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Humility, Empathy, Religious Commitment, and the Forgiveness of Hurt in Close Relationships
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Abstract

Background: Current research on humility indicates that it could be instrumental in the repair of damaged relationships through the facilitation of forgiveness. Empathy has received much attention regarding its relationship with forgiveness and there is some evidence that empathy may mediate the already established link between humility and forgiveness. The present study explored the relationship between humility and forgiveness, whether empathy would mediate that relationship, and whether religious commitment would moderate this mediation. **Methods**: 372 participants were recruited from a large private Christian University in the Mid-Atlantic region of the United States and were asked to recall their most recent experience of being hurt deeply by someone close to them. This was accomplished through an anonymous online survey of self-report measures. **Results**: The researchers found that no correlation existed between humility and forgiveness. Furthermore, empathy did not mediate this relationship and religious commitment did not moderate the predicted mediation. However, evidence indicated that religious commitment moderated the direct relationship between humility and forgiveness, with humility predicting forgiveness at 1 SD below the mean of religious commitment (Effect = .6711, p = .015). Because our sample was highly religious (N > 99% Christian) and highly religiously committed (M = 37.68, SD = 7.52), this possible interaction may explain the lack of relationship between humility and forgiveness being that it is contingent upon low religious commitment. The post-hoc analysis found that religious commitment predicted forgiveness significantly above other main variables (β = .178, p < .001), but lost significance when empathy entered the model, which accounted for an additional 40% of the variance. **Conclusions**: Our findings align with current research which suggests that trait and state measures often correlate weakly; trait humility in our sample was not related to a state measure of forgiveness. However, current evidence suggests that an interaction may exist between religious commitment and humility, which may partially explain this lack of relationship, although further exploration is needed. The post-hoc analysis revealed empathy as the main predictor of forgiveness in this sample.

Introduction

- Relational humility, as conceptualized by Davis et al. (2010), consists of an accurate view of self and behaviors that are other oriented. The Van Tongeren et al. (2019) *social bonds hypothesis* suggests that humility is instrumental in the formation, maintenance, and repair of social bonds.
- Forgiveness is conceptualized as an active intrapersonal choice to forfeit one's rights to negative behavior, affect, and judgement towards another and the replacement of these negative experiences with positive behavior, affect, and judgements (Enright et al., 1998). Forgiveness has prosocial benefits such as the promotion of relationship commitment, closeness, and relationship satisfaction (Fincham, 2009).
- Empathy, defined as cognitive and emotional insight into how another may be feeling, presents a robust relationship with forgiveness (McCullough et al., 1997, 1998; Spreng et al., 2009).
- Current literature, while not extensive, suggests that humility and empathy may be working together to facilitate forgiveness. (Fupšová & Záhorcová, 2022; Kim et al., 2022, in press). There has yet to be a study that explores whether state empathy will mediate the relationship between forgiveness and relational humility.
- Religious commitment is conceptualized as the extent to which an individual adheres to religious beliefs, values, and practices in daily life (Worthington et al., 2003). Current research suggests that religious commitment has a stronger link to forgiveness than humility, however, this trait measure of religiosity is likely to have a small role to play in this relationship (Choe et al., 2019; Davis et al., 2017).
- The current study seeks to first explore the correlational relationship between all main study variables. Next, the study explores the potential mediational relationship between relational humility and forgiveness with empathy as a mediator. Finally, the study explores whether religious commitment may moderate the supposed mediation.

