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Situational Characteristics and Emotional Forgiveness: A Two-Wave Study With Socially Maladjusted Youths in Poland

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ABSTRACT

Forgiveness is a coping strategy that facilitates psychological well-being and reduces stress, leading to growing interest in identifying its key predictors. This study examined how situational characteristics, as defined by the DIAMONDS model, influenced emotional forgiveness among socially maladjusted youths in Poland. Utilizing a two-wave longitudinal design with 354 participants aged 11–18 years, with assessments conducted at 3-month intervals, this research explored the effects of the situational dimensions Duty, Intellect, Adversity, Mating, pOsitivity, Negativity, Deception, and Sociality (DIAMONDS) on emotional forgiveness outcomes. The findings indicated that Adversity impeded the reduction of negative emotions, while Duty supported constructive emotional processing; pOsitivity exhibited a nuanced impact, influencing both positive and negative emotional responses in different ways. These results underscore the importance of both situational context and individual perceptions in shaping forgiveness. We call for integrated approaches that consider both personality traits and situational factors to provide a more comprehensive understanding of forgiveness. Further longitudinal research is recommended to explore these dynamics among socially maladjusted youths.

Forgiveness is a psychological process that involves the voluntary release of negative emotions, motivations, and thoughts toward an offender and replacing them with positive or neutral ones (Strelan 2020; Worthington 2020). The positive effects of forgiveness, particularly in managing health and well-being, have been widely documented, spurring interest in identifying its predictors (Lee and Enright 2019; Rasmussen et al. 2019). Much of the literature has focused on dispositional factors like personality traits, moral values, and cognitive flexibility that influence the tendency to forgive (Benard et al. 2022; Lau et al. 2021). However, the role of situational assessments in shaping episodic forgiveness—defined as the decision to forgive in response to a specific event—remains underexplored. This paper describes a study that examined how situational characteristics may shape episodic forgiveness, particularly emotional forgiveness, as a consequence of the decision to forgive.

1 | Forgiveness

Forgiveness is generally understood as the process of letting go of negative thoughts, motives, and emotions like anger, resentment, and the desire for revenge toward an offender, often replacing these with more positive or neutral ones (Webb et al. 2017; Worthington 2020). Forgiveness is beneficial for promoting psychological well-being and reducing stress

Summary

- The study shows that situational factors, especially those in the DIAMONDS model, shape emotional forgiveness in socially maladjusted youths.

- Adverse situations reduce emotional forgiveness, while duty-oriented situations encourage it by fostering constructive emotional processing.

- Forgiveness interventions should focus on reframing adverse situations and promoting a sense of duty to enhance emotional forgiveness.

(Skalski-Bednarz et al. 2024), particularly among individuals who have experienced interpersonal offenses like verbal or physical aggression (Toussaint et al. 2018; Webb et al. 2012), sexual assault (Ha et al. 2019; Skalski-Bednarz and Toussaint 2025), or other challenging situations, like a serious illness (Skalski-Bednarz et al. 2024), betrayal in relationships (Strelan et al. 2017), wartime conflicts (Skalski et al. 2022), or other traumatic events (Finch 2006; Noll 2007).

Forgiveness, as an emotion-focused strategy, is also valuable in prevention programs for socially maladjusted youths. These young people, often both victims and perpetrators of problematic behaviors, can benefit significantly from forgiveness education (Skalski-Bednarz et al. 2024a). A study by Skalski-Bednarz et al. (2024) found that even a brief educational intervention on forgiveness can help reduce hostility and aggression toward peers. Such interventions provide adolescents with alternative behaviors to manage threatening situations, allowing them to reappraise these situations and respond more thoughtfully.

Research has identified two main types of forgiveness: *dispositional forgiveness*, which reflects a general tendency to forgive across various situations, and *episodic forgiveness*, which occurs in response to a specific event (Rezaei et al. 2020). Episodic forgiveness can be further divided into *decisional forgiveness*, which involves a cognitive decision to forgive and forgo revenge, and *emotional forgiveness*, characterized by the replacement of negative emotions with positive or neutral ones (Davis et al. 2015; Worthington et al. 2007). Although dispositional forgiveness accounts for a significant portion of the variance in episodic forgiveness, the latter is also influenced by other personal and contextual factors (Stackhouse 2019). The *REACH model* (Worthington 2020) posits that a decision to forgive often leads to emotional forgiveness, which comprises two dimensions: positive and prosocial emotions toward the offender and the reduction of negative emotions related to the offender (Hook et al. 2012). Studies suggest that forgiveness, particularly emotional forgiveness, can enhance mental health by fostering emotional liberation and reducing the psychological burdens associated with harboring anger and resentment.

Guided by Hoyt and McCullough's (2005) theoretical review, forgiveness and its predictors can be examined at three levels: situational, dispositional, and dyadic. The situational level explores how specific characteristics of interpersonal transgressions, such as perceived intent or harm severity, influence forgiveness toward a particular offender. The dispositional level considers forgiveness as a consistent individual trait shaped by personal characteristics, such as emotions, cognitions, and moral values, influencing forgiveness across different contexts. Finally, the dyadic level focuses on forgiveness within specific relationships, such as romantic or family bonds, where forgiveness patterns are shaped by relationships' unique dynamics and history. Together, these levels provide a comprehensive framework for understanding how various factors—contextual, personal, and relational—predict forgiveness in different interpersonal settings.

2 | Predictors of Forgiveness

Research suggests that an individual's sense of morality influences their willingness to forgive. For instance, Benard et al. (2022) found that individuals who prioritize moral foundations related to care and fairness are more inclined to forgive, as these foundations encourage empathy and reciprocity rather than revenge. Likewise, moral development affects forgiveness decisions; those who emphasize fairness and harm avoidance are more likely to forgive transgressions (Lindsey 2013). Religion can further enhance this moral framework by providing a sense of moral meaning and often promoting forgiveness as a virtue that aligns with values like compassion, mercy, and reconciliation (Escher 2013).

Cognitive flexibility, particularly executive functions such as working memory, vigilance, and inhibitory control, also plays a key role in forgiveness by helping regulate emotions and behavior. These functions, governed by the prefrontal cortex, are essential for managing social and emotional responses (Maier et al. 2018; Whitmer and Banich 2007). Individuals with stronger executive functioning are better equipped to manage negative emotions like anger and resentment, making them more likely to forgive (Pronk et al. 2010; Zhao et al. 2021). Neuroimaging studies further support this view, showing that brain areas involved in cognitive control are active during emotion regulation, highlighting the significance of cognitive processes in forgiveness (Pripfl and Lamm 2015; Skalski-Bednarz and Toussaint 2024).

Personality traits also influence the likelihood of forgiveness. Traits like agreeableness, empathy, and low neuroticism are generally associated with a greater propensity to forgive. For example, agreeable individuals tend to view conflicts as opportunities for cooperation rather than retaliation (Rey and Extremera 2016). Similarly, highly empathetic individuals are more forgiving because they can understand others' feelings and often experience compassion for those who have wronged them (Eyring et al. 2020). In contrast, traits like narcissism and a high propensity for anger are linked to lower levels of forgiveness, as individuals with these traits may be more self-centered and inclined to hold grudges (Exline et al. 2004; Fatfouta et al. 2015).

However, recent studies suggest that the impact of personality traits on forgiveness may be weaker than previously assumed. A longitudinal study by Skalski-Bednarz and Toussaint (2023) found that while traits such as agreeableness, extraversion, and

emotional stability do predict forgiveness, their effects are relatively weak. Similarly, three-wave surveys by Lau et al. (2021) found only a weak association between conscientiousness and dispositional forgivingness. Thus, forgiveness may be more influenced by situational factors and relationships than by stable personality traits.

2.1 | Situational Characteristics

While dispositional factors provide a framework for understanding why people might choose to forgive, their effects in predicting episodic forgiveness are often limited, as indicated by numerous studies (Fehr et al. 2010). This limitation points to the need for alternative predictors that offer a more dynamic and context-sensitive perspective on forgiveness. Research has shown that situational factors (e.g., perceived intent behind an offense, the severity of harm caused, and the broader context in which the offense occurs) often explain more variance in forgiveness outcomes than dispositional ones (Brady et al. 2023; Couto 2022; Karremans and Van Lange 2005; McCullough and Witvliet 2002). For instance, an offense perceived as deliberate rather than accidental can significantly reduce the likelihood of forgiveness (Weiner 1995). Similarly, the extent of harm caused and whether the offender shows sincere remorse are pivotal in shaping forgiveness (Martinez-Diaz et al. 2021; McCullough et al. 2003). When the harm is perceived as severe and remorse is absent, feelings of avoidance or even a desire for revenge may emerge, complicating the forgiveness process. Conversely, when victims believe the offender is unlikely to repeat the offense, they are generally more open to forgiving (Couto 2022; Koutsos et al. 2008; Rusbult et al. 2005).

While these insights enhance our understanding, a broader issue persists in research on situational influences on behavior and emotional responses: the lack of consistent and systematic frameworks for defining and measuring situational factors. This challenge extends beyond forgiveness studies to other domains that examine situational motives and emotional reactions, where the research has often relied on less structured and more ad hoc methods (Sherman et al. 2015). Addressing this gap requires more standardized approaches to better capture the complexities of how situational factors shape behavior and emotions.

Psychology has long focused on individual functioning, developing extensive knowledge about personality (Funder 2001) and behavior (Furr 2009). However, to fully understand human behavior, it is also essential to consider how people perceive and interpret the situations they encounter. Sherman et al. (2015) argued that most studies have lacked a systematic framework for defining situational measures. Situations can be described using objectively measurable cues (e.g., time of day, weather, or the presence of others) that people then perceive and interpret, creating what is referred to as the "psychological situation" (Mischel and Shoda 1995). These cues form the foundation for constructing inferred situational features, such as whether a situation is seen as challenging, pleasant, or social. Situations can also be grouped into broader categories (e.g., school, work, and social) based on shared cues or characteristics, offering a more systematic way to define and assess them (Rauthmann and Sherman 2020).

To advance this understanding, Rauthmann et al. (2014) developed the DIAMONDS taxonomy, a structured framework for examining how people perceive different characteristics of situations. This taxonomy identifies eight dimensions—Duty, Intellect, Adversity, Mating, pOsitivity, Negativity, Deception, and Sociality—that capture the essential psychological traits of situations. Each dimension provides a unique lens for understanding situations: (1) *Duty* involves tasks and responsibilities; (2) *Intellect* encompasses cognitive engagement; (3) *Adversity* pertains to threats and criticism; (4) *Mating* focuses on romantic or social interest; (5) *pOsitivity* reflects joyful or pleasant experiences; (6) *Negativity* includes frustration, anxiety, or fear; (7) *Deception* involves distrust or dishonesty; and (8) *Sociality* concerns social interactions and relationship-building (Luhmann et al. 2021). Using this taxonomy, researchers can systematically explore how these situational dimensions impact human behavior, including episodic forgiveness.

To explain the intricate relationships between individuals, situations, and behavior, Furr and Funder (2021) proposed the situation construal model. This model, developed from an interactionist perspective, posits that situations are not merely passive contexts but are actively interpreted by individuals through a combination of objective cues and personal experiences. It suggests that both the objective characteristics of situations and the subjective interpretations of these cues interact to shape behavior. Supposedly, behaviors like the inclination to forgive can be influenced by how people perceive and make sense of the situational cues they encounter, highlighting the dynamic interplay between situational elements and individual perception.

By concentrating on the structured characteristics of situations defined by DIAMONDS (Rauthmann et al. 2014), researchers can gain deeper insights into how specific situational cues influence episodic forgiveness. This approach moves beyond the constraints of earlier models that lacked clear guidelines, focusing instead on the vital role of situational contexts. Utilizing a well-defined framework like DIAMONDS provides a more comprehensive understanding of how various situational elements can predict forgiveness, paving the way for more standardized studies of human behavior in context.

Supporting this view, Horstmann and Ziegler (2019) found that the eight dimensions of DIAMONDS significantly predict affect. For instance, Duty and pOsitivity were linked to positive affect, while Duty and Sociality negatively, and Adversity and Negativity positively, predicted negative affect. These findings suggest that how people perceive different situational cues, as captured by DIAMONDS, influences their emotional responses. Additionally, a longitudinal study by Rentzsch et al. (2022) showed that greater similarity in situational perceptions within relationships positively predicted both state and changes in trait relationship satisfaction over time. Since both positive and negative affects, as well as relationship satisfaction, are correlated with forgiveness, these results raise the expectation that DIAMONDS dimensions could also predict forgiveness.

2.2 | Present Study

In this study, we sought to explore how the DIAMONDS dimensions (Rauthmann et al. 2014) may predict emotional

forgiveness among socially maladjusted youths in Poland. This group exhibits higher levels of aggressive behaviors and is also more frequently a victim of offenses (Skalski-Bednarz 2024). According to theoretical perspectives such as the I3 theory (Slotter and Finkel 2011), equipping individuals with a repertoire of adaptive behaviors, such as forgiveness, can potentially reduce the frequency of aggressive acts and improve the social adjustment of youth. Due to the limited research specifically examining how the DIAMONDS dimensions relate to forgiveness—beyond general links between situational characteristics and emotional outcomes (Horstmann and Ziegler 2019; Rentzsch et al. 2022)—we took an exploratory approach without proposing specific hypotheses about which predictors may be most significant. Instead, we aimed to uncover potential patterns in the data.

Previous research by Horstmann and Ziegler (2019) showed that different situational dimensions can uniquely influence positive and negative affects. Building on these findings, we chose to move beyond a general assessment of emotional forgiveness and instead conduct separate analyses for its two subdomains: positive and prosocial emotions toward an offender and the reduction of negative emotions related to the offender. We hoped this approach would enable us to capture the distinct effects that different situational predictors may have on each subdomain. To further explore how perceptions of situational characteristics affect changes in emotional forgiveness over time, we adopted a longitudinal study design with assessments conducted at 3-month intervals.

3 | Materials and Methods

3.1 | Participants and Procedure

This study included 354 White/Caucasian participants aged 11–18 years ($M = 15.2$, SD = 1.7), with 65% being boys. All participants had a criminal background; those involved in minor offenses were placed in daily probation centers, while 42% with more serious offenses were assigned to locked educational centers. Our two-wave longitudinal survey had a 66% retention rate across both waves. The sample size was sufficient to detect effects based on G*Power calculations, and the structure of the sample aligned with the demographics of this population in Poland. However, it should be noted that this sample was not fully representative of this subpopulation. Data were collected from 15 centers located in different parts of the country. The centers were randomly selected from the national registry of such facilities, and we subsequently contacted the authorities to request permission to conduct the study. All directors granted their consent for the research.

This study was approved by the Ethics Committee of the Faculty of Education, University of Białystok, Poland, and data were collected from September 2022 to February 2023. The first wave (T1) took place in September, and the second wave (T2) occurred in January and February. Data collection was conducted in centers, with a trained project staff member administering the surveys to groups of approximately 30 participants using a paper-and-pencil format. After data collection, responses were entered into a master data sheet by the researcher, with each participant's responses coded with a

unique identifier to facilitate follow-up while maintaining anonymity. A separate file linking these identifiers to participants' names was securely stored apart from the main dataset to ensure confidentiality. Informed consent was obtained from the directors of the educational centers, the heads of the probation centers, the guardians of the juveniles, and the juveniles themselves.

In both waves, participants completed a series of questionnaires designed to assess psychosocial functioning and health, including measures for evaluating situational characteristics and emotional forgiveness. The entire set of questionnaires took approximately 30 min to complete. Before completing the questionnaires, the participants were instructed to recall a specific instance of harm done to them by another person within the past 6 months and to respond to the forgiveness and situational assessment scales with reference to this particular transgression. Although participants were directed to focus on a specific transgression, the nature of these incidents was not specified in the study. During the second wave, participants were asked to recall the same transgression they had evaluated in the first wave.

4 | Measures

4.1 | Situational Characteristics

Situational characteristics were assessed using the DIAMONDS framework originally developed by Rauthmann et al. (2014) and adapted into Polish by Jonason et al. (2021). This framework includes 24 items designed to evaluate eight dimensions (three items each) that capture various psychological traits of situations. Participants rated each item on a 7-point response scale with options ranging from 1 (*definitely not*) to 7 (*definitely yes*). The eight dimensions are: Duty, which assesses the extent to which work needs to be done (e.g., "Work needs to be done"; Cronbach's $\alpha = 0.66$ for Wave 1 and 0.68 for Wave 2); Intellect, which captures the cognitive engagement required by the situation (e.g., "Deep thinking is required"; $\alpha = 0.73$ for Wave 1 and 0.75 for Wave 2); Adversity, which pertains to situations eliciting stress or criticism (e.g., "You are being criticized"; $\alpha = 0.62$ for Wave 1 and 0.64 for Wave 2); Mating, which involves the presence of potential romantic partners (e.g., "Potential romantic partners are present"; $\alpha = 0.60$ for Wave 1 and 0.61 for Wave 2); pOsitivity, which reflects pleasant or playful situations (e.g., "The situation is playful"; $\alpha = 0.57$ for Wave 1 and 0.59 for Wave 2); Negativity, which includes frustrating or negative circumstances (e.g., "The situation is frustrating"; $\alpha = 0.76$ for Wave 1 and 0.77 for Wave 2); Deception, which pertains to the potential for deceit (e.g., "It is possible to deceive someone"; $\alpha = 0.57$ for Wave 1 and 0.58 for Wave 2); and Sociality, which focuses on opportunities for social interaction (e.g., "Social interactions are possible"; $\alpha = 0.82$ for Wave 1 and 0.83 for Wave 2). The acronym DIAMONDS reflects the first letters of each dimension; however, for the dimension of pOsitivity, the capital letter is shifted to the second position to align with the framework's name. Each dimension includes specific items that represent these situational characteristics, providing a nuanced understanding of how participants perceive and interpret their environments.

4.2 | Emotional Forgiveness

Emotional forgiveness was assessed using the Emotional Forgiveness Scale (EFS) developed by Hook et al. (2012) to measure emotional forgiveness and the achievement of inner peace following a specific wrongdoing. For this study, we used the Polish adaptation of the EFS by Mróz et al. (2022). The scale demonstrated good internal consistency, with Cronbach's α values of 0.75 for Wave 1 and 0.77 for Wave 2. The EFS consists of eight items divided into two dimensions (four items each): positive and prosocial emotions toward an offender ($\alpha = 0.80$ for Wave 1; $\alpha = 0.81$ for Wave 2) and the reduction of negative emotions related to the offender ($\alpha = 0.76$ for Wave 1; $\alpha = 0.77$ for Wave 2). Participants responded to each item on a 5-point scale ranging from 1 (*extremely uncharacteristic*) to 5 (*extremely characteristic*). Example items include "I no longer feel upset when I think of him or her" and "I feel sympathy toward him or her."

4.3 | Statistical Analysis

The study's informal hypotheses were examined through a correlation matrix and multiple regression analyses performed using IBM's SPSS (Version 29). The regression models incorporated baseline psychological characteristics, the initial levels of emotional forgiveness (with autoregressive control), and sex as a covariate. Before conducting the analyses, all variables were assessed for outliers. Given that the distributions were approximately normal and no significant outliers were found, the original data values were utilized. A significance threshold was set at $p \leq 0.05$, and effect sizes were determined using R^2.

5 | Results

Table 1 presents the descriptive statistics for the study's participants, including the mean, standard deviation, skewness, and kurtosis for various psychological and behavioral variables measured at T1 and T2. The correlation matrix is provided in Appendix 1.

The significant correlations between the DIAMONDS dimensions and forgiveness at T1 or T2 suggested several meaningful relationships. Specifically, Duty showed a significant positive correlation with positive and prosocial emotions toward an offender at T1 ($r = 0.14$, $p < 0.01$). Intellect was positively correlated with positive and prosocial emotions toward the offender at T1 ($r = 0.11$, $p < 0.05$) and negatively correlated with the reduction of negative emotions related to the offender at T1 ($r = -0.11$, $p < 0.05$). Adversity demonstrated a negative correlation with the reduction of negative emotions related to the offender at both T1 ($r = -0.11$, $p < 0.05$) and T2 ($r = -0.14$, $p < 0.01$). Mating was positively associated with positive and prosocial emotions toward the offender at T1 ($r = 0.17$, $p < 0.001$), while pOsitivity also showed a positive correlation with positive and prosocial emotions toward the offender at T1 ($r = 0.22$, $p < 0.001$). Negativity displayed a positive correlation with positive and prosocial emotions toward the offender at T2 ($r = 0.11$, $p < 0.05$) and a negative correlation with the reduction of negative emotions related to the offender at T1 ($r = -0.11$, $p < 0.05$) and T2 ($r = -0.12$, $p < 0.05$). Deception was negatively correlated with the reduction of negative emotions related to the offender at T1 ($r = -0.12$, $p < 0.05$). Finally, Sociality showed a positive correlation with positive and prosocial emotions toward the offender at T1 ($r = 0.12$, $p < 0.05$) and a negative correlation with the reduction of negative emotions related to the offender at T1 ($r = -0.11$, $p < 0.05$).

TABLE 1 | Descriptive statistics ($N = 354$).

	M (SD)	Skewness	Kurtosis
Duty T1	4.59 (1.6)	−0.57	−0.38
Intellect T1	4.45 (1.49)	−0.47	−0.28
Adversity T1	3.05 (1.71)	0.60	−0.55
Mating T1	3.56 (1.37)	0.22	−0.07
pOsitivity T1	4.39 (1.46)	−0.35	−0.17
Negativity T1	3.54 (1.53)	0.17	−0.51
Deception T1	3.48 (1.54)	0.18	−0.51
Sociality T1	4.2 (1.35)	−0.29	−0.07
Emotional Forgiveness T1	23.46 (5.54)	0.37	0.73
Emotional Forgiveness T2	23.57 (5.14)	−0.31	0.91
Positive and Prosocial Emotions T1	2.94 (1.2)	0.71	0.91
Positive and Prosocial Emotions T2	2.89 (1.1)	0.02	−0.79
Reduction of Negative Emotions T1	2.92 (0.89)	0.04	−0.26
Reduction of Negative Emotions T2	2.97 (0.84)	0.02	−0.14
Sex (1 = female, 2 = male)	1.65 (0.48)	−0.64	−0.6
Type of Center (1 = probation, 2 = educational)	1.58 (0.49)	−0.31	0.91
Age	15.23 (1.69)	−0.75	0.03

In the next step, we conducted multiple linear regression analyses. To ensure the validity of the regression results, variance inflation factor (VIF) values were examined to control for multicollinearity. All VIF values were below 5, indicating low to moderate levels of multicollinearity among the predictors, which justified proceeding with further analyses.

Table 2 presents the regression analyses that examined situational characteristics as predictors of subsequent emotional forgiveness and other related outcomes at T2. The models included DIAMONDS situational characteristics measured at T1, as well as the outcome variables measured at T1 to account for autoregressive effects, along with demographic factors, which included age, sex, and the type of center where the data were collected. Beyond the autoregressive effects, for the outcome of emotional forgiveness at T2, significant predictors included Adversity at T1 ($\beta = -0.14$, $p < 0.05$) and age ($\beta = -0.12$, $p < 0.05$). The model demonstrated a moderate fit, $F_{(12, 328)} = 3.96$, $p < 0.001$, $R^2 = 0.14$, without demographic variables, $R^2 = 0.12$.

Similarly, beyond the autoregressive effects, when predicting positive and prosocial emotions toward an offender at T2, significant effects were found only for demographic variables, specifically age ($\beta = -0.11$, $p < 0.05$) and type of center ($\beta = -0.14$, $p < 0.05$). The model showed a good fit, $F_{(12, 328)} = 4.70$, $p < 0.001$, $R^2 = 0.15$.

Finally, for the reduction of negative emotions related to the offender at T2, significant predictors included Duty at T1 ($\beta = 0.14$, $p < 0.05$), Adversity at T1 ($\beta = -0.16$, $p < 0.05$), pOsitivity at T1 ($\beta = -0.13$, $p < 0.01$), and sex ($\beta = 0.16$, $p < 0.01$). This model demonstrated a reasonable fit, $F_{(12, 328)} = 2.89$, $p < 0.001$, $R^2 = 0.10$.

6 | Discussion

In the present study, we explored how situational characteristics, as defined by the DIAMONDS framework (Rauthmann et al. 2014), predict emotional forgiveness among socially maladjusted youths in Poland. This work was a response to Sherman et al.'s (2015) call for more structured frameworks to examine situational influences on behavior. By focusing on the dynamic relationship between situational perceptions and emotional forgiveness, this study addressed a gap in the literature, which has largely emphasized dispositional predictors of forgiveness, such as personality traits (Koutsos et al. 2008), moral values (Benard et al. 2022), religiosity (Escher 2013), and cognitive flexibility (Skalski-Bednarz and Toussaint 2024). The findings suggest that situational characteristics play a modest role in shaping forgiveness, primarily in reducing negative emotions toward the offender, particularly in settings marked by complex social dynamics, such as in educational and probation environments, while the impact on positive emotional outcomes appears minimal. However, similar to dispositional predictors (Hall et al. 2021; Skalski-Bednarz et al. 2024b), the effect sizes for these situational factors were moderate, indicating the need for a comprehensive approach when considering what influences forgiveness.

TABLE 2 | Situational characteristics as predictors of subsequent emotional forgiveness ($N = 354$).

	B	SE	β	t
Outcome: Emotional Forgiveness (total score) at T2				
Constant	21.29	3.65	—	5.83***
Duty T1	0.11	0.25	0.03	0.43
Intellect T1	−0.25	0.25	−0.08	−0.99
Adversity T1	−0.41	0.19	−0.14	−2.14*
Mating T1	0.10	0.24	0.03	0.40
pOsitivity T1	−0.3	0.24	−0.09	−1.28
Negativity T1	0.11	0.22	0.03	0.48
Deception T1	0.34	0.23	0.10	1.46
Sociality T1	0.39	0.25	0.10	1.56
Emotional Forgiveness T1	0.27	0.05	0.29	5.10***
Age	−0.35	0.18	−0.12	−2.00*
Sex (1 = female, 2 = male)	1.31	0.61	0.12	2.15*
Type of Center (1 = probation, 2 = educational)	−0.88	0.61	−0.09	−1.44
$F_{(12, 328)} = 3.96$***, $R^2 = 0.14$				
Outcome: Positive and Prosocial Emotions Toward the Offender at T2				
Constant	3.31	0.70	—	4.73***
Duty T1	−0.05	0.05	−0.07	−1.05
Intellect T1	−0.06	0.05	−0.08	−1.21
Adversity T1	0.01	0.04	0.01	0.12
Mating T1	0.01	0.05	0.01	0.17
pOsitivity T1	0.01	0.05	0.02	0.27
Negativity T1	0.07	0.04	0.09	1.50
Deception T1	−0.01	0.05	−0.02	−0.22
Sociality T1	0.09	0.05	0.11	1.81
Positive and Prosocial Emotions T1	0.30	0.05	0.31	5.68***
Age	−0.08	0.04	−0.11	−2.12*
Sex (1 = female, 2 = male)	0.07	0.12	0.03	0.60
Type of Center (1 = probation, 2 = educational)	−0.30	0.12	−0.14	−2.51*
$F_{(12, 328)} = 4.7$***, $R^2 = 0.15$				
Outcome: Reduction of Negative Emotions Related to the Offender at T2				
Constant	2.21	0.58	—	3.85***
Duty T1	0.08	0.04	0.14	2.01*
Intellect T1	−0.03	0.04	−0.05	−0.72

(Continues)

TABLE 2 | (Continued)

	B	**SE**	**β**	**t**
Adversity T1	−0.08	0.03	−0.16	−2.53*
Mating T1	0.02	0.04	0.03	0.46
pOsitivity T1	−0.07	0.04	−0.13	−2.02*
Negativity T1	−0.04	0.03	−0.08	−1.28
Deception T1	0.04	0.04	0.08	1.21
Sociality T1	0.03	0.04	0.05	0.80
Reduction of Negative Emotions T1	0.11	0.05	0.12	2.11*
Age	−0.01	0.03	−0.02	−0.38
Sex (1 = female, 2 = male)	0.29	0.10	0.16	2.96**
Type of Center (1 = probation, 2 = educational)	0.16	0.10	0.09	1.66
$F_{(12, 328)} = 2.89$***, $R^2 = 0.10$				

*$p < 0.05$; **$p < 0.01$; ***$p < 0.001$.

This longitudinal study offers valuable insights into how situational assessments shape episodic forgiveness, reinforcing theoretical frameworks that highlight the importance of situational components in the forgiveness process. It provides empirical support for Hoyt and McCullough's (2005) model, which identifies situational predictors of forgiveness, emphasizing how specific characteristics of interpersonal transgressions influence forgiveness outcomes. Furthermore, the findings align with the situational construal model (Furr and Funder 2021), which suggests that individuals actively interpret and respond to situational cues, shaping their forgiveness responses through a dynamic interplay of objective features and subjective perceptions. A notable contribution of this research is the identification of key situational characteristics—Duty, Adversity, and pOsitivity—as significant predictors of changes in emotional forgiveness, particularly in reducing negative emotions toward offenders.

The findings indicate that Adversity negatively impacts emotional forgiveness over time; the youths who experienced more adverse situations were less likely to diminish their negative emotions toward an offender. This pattern suggests that in environments perceived as threatening or critical, socially maladjusted youths may find it challenging to emotionally forgive. These results are consistent with earlier research that demonstrated the negative impact of stressful contexts on forgiveness (Harris et al. 2006; Skalski et al. 2022; Toussaint et al. 2016; Webb et al. 2011).

Conversely, the dimension of Duty positively influenced emotional forgiveness among socially maladjusted youths. Duty reflects situations that call for responsibility, adherence to social norms, and task-oriented behavior. Higher perceptions of Duty were associated with a greater reduction in negative emotions toward an offender, implying that contexts perceived as requiring responsible action or commitment may facilitate more constructive emotional processing. This relationship could be

attributed to the structured nature of Duty-oriented situations, which may encourage self-regulation and reflection, thereby promoting emotional forgiveness. Supporting this idea, Horstmann and Ziegler (2019) found that Duty was uniquely associated with both positive and negative affect, being positively linked to positive affect and negatively linked to negative affect. Notably, Duty was the only dimension in their study that showed such a dual correlation with both dimensions of affect, highlighting its distinctive role in fostering balanced emotional outcomes. In the context of forgiveness, this suggests that situations involving a sense of duty or obligation can help individuals manage their emotional responses more effectively by promoting deliberate and thoughtful engagement with the forgiveness process, contributing to the reduction of negative emotions. Moreover, it is possible that a sense of duty could also arise from religious beliefs, which may further moderate this association (Witte and Alexander 2008). This highlights a potential avenue for future research to explore how religiousness might influence the relationship between duty-oriented situations and emotional forgiveness.

While pOsitivity appeared to promote emotional forgiveness, particularly through positive and prosocial emotions toward the offender—evidenced by their significant positive correlation at T1—it paradoxically emerged as a negative predictor for the subsequent reduction of negative emotions related to an offender. Given that pOsitivity did not significantly correlate with the reduction of negative emotions at either T1 or T2, this suggests a suppression effect. Statistically, this indicates that when pOsitivity was included in the regression model alongside other variables, the other predictors helped to remove shared variance unrelated to the reduction of negative emotions, thereby allowing positivity to become a significant prospective predictor even though it did not initially show a significant correlation with this outcome.

Theoretically, this suppression effect can be interpreted in several ways. First, individuals who perceive situations positively might feel less driven to actively reduce negative emotions, as they already view the situation in a more favorable light (Alessandri et al. 2012). This interpretation aligns with the stress and coping model of forgiveness (Strelan 2020), which posits that forgiveness, as a coping mechanism, is activated in response to negative situational appraisals to mitigate their adverse impact on mental health. Second, those with a high positivity orientation may tend to downplay negative experiences or focus on positive aspects of a situation. Consequently, instead of actively working to reduce negative emotions, they might overlook or disregard negative elements, which could paradoxically lead to a lower level of genuine emotional forgiveness. Finally, individuals high in positivity might favor coping strategies that avoid directly confronting negative emotions. Even if they show positive and prosocial attitudes toward an offender, they may not fully engage in the emotional forgiveness process, which, according to the REACH model (Worthington 2020), involves confronting and consciously reducing negative emotions. For example, Kupcewicz and Jóźwik (2019) found that a positive orientation was more strongly correlated with coping strategies like self-blame or seeking emotional support rather than acceptance of an offensive situation, partially supporting this interpretation.

Following Horstmann and Ziegler (2019), we initially anticipated that different situational characteristics would distinctly predict the two aspects of forgiveness—one centered on positive affect (positive and prosocial emotions toward the offender) and the other on negative affect (reduction of negative emotions related to the offender). However, our findings revealed that situational factors predicted only the subsequent reduction of negative emotions (as well as the overall emotional forgiveness score) but did not predict an increase in positive and prosocial emotions, suggesting that different mechanisms may underlie the development of positive emotions compared to the reduction of negative emotions as it relates to an offensive situation. Situational assessments seem to play a more crucial role in managing negative emotions, which are often triggered by stressful or challenging contexts.

In contrast, the emergence of positive emotions may depend more on stable personality traits or internal resources. For instance, Komulainen et al. (2014) found that cheerfulness, a positive emotion, was more strongly associated with personality traits than sadness, a negative emotion. Our study, in contrast, highlighted the importance of situational characteristics in predicting the reduction of negative affect. Moreover, reducing negative emotions generally requires deeper cognitive and emotional effort to reinterpret situations, whereas fostering positive emotions may only require a basic level of acceptance (Webb et al. 2012). This difference could also account for the lack of significant situational predictors for positive emotions in our findings. Furthermore, the differences between these two dimensions of emotional forgiveness extend beyond their potential predictors to their outcomes, as well. For instance, Mróz et al. (2022) observed that reducing negative emotions was associated with better health outcomes and fewer negative ruminations, unlike merely having positive emotions.

Our regression analyses also revealed that demographic factors, such as age and type of center (probation vs. educational), significantly influenced subsequent forgiveness outcomes. This finding suggests that both the developmental stage of the youth and the specific environment in which they are situated can play crucial roles in shaping youths' capacity for forgiveness. Since socially maladjusted youths are not only more frequently the perpetrators of aggressive acts but also often victims of offenses (Kamiński 2016), it is likely that older adolescents have accumulated more negative experiences over time. This accumulation may help explain the positive predictive effect on the overall forgiveness score and positive and prosocial emotions toward the offender at T2.

On the other hand, the significant gender effect, where boys were more likely to experience emotional forgiveness (as indicated by both the overall score and the reduction of negative emotions related to the offender), may be due to boys tending to harbor grudges, hostility, or resentment for longer periods compared to girls (Björkqvist and Österman 2018). This aligns with the consensus in the literature that suggests females are generally better at managing, interpreting, and expressing their emotions (Skalski and Pochwatko 2020), which may mean that their acts of forgiveness are less emotionally charged. The developmental and socialization processes that encourage boys to suppress emotional expression or respond with anger might

lead to a delayed but more intense process of emotional forgiveness when they finally engage with it.

Additionally, the effect of the type of center—where youths in centers are perhaps more likely to develop positive and prosocial emotions toward offenders—suggests that those in educational centers, who tend to display more antisocial behaviors than their counterparts in probation centers, are less capable of experiencing prosocial emotions, behaviors, and feelings (Frick and Kemp 2021). Youths in educational centers may have a higher tendency toward traits associated with psychopathy, which can impair their ability to empathize or engage in prosocial behaviors. This limitation in empathy and prosocial engagement might restrict their capacity for positive and prosocial emotional responses related to forgiveness.

Furthermore, as highlighted in Appendix 1, stronger correlations between situational assessments and forgiveness were observed within the same wave of data collection. This finding aligns with prior research suggesting that cross-sectional studies often overestimate effects compared to longitudinal analyses (Skalski-Bednarz et al. 2024b). Nevertheless, even these within-wave correlations remain relatively small, emphasizing the modest role of situational characteristics in forgiveness processes. These results partially align with Fehr et al.'s (2010) meta-analysis, which demonstrated that situational cognitive predictors of forgiveness (e.g., harm severity) are generally weaker than situational affective predictors (e.g., state empathy).

Given the gaps in the literature regarding situational characteristics of forgiveness, future research should examine how these characteristics change over time or differ based on the specific nature of the transgression. Understanding whether situational factors are perceived differently at various developmental stages or in response to distinct types of offenses could provide valuable insights. An integrated approach to understanding forgiveness is needed—one that considers both stable personality traits and the influence of situational contexts. Longitudinal studies that investigate the dynamic interplay between these factors over time would offer a more comprehensive understanding of the forgiveness process and clarify how situational and individual elements jointly shape forgiveness.

While dispositional traits like agreeableness (known predictors of forgiveness; Rey and Extremera 2016) may predispose individuals to forgive, the context provided by situational factors may shape how these traits manifest. Future studies should investigate how specific situational characteristics might mediate or moderate the influence of dispositional traits on forgiveness. For instance, an agreeable person might be more likely to forgive when faced with a minor offense (low Adversity), while a religious person might forgive out of a sense of duty. Understanding these dynamics could reveal the conditions under which forgiveness is more likely to occur and how both situational and dispositional factors interact to shape the forgiveness process.

This interplay can be further explained by DeYoung's (DeYoung 2015) cybernetic big five theory (CB5T), which posits

that situational characteristics influence personality through feedback mechanisms that regulate behavior and adaptation. Situations can activate or suppress specific personality traits, modify behavioral patterns through learning, and shape how individuals perceive and respond to their environment. Moreover, personality not only reacts to situations but also actively selects, creates, and transforms them, resulting in a dynamic interplay. This perspective highlights how the stability and variability of personality arise from continuous interactions between traits and situational contexts.

Beyond the narrow focus on situational characteristics that may influence forgiveness, another key limitation of this study was its exclusive emphasis on emotional episodic forgiveness. However, emotional forgiveness often follows a decision to forgive, which requires a certain evaluation of the offensive event (Toussaint et al. 2020). This may suggest that the decisional component could be more sensitive to situational characteristics than emotional forgiveness itself. Although emotional forgiveness is more strongly linked to health outcomes (Mróz et al. 2022), which frame our perspective, future research should also consider decisional forgiveness as a potential outcome.

Moreover, when studying the impact of situational characteristics on forgiveness, it is important to consider both the types of situations sampled and the participants involved (Horstmann et al. 2018). Participants do not encounter situations randomly; they select and interpret them based on personal factors (Rauthmann et al. 2015). This could mean that only certain types of transgressive situations are reported, leading to a limited range of situational dimensions and potentially affecting studies' findings. Reduced variability can either decrease the observed relationships between situational factors or artificially inflate correlations between dimensions that may not be related in broader contexts. Overcoming these biases could involve using more diverse samples or experimental designs that introduce participants to a wider variety of forgiveness-requiring scenarios.

Another limitation of the study lies in its reliance on a non-representative sample of socially maladjusted youths from Poland, which could significantly constrain the applicability of the findings to wider populations. This limitation is particularly relevant given the potential cultural, social, and systemic differences between Poland and other countries, as well as variations within different subgroups of youth populations. These factors may influence the behaviors, challenges, and outcomes observed, thereby limiting the generalizability of the results to other cultural or demographic contexts. A more detailed exploration of these contextual influences and their potential impact on the study's findings would provide a more nuanced understanding of the study's limitations. Although the two-wave longitudinal design allowed for tracking changes over time, the relatively short interval between assessments may have missed the longer-term effects of situational characteristics on forgiveness. Moreover, the reliance on self-report measures may introduce potential biases, such as common method bias and social desirability bias, which could have influenced how the participants reported their levels on DIAMONDS or emotional forgiveness measures. Attrition rates between the two waves presented another challenge, