



## Effect of implicit and explicit prejudice on forgiveness: Comparisons between in-group and out-group threats

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### Abstract

The objectives of this research were to study the effect of implicit and explicit prejudice on implicit and explicit forgiveness of participants between threatening situations from both in-group and out-group individuals, to compare offensive appraisals with different types of threats, as well as to study the relationship between the two types of prejudice, offensive appraisal, and forgiveness. In particular, a  $2 \times 2 \times 2$  randomized block factorial experimental design was conducted to examine the impact of low/high implicit prejudice, low/high explicit prejudice, and in-group/out-group threats on implicit and explicit forgiveness. A sample of 200 undergraduate students from two public universities in Bangkok, Thailand completed the personal data questionnaire, the implicit prejudice scale, the explicit prejudice scale, the implicit forgiveness test, the explicit forgiveness test, and the offensive appraisal scales. Three-way ANOVA, t-test and Pearson's correlation coefficient were used to test the hypotheses and objectives of this research. The results showed that: 1) participants with both low implicit and explicit prejudice in the in-group threat condition had the highest implicit and explicit forgiveness levels, while participants with high implicit and explicit prejudice in the out-group threat condition had the lowest implicit and explicit forgiveness levels; 2) participants who were under the out-group threat condition, assessed the level of offensiveness significantly higher than research participants who were under the in-group threat condition, and; 3) implicit prejudice and explicit prejudice had a significantly positive correlation to the offensive appraisal score. Furthermore, the offensive appraisal score had a significantly negative correlation with implicit and explicit forgiveness.

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### Introduction

Individual diversity in a society with regard to different backgrounds, demands, thoughts, emotions and expressions, and social interactions between members can cause misunderstanding, offensiveness, disturbance, and disruption, which can obstruct a person from reaching his or her desired goal. Consequently, conflicts are formed and responses can

eventually lead to unnecessary losses. One solution which can be utilized to solve such dilemmas is forgiveness.

Forgiveness reflects the change of a person's cognition, emotion, motivation, and social behaviors. The person is willing to discard resentment and distress, diminishing negative judgment and controlling the reaction (of being violated or offended), allowing good friendships to be formed (McCullough, Bono, & Root, 2007; Stelan & Covic, 2006). Forgiveness can be measured in dimensions of explicit forgiveness, which is an individual's expression through self-assessment using measurement scales, assessment forms or obvious overt behaviors. The expression of explicit forgiveness, in some cases, can cause an individual's self-

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assessment and expression to deviate from reality, because forgiveness is a positive characteristic which has been claimed as the societal expectation. As a result, even in a case where a person does not intend to forgive those who offend or intimidate him/her, or the level of forgiveness is considerably low as the person unwillingly expresses a higher level of forgiveness than his/her internal intention, there has been an attempt to develop an implicit forgiveness measure. Such a tool helps in measuring the process of interactions through the person's automatic remembrance of metacognition and anecdotes. The process is sensitive and can be reflected upon when the person responds to certain specific stimuli. This is considered to be one of the methods that can reflect the reality of an individual's thoughts, feelings, and emotions (Buechse, 2010; Goldring, 2011).

There are several factors affecting an individual's ability to forgive, with one being a result of the person's mechanism that evaluates the level of offensiveness and how much it obstructs his/her desire or motivation to achieve his/her goal. This is called the primary appraisal, which relatively affects the person's self-assessment concerning his/her own ability to cope with the offensiveness and who should be responsible for such imposition. This particular process is called the secondary appraisal. If a person perceives the offensiveness as highly severe and demands responsibility, the tendency to grant forgiveness can be low while the chance for a negative reaction and revenge can be rather high (Smith & Kirby, 2009). The study of both explicit and implicit forgiveness also reveals certain connections with such processes.

Nevertheless, the review of other research studies introduces additional information concerning how there might be certain situations where the mechanism of the offensive appraisal system, which leads to a person's forgiveness, can be distorted from reality. Such distortion derives from a person's prejudice and bias (Brown, 2010; Stangor, 2009). When an individual has some bad past experiences with someone, especially where that someone is not a member in the same group, some conscious or unconscious negative evaluations will happen continuously in the individual's mind, and easily change into out-group prejudice. This process makes the individual always keeps his/her guard up when he/she is offended or violated by someone outside of the group. Consequently, the individual tends to over evaluate the threat and so retaliation is severe (Gawronski, Hofmann, & Wilbur, 2006; Halevy, Weisel, & Bornstein, 2012). In contrast, when an individual perceives that he/she is a member of the group, the individual will have a good relationship with other group members and receive positive experiences and subsequently will tend to have a higher in-group favoritism attitude. However, if the offensiveness comes from one of the group's members, this in-group bias will affect the individual's cognitive and effective processes and as a result, the individual often perceives the offensiveness as less serious and more forgivable (Bradfield & Aquino, 1999; Sibley, 2008).

The study categorizes prejudice according to the process and expression into implicit prejudice and explicit prejudice. Such categorization is similar to the study of forgiveness where explicit and implicit forgiveness automatically take place along

with the process of thinking and expression, which has gone through one's consideration of information, motivation, and opportunities. A person's expression can be related or conflicted, since the expression of prejudice, in some cases, is hard to accept in society. Even though a person may have prejudice toward an individual or a group, it may not be fully expressed (Dambrun & Guimond, 2004; Son Hing, Chung-Yan, Hamilton, & Zanna, 2008).

Previous studies about forgiveness have not been related to prejudice as well as an individual's metacognitive mechanism, both in the context of explicit perception and expression and implicit perception. As a result, this current research is driven by the interest which is not only to study the expression of forgiveness of participants with different levels of explicit and implicit prejudice between threatening situations from both in-group and out-group individuals, but also to compare offensive appraisals with different types of threat, as well as to study the relationship between the two types of prejudices, offensive appraisal, and forgiveness. This study will provide a greater understanding of the perception process through appraisals, which lead to various levels and methods of forgiveness. The research outcome can be used as information to manage conflicts and promote forgiveness, which consequentially strengthens and improves relationships and rapport between individuals.

### *Hypothesis*

We expected that participants with low explicit and implicit prejudice tend to have higher explicit and implicit forgiveness when offended by in-group members compared with participants with high explicit and implicit prejudice when offended by out-group members. Participants who are offended by in-group members tend to under evaluate the level of offensiveness, compared with the offensiveness caused by out-group individuals. Both types of prejudice are likely to have a positive correlation to offensive appraisal, and offensive appraisal is likely to have a negative correlation to both types of forgiveness.

### **Methodology**

#### *Participants*

The sample size was determined using G\*Power (Faul, Erdfelder, Lang, & Buchner, 2007), the medium effect sizes, numerator degrees of freedom were calculated, and the appropriate sample size was approximately 200 cases. The participants in this research were 200 undergraduate students who were enrolled in general education subjects in two public universities in Bangkok (Chulalongkorn University and Srinakharinwirot University) and were willing to be part of the research. The average age of the participants was 20 years and 57 percent were female. The sampling and research procedures were approved by the Ethics Review Committee for Research Involving Human Research Subjects, Chulalongkorn University of Thailand.

### Research Design and Research Procedure

A 2 (low-high implicit prejudice)  $\times$  2 (low-high explicit prejudice)  $\times$  2 (in-out group threats) randomized block factorial design was used. The research began by showing the participants a short video clip about prejudice priming to stimulate and intensify prejudice toward out-group and in-group members. After the video clip ended, participants were asked to rank their expressive feelings about six characters that had appeared in the video clip for the manipulation check (the six characters were separated into two groups—three characters that acted as in-group members and were friendly and three that acted as out-group members and were unfriendly. In order to avoid gender bias, there were two males and one female in each group, all characters were Thai to prevent race bias, and were aged between 20 and 30 years). The participants were later asked to apply the explicit prejudice scale and a simple task (finding a way out of an uncomplicated maze) in order to prevent the results of the explicit prejudice test from interfering with their answers in the implicit prejudice test. After measuring implicit prejudice using an implicit association test (IAT), we used a median split to separate participants with low or high implicit-explicit prejudice scores and randomized them into different threat conditions. For the in-group threat condition, participants were shown a short video clip in which three characters who once appeared as in-group members expressed a sense of hostility toward the hypothetical character created to represent each of the participants of the research. On the other hand, the out-group threat condition participants were shown a short video clip where three characters who once appeared as out-group members expressed a sense of hostility toward the hypothetical character created to represent each of the participants of the research. The participants were asked to complete the offensive appraisal test and the explicit forgiveness scale, and then to find a way out of another uncomplicated maze. After the IAT to measure implicit forgiveness was completed, the researcher conducted a debriefing session and answered questions.

### Measures and Materials

#### *Prejudice and threats priming video clips*

The content of the prejudice priming video clip facilitated a hypothetical situation where each of the participants was asked to imagine himself/herself as a character who was a new employee beginning the first day of a job at a new company. Three characters acted as a group of friendly, welcoming co-workers, while the other three characters acted as a group of rather unfriendly and unwelcoming co-workers. All of these characters' actions followed the storyline set out by the researcher to form different prejudicial environments, offering participant both a sense of belonging or alienation. The threat priming video clip showed the situation of threats posed by in-group individuals where the participant was threatened by the group of people who used to be friendly and who were once members of the same group as him/her (for example, insulting verbally, bullying, and starting an argument). Regarding the threat posed by out-group individuals, the short video clip showed the situation where a group of people with unfriendly

attitudes and actions posed a threat to the participant's imaginary character.

#### *Implicit association tests*

IATs were used to measure implicit prejudice and implicit forgiveness. The theory behind the IAT states that if an individual has a distinct attitude or a positive mindset toward a stimulus, the individual's automatic thought process associates positive words to the stimulus much quicker than negative words. Conversely, if an individual has a distinct attitude or a negative mindset toward a stimulus, the individual's automatic thought process associates negative words to the stimulus much quicker than positive words. This research utilizes the computerized Implicit Prejudice Association Test, developed by Greenwald, Nosek, and Banaji (2003) and the research done by DeBellis (2011). Images of the targeted individuals 1, 2, and 3 were categorized as 'my people' and were portrayed as members of the same group. Images of the targeted individuals 4, 5, and 6 were categorized as 'not my people' and were portrayed as not belonging in the same group. There were six words with positive implication in the 'pleasant' category: *good, talented, cheerful, honest, cooperative, and kind*. There were six words with negative implication in the 'unpleasant' category: *bad, aggressive, disgusting, scary, menacing, and torturing*. The higher the IAT score, the higher the feelings of in-group favoritism and the higher out-group prejudice the participant had. The reliability rate of the test was .77. For the Implicit Forgiveness Association Test, we also used a computerized test developed from the research of DeBellis (2011) and Goldring (2011). This test would associate images of targeted individuals 1, 2 and 3 as 'my people' and images of targeted individual 4, 5 and 6 as 'not my people' matched with six words reflecting forgiveness: *forgive, reconciliation, reunited, exempt from punishment, understanding, and compassion*, and another six words reflecting unforgiveness: *revenge, unforgiving, vengeance, retaliation, vindictive, and condemn*. The lower the IAT score, the lower the level of implicit forgiveness the participant had. The Cronbach's Alpha ( $\alpha$ ) value of this test was .82.

#### *Explicit prejudice scale*

We employed the prejudice measurement approach from Halevy et al. (2012) and Stenstrom, Lickel, Denson, and Miller (2008) by measuring in-group favoritism and out-group prejudice, which reflected cooperativeness and expression of admiration and pride. This reflected the perception of one's own group as superior to others for being unique, protective of each other's interest, and conflict-free (for example, "you admire the members of your own group far more than those outside, without any particular reason"). There were 16 questions with scales from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 7 (*strongly agree*). The higher the explicit prejudice score, the more an individual would express feelings of like toward in-group persons and dislike toward out-group persons ( $\alpha = .93$ ).

#### *Explicit forgiveness scale*

This scale was developed from Bradfield and Aquino (1999) and Rye et al. (2001), and encompassed ideas and expressions of forgiveness (for example, "You consider giving those who did wrong to you a chance to make amends and

rekindle the relationship.”; “You try to express friendliness and compassion to those who treat you wrongly.”). There were 16 questions with a scale from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 7 (*strongly agree*). The higher the score, the higher the level of explicit forgiveness the participant had ( $\alpha = .94$ ).

#### *Offensive appraisal*

We used two types of scales developed from the research by Weun, Beatty, and Jones (2004). The first scale addressed primary appraisal, and was comprised of a series of six questions such as “If the situations in the video clip you have just viewed really happened to you, what level of impartiality do you think of?” The secondary appraisal contained a series of seven questions such as “If the situations in the video clip you have just viewed really happened to you, would you consider yourself a victim of a threat?”. Both of the appraisals used a 7-point scale, from 1 (*the least*) to 7 (*the most*). The results were analyzed as the higher the score, the higher the evaluation of violent threats.

#### *Manipulation Checks*

To check for the occurrence of in-group and out-group prejudice, the participants were asked to assess their feelings of liking and the desire to belong to the group in the short clip, which showed both individuals portrayed as members of the same group and individuals portrayed as not belonging in the same group. A favoritism scale of 1–10 was used; the higher the score, the more the participant liked and desired to belong to the group. To check for offensive appraisal perception, the participants were asked to assess their feelings of being threatened and uneasiness by ticking either “Yes” or “No” in the appropriate box.

#### *Data Analysis*

We verified data by examining the score distributions and outliers detection using the Mahalanobis distance method, which revealed that the sample of 200 participants provided valid and complete data. Descriptive statistics, a t-test, Pearson's product-moment correlation coefficient, and three-way ANOVA were used to test the hypotheses and objectives of this research.

### **Results**

#### *Manipulation Checks Results*

We found significant differences of the favoritism score between in-group characters and out-group characters, ( $F [1,192] = 4.14, p < .05$ ). Every character who was portrayed as a member of the same group received a significantly higher favoritism score than characters portrayed as not belonging in the same group. After watching both video clips with different threat conditions (in-group and out-group threats), all the participants answered “Yes” in the offensive appraisal perception, saying they felt threatened and uneasy. This information showed that our experimental treatment conditions were effective in creating prejudice.

#### *Implicit Forgiveness*

The three-way interaction among implicit prejudice, explicit prejudice, and threats was highly significant, ( $F [1,192] = 10.46, p < .01$ ). The two-way interaction analysis revealed the implicit  $\times$  explicit prejudice interaction was significant for both an in-group threat, ( $F [1,95] = 4.19, p < .05$ ) and an out-group threat, ( $F [1,95] = 6.42, p < .05$ ). Pairwise tests for simple main effects of threats were then analyzed for each level of implicit and explicit prejudice. Table 1 presents the means of the relevant variables. For the in-group threat condition, the major findings were that participants with low implicit and explicit prejudice had the highest implicit forgiveness level ( $M = 0.76$ ). Moreover, the low implicit-explicit prejudice had significantly higher implicit forgiveness than high implicit-low explicit prejudice ( $M = 0.57, p < .05$ ), and high implicit-explicit prejudice ( $M = 0.57, p < .05$ ). Accordingly, low implicit-high explicit prejudice ( $M = 0.67, p < .05$ ) had a significantly lower implicit forgiveness level than both the low implicit-explicit prejudice groups. However, there was no difference in the implicit forgiveness levels ( $p = ns$ ) for high implicit prejudice participants with low or high explicit prejudice. For the out-group threat condition, although participants had both low implicit and explicit prejudice, the level of implicit forgiveness was almost the same as the for the low implicit-high explicit prejudice participants ( $p = ns$ ). When participants had high implicit prejudice, lower explicit prejudice would significantly help to increase implicit forgiveness than high explicit prejudice ( $p < .01$ ) as shown in Figure 1.

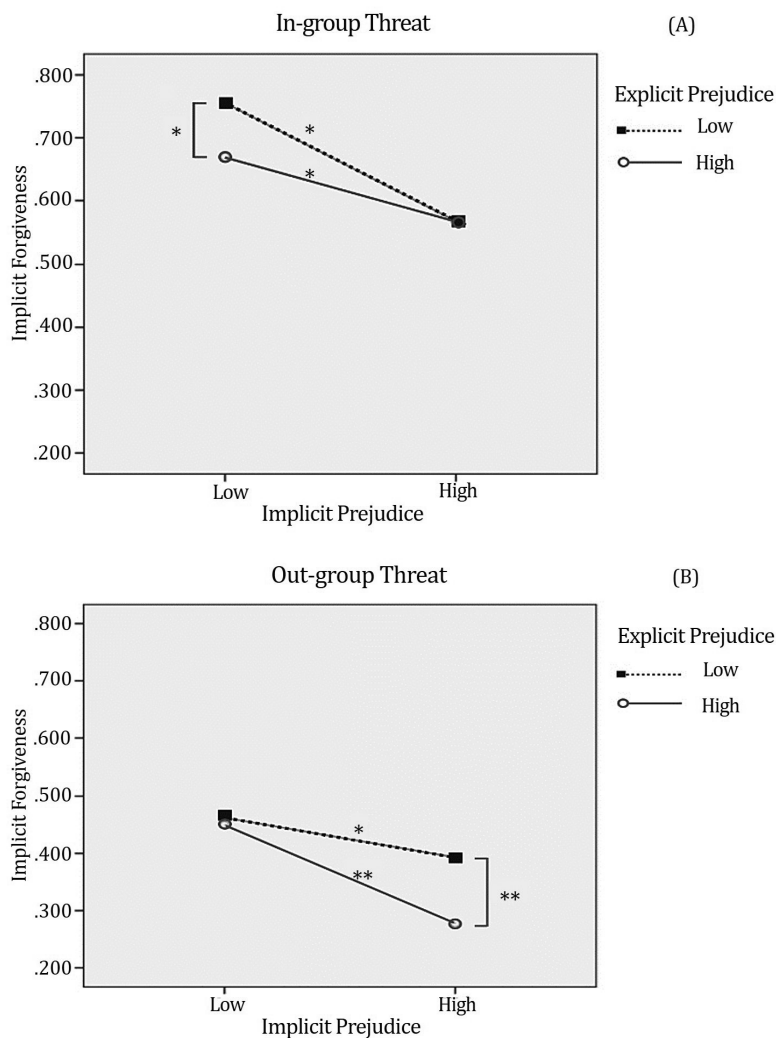
#### *Explicit Forgiveness*

The three-way interaction among implicit prejudice, explicit prejudice, and threats was significant, ( $F [1,192] = 15.87, p < .01$ ). The two-way interaction produced the same results as implicit forgiveness, in that the implicit  $\times$  explicit prejudice interaction was significant for both an in-group threat, ( $F [1,95] = 15.72, p < .01$ ) and an out-group threat, ( $F [1,95] = 4.28, p < .05$ ). Again, we conducted pairwise tests for simple main effects and Table 2 presents the relevant means. For the in-group threat condition, low implicit and explicit prejudice participants had the significantly highest level of explicit forgiveness ( $M = 5.43, p < .01$ ), while other conditions of explicit and implicit prejudice had the same level of explicit forgiveness ( $p = ns$ ). In the out-group threat condition, we found nearly the same pattern as in the implicit forgiveness results, with low implicit prejudice participants with low or high explicit prejudice tending to have the same level of explicit forgiveness ( $p = ns$ ). However, low implicit-explicit prejudice and low implicit-high explicit prejudice had significantly higher explicit forgiveness than high implicit-low explicit, and high implicit-high explicit prejudice groups ( $p < .01$ ). The lowest explicit forgiveness level was found in both high implicit and explicit prejudice participants ( $M = 2.84$ ) but this forgiveness could rise significantly higher when high implicit prejudice participants had lower explicit prejudice ( $M = 3.58, p < .01$ ) as shown in Figure 2.

**Table 1**

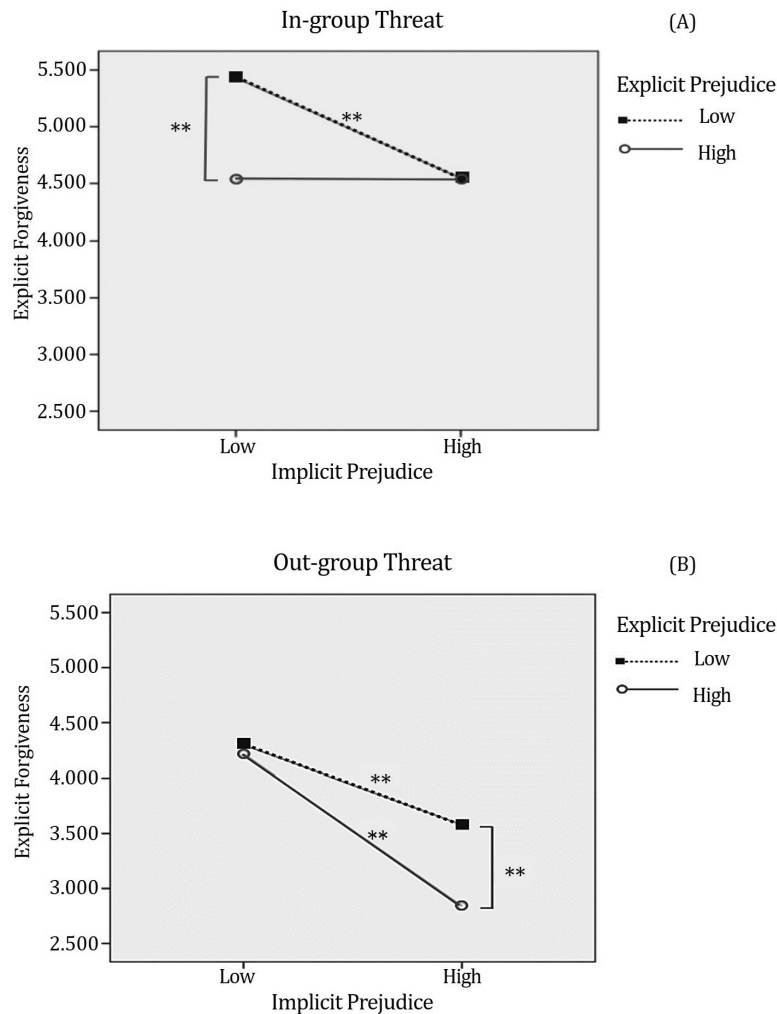
Means and standard deviations of implicit forgiveness

| Prejudice level         | In-group threat |      | Out-group threat |      |
|-------------------------|-----------------|------|------------------|------|
|                         | M               | SD   | M                | SD   |
| Low implicit prejudice  |                 |      |                  |      |
| Low explicit prejudice  | 0.76            | 0.08 | 0.46             | 0.09 |
| High explicit prejudice | 0.67            | 0.12 | 0.45             | 0.10 |
| High implicit prejudice |                 |      |                  |      |
| Low explicit prejudice  | 0.57            | 0.10 | 0.39             | 0.11 |
| High explicit prejudice | 0.57            | 0.10 | 0.28             | 0.06 |

**Figure 1** Implicit forgiveness level: (A) in-group threat condition, (B) out-group threat condition, \* and \*\* indicate .05 and .01 levels of significance, respectively**Table 2**

Means and standard deviations of explicit forgiveness

| Prejudice level         | In-group threat |      | Out-group threat |      |
|-------------------------|-----------------|------|------------------|------|
|                         | M               | SD   | M                | SD   |
| Low implicit prejudice  |                 |      |                  |      |
| Low explicit prejudice  | 5.43            | 0.37 | 4.30             | 0.87 |
| High explicit prejudice | 4.54            | 0.50 | 4.21             | 0.74 |
| High implicit prejudice |                 |      |                  |      |
| Low explicit prejudice  | 4.55            | 0.65 | 3.58             | 0.71 |
| High explicit prejudice | 4.53            | 0.60 | 2.84             | 0.62 |



**Figure 2** Explicit forgiveness level: (A) in-group threat condition, (B) out-group threat condition, \*\* indicates .01 level of significance

## Discussion

Overall, people tend to forgive more when being threatened by in-group than out-group members. In particular, those with low implicit and explicit prejudice had the highest levels of both implicit and explicit forgiveness, whereas those with high implicit and explicit prejudice had the lowest levels of both implicit and explicit forgiveness. Importantly, implicit prejudice had more influence on forgiveness than explicit prejudice.

When people are threatened by in-group members, those with low implicit prejudice will have a stronger tendency to forgive than people with high implicit prejudice. However, in this regard, it also depends on the level of the explicit prejudice. A person with low implicit and explicit prejudice is the most willing to forgive, whereas, a person with low implicit prejudice but high explicit prejudice has a lower implicit forgiveness level. Owing to their nature, people tend to forgive others, especially individuals in their own group in order to reduce any physical and emotional stress and to avoid any negative effects

that may occur when people are likely to have to continue interacting with the individuals in their own group (Jiao, 2009; Llewellyn & Philpott, 2014), and the mechanism of implicit forgiveness of those people is a process that basically occurs (subconsciously) in the mind. Therefore, if a person has a low level of implicit prejudice, which is a process that occurs (subconsciously) in the mind as well, no matter what the level of explicit prejudice may be, that person's tendency to forgive increases, especially among the individuals in his/her group. The result of an offensive appraisal helps to understand the mind's mechanism more clearly, so when people have a low level of implicit prejudice, their assessment reduces the seriousness of the offensiveness and, therefore, implicit forgiveness increases (Fincham, 2009; Goldring, 2011). Interestingly, when a person with a high level of implicit prejudice is offended/intimidated by in-group members, no matter whether the level of explicit prejudice is high or low, then the person's implicit forgiveness is not any different. This shows that a high level of implicit prejudice will have

a much stronger influence than that of explicit prejudice, even if individuals of the same group are involved, and the willingness to forgive decreases. The reason might be that people feel distressed when offended by in-group individuals whom they trust, even if it is obvious that the offense has not been that serious. Nonetheless, such people feel tense and confused, and such feelings can temporarily deteriorate their willingness to forgive (Fein & Spencer, 1997; Struthers, Eaton, Santelli, Uchiyama, & Shirvani, 2008).

Regarding explicit forgiveness, when people are offended or threatened by in-group individuals, the findings were similar to those for implicit forgiveness, that is, people with a low level of implicit prejudice show a stronger tendency to express explicit forgiveness, with the exception being cases where people have a low level of implicit prejudice but a high level of explicit prejudice and then the willingness to express explicit forgiveness is not different from that of people with a high level of implicit prejudice, no matter whether their explicit prejudice is high or low. The reason for this might be that although people would like to forgive, their explicit prejudice has already been expressed and is obvious to others, and if forgiveness is expressed immediately, it may cause the intimidating party to become even more intimidating. Therefore, people may hold back an immediate expression of explicit forgiveness in silent retaliation to serve as a warning to individuals of the same group to reduce any offenses/intimidation which may occur in the future (Hewstone, Rubin, & Willis, 2002; Worthington, 2006).

The findings show that people with high levels of implicit prejudice and explicit prejudice are much less willing to express implicit forgiveness and explicit forgiveness when offended or threatened by out-group members because people with a high level of prejudice assess the fierceness of offenses as more severe, and when offended by out-group individuals, who are regarded as not belonging to one's own group, they feel that those offenses are not acceptable and are more severe than offenses committed by in-group members, and so people clearly express their out-group prejudice. Therefore, it is not really necessary for these affected people to preserve their reputation as friends in any relationships or for any benefit in the future. Consequently, such people express feelings of retaliation and have thoughts of forgiveness at a lower level (Fischer, Haslam, & Smith, 2010; Tam et al., 2008). However, a person may express an increased level of implicit forgiveness as well as explicit forgiveness, even if he or she bears a high level of implicit prejudice derived from a low level of explicit prejudice. The reason for this might be that at certain times, although people bear negative feelings and out-group prejudice, they do not openly express those feelings, even if offended by one or more members from other groups. These people may want to preserve their reputation by not openly expressing feelings of retaliation. This may affect people in such a way that they suppress their negative feeling of not wanting to forgive on the one hand, but on the other, it induces them to express forgiveness. This case is different from cases of offenses or threats committed by in-group members as mentioned above (when there is a high level of implicit prejudice), as although there is a low level of explicit prejudice, people will express two types of forgiveness owing to the confusion and tension

caused by harm and danger committed by in-group individuals they trusted (Cehajic, Brown, & Castano, 2008; Fedor, 2014; Fein & Spencer, 1997; Stelan & Covic, 2006).

If the level of implicit prejudice is low, no matter whether the level of explicit prejudice is high or low, the levels of willingness to express implicit forgiveness are very similar. A study on explicit forgiveness also produced the same result, which was consistent with a previous study on forgiveness, where it was believed that the fact that people are more willing to forgive others derives from the mind (subconscious). If a person's mind is without any prejudice or bias and partiality, it will influence the ability to acknowledge the fierceness of the offenses by reducing that ability, and a person will assume that the offenses, no matter whether committed in-group or out-group, may have occurred unintentionally. Furthermore, it is also normal for people living together to have serious disagreements, and it is human nature to forgive in order to curb negative moods, nourish friendship, and reduce hatred. Therefore, it is possible that the levels of the two types of forgiveness increase (Brown, 2010; Hugenberg & Bodenhausen, 2003).

## Conclusion and Recommendation

This study was a pilot survey on investigating the process of the mind and ways of expression concerning prejudice or bias and the assessment of offenses or threats deriving from the disregard for others shown by in-group and out-group members, which leads to expressing forgiveness in order to make people realize their own prejudices, and consider the fact that offenses/intimidation committed by others, no matter whether they are in-group members or from other groups, can occur in certain circumstances, even unintentionally. Even if they lead to disadvantages or cause negative moods, disagreements should be solved by peaceful means, (such as by forgiving), in order to reduce acts of vengeance or retaliation and escalation of the disagreement. However, for future study concerning this subject, the research may be repeated or a structural equation model study may be conducted including other determining psychological factors, such as self-esteem, mercifulness, and conscientiousness, which will help to understand the process or mechanism of reducing prejudice and increasing people's increased willingness to forgive.

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