Methods

372 undergraduate students were recruited from a large, private Christian university in central Virginia. To participate, participants had to be at least 18 years old, be currently taking a residential psychology course at the institution of recruitment and have experienced a close relational hurt at some point in their lives. Most participants were female (84.4%) and White (87.4%). The average age of participants was 18.7 years (SD=2.66). Over 99% of participants identified as Christian.
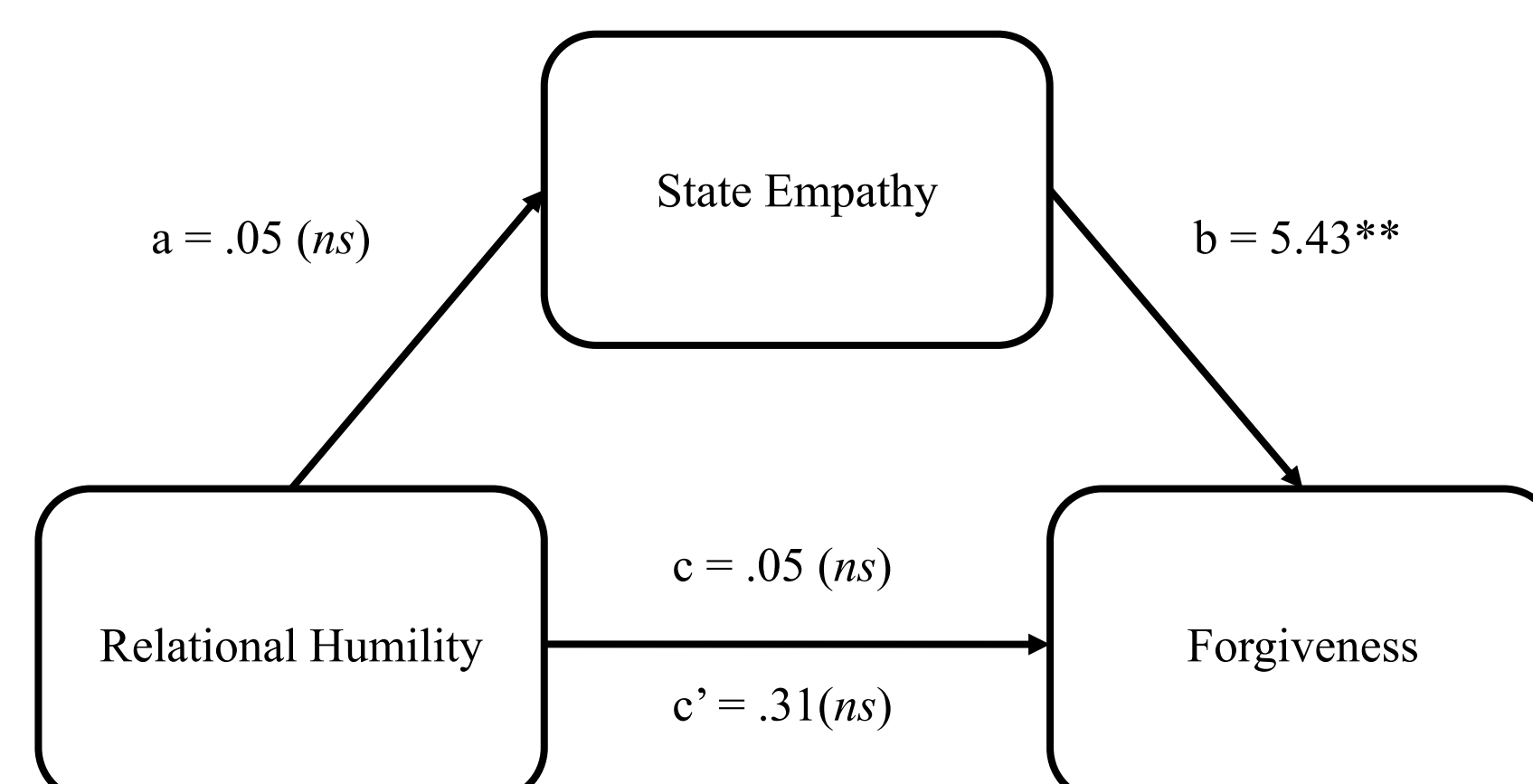
Data was collected via an online survey during which students indicated consent and submitted demographic information. All scales provided self-report. The seminal scales, measured relational humility (RHS-16; Davis et al., 2011), empathy (TEQ; Spreng et al., 2009) and religious commitment (RCI-10; Worthington et al., 2003) at the trait level. Before the final measures were given, participants were asked to visualize a time in which a specific offender hurt them deeply. The remaining scales were then completed, reporting forgiveness (EFI-30; Subkoviak et al., 1995) and empathy (BEA, Batson et al., 1983) at the state level. Upon completion, participants were compensated with a small amount of course credit.

Table 1
Correlations between main study variables, means, SDs, and alphas

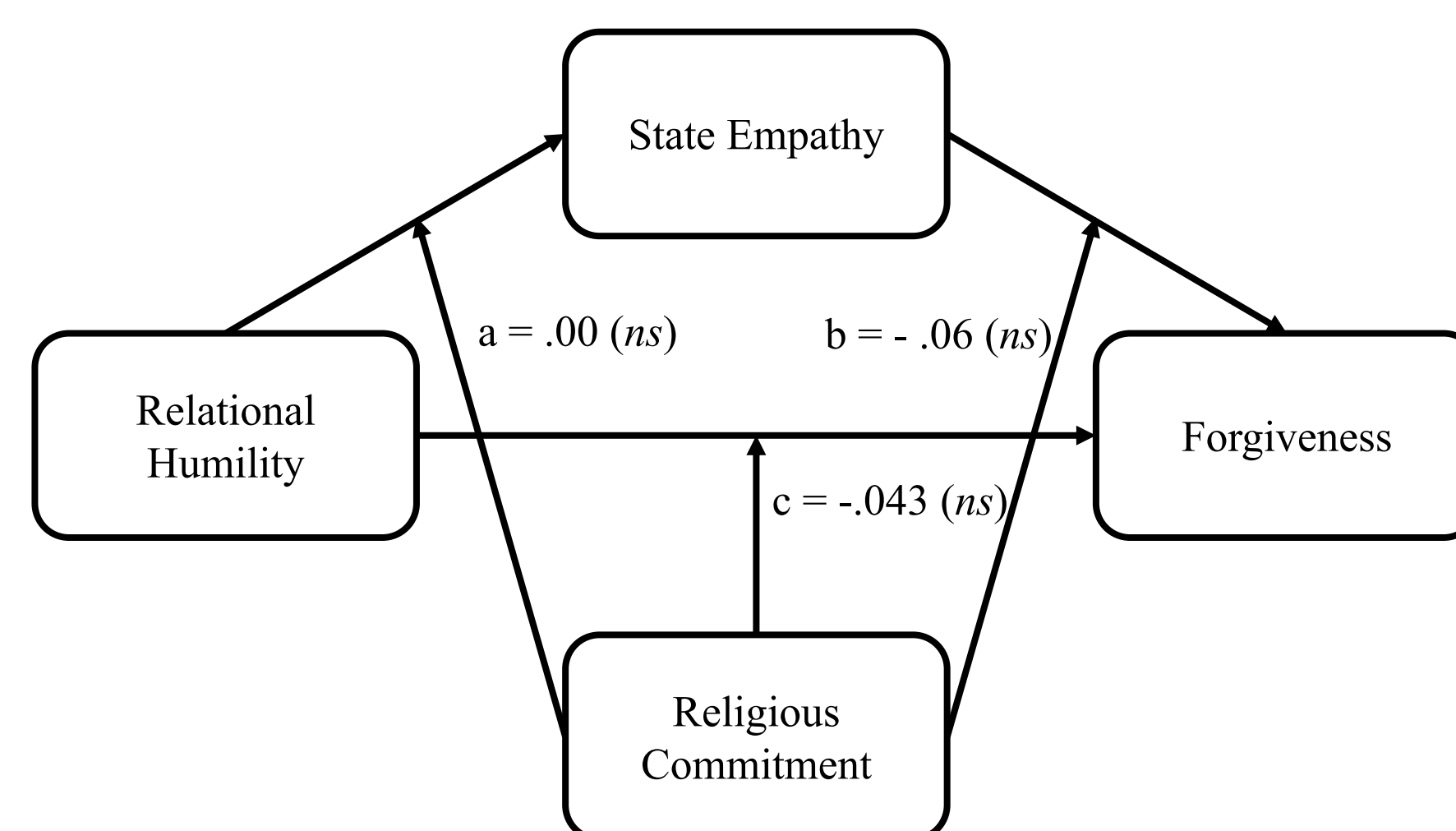| Variables	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
1. Relational Humility	-						
2. Religious Commitment	.178**	-					
3. Trait Empathy	.411**	.337**	-				
4. State Empathy	.011 (ns)	.220**	.175**	-			
5. Forgiveness	.055 (ns)	.184**	.094 (ns)	.697**	-		
6. Closeness prior to hurt	.084 (ns)	.022 (ns)	.110*	.189**	.182**	-	
7. Degree of hurt experienced	.094 (ns)	.072 (ns)	.188**	-.03 (ns)	-.211*	.126*	
Mean	64.36	37.68	67.93	10.93	123.99	4.36	4.25
Standard Deviation	7.506	7.522	6.529	4.364	33.995	0.868	0.821
Alpha	.829	.896	.835	.864	.976	-	-

$* p < .05$ $** p < .01$. ns = not statistically significant

Figure 1
Mediation Model

$** p < .01$. ns = not statistically significant
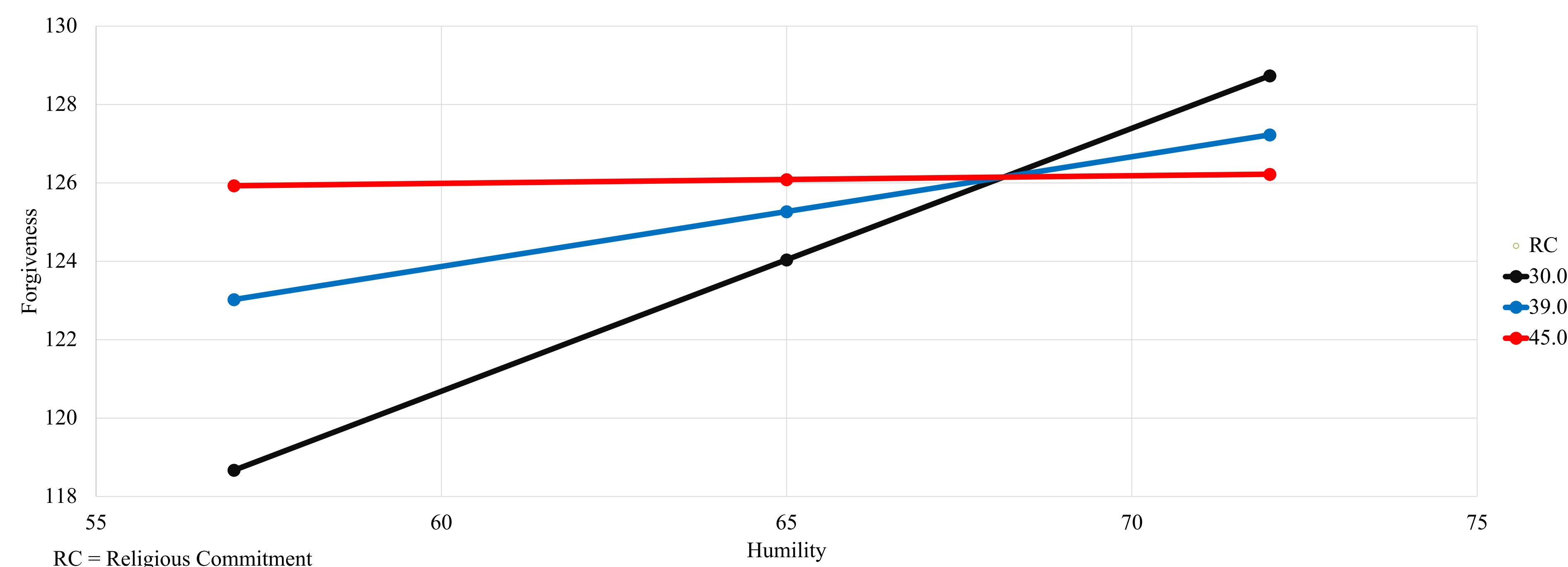
Figure 2
Moderation Mediation Model

ns = not statistically significant

Table 2
Post-Hoc Analysis: Hierarchical Regression Predicting Forgiveness

Variable	β	R^2	ΔR^2
Step 1		.103	.103**
Trait Empathy	.121*		
Depth of Hurt	-.259**		
Closeness Prior	.202**		
Step 2		.103	.000
Trait Empathy	.115*		
Depth of Hurt	-.259**		
Closeness Prior	.201**		
Relational Humility	.015 (ns)		
Step 3		.131	.028**
Trait Empathy	.059 (ns)		
Depth of Hurt	-.261**		
Closeness Prior	.204**		
Relational Humility	.007 (ns)		
Religious Commitment	.178**		
Step 4		.535	.404**
Trait Empathy	-.038 (ns)		
Depth of Hurt	-.203**		
Closeness Prior	.079*		
Relational Humility	.067 (ns)		
Religious Commitment	.05 (ns)		
State Empathy	.671**		

$* p < .05$ $** p < .01$. ns = not statistically significant

Figure 3
Line Graph of Conditional Effects of Religious Commitment on the Forgiveness-Humility Relationship.

RC = Religious Commitment

Results and Discussion

Results
- Humility did not significantly correlate with forgiveness (r = .05, p = .30) nor state empathy (r = .01, p = .84). However, forgiveness correlated strongly with state empathy (r = .68, p > .001). See Table 1 for a complete list of correlational findings.
- Notably, religious commitment correlated modestly with all main study variables. Also, a strong relationship between state empathy and forgiveness was shown, as expected (r = .697, p > .001).
- After controlling for trait empathy, state empathy did not mediate the relationship between humility and forgiveness (a*b = -.26 , 95% bootstrap CI [-.60 to .08]; see Figure 1).
- Religious commitment did not significantly moderate this mediation (see Figure 2).
- A significant conditional effect was found on the relationship between humility and forgiveness. When religious commitment was low, humility was more likely to predict forgiveness (see Figure 3).
- A hierarchical regression was performed post-hoc (see Table 2). Conditions of forgiveness (depth of hurt and relational closeness prior to the offense) significantly predicted forgiveness through all four steps. Relational humility accounted for no additional variance. Religious commitment accounted for an additional 2.8% variance in Step 3. However, in Step 4, religious commitment lost significance, but state empathy accounted for an additional 40.4% of variance, suggesting that it is the primary predictor of forgiveness in this dataset.

Discussion
- Relational humility is vague in its conceptualization and application throughout current literature. While there is an established relationship between humility and forgiveness, current research suggests that the use of a state measure of humility may produce a more robust correlation, as state measures are more causally proximal to other state measures as opposed to trait measures (Davis et al., 2013).
- Evidence suggesting that empathy might mediate the humility-forgiveness link employed only contextual state measures, suggesting that a state measure of humility may produce a significant model (Kim et al., 2022; McCullough et al., 1997,1998).
- The moderation model was not significant, likely due to the insignificant mediation model. However, the conditional effect may partially explain the lack of relationship between humility and forgiveness. A highly religious sample may not display a strong correlation between humility and forgiveness if this relationship is indeed dependent on a low level of religious commitment.
- Post-hoc results revealed that state empathy is the largest predictor of forgiveness in this dataset, which aligns with previous findings (McCullough et al, 1997, 1998). Additionally, previous findings suggest that conditions of the offense are large predictors of forgiveness, and our regression model reflects this finding (Fupšová & Záhorcová, 2022; McCullough et al., 1997, 1998). Finally, this regression model suggests a classical mediation of state empathy between religious commitment and forgiveness, but further research is needed to validate this finding.

Future Work

1. Apply a state measure of relational humility to determine how an accurate measure of humility may predict forgiveness in a specific context.
2. Further explore the potential interaction between religious commitment and humility when predicting forgiveness.
3. Discover whether promoting contextual humility in a counseling setting might predict forgiveness.
4. Explore potential mediating effect of state empathy on the relationship between religious commitment and forgiveness.

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