be related to primary appraisals and coping strategies in forgiveness situations. The accurate measurement of control, which is central to our theoretical explanation of the positive relationship between forgiveness and emotional-focused coping among women, should be directly considered within future studies.

The present findings suggest that there are crucial sex differences in the way that men and women appraise forgiveness situations. There are also sex differences in the coping strategies used. It appears that women conceptualize forgiveness situations as low-control stressors, whereas men do not. The different coping strategies adopted by men and women are broadly consistent with this difference in their conceptualization of forgiveness situations.

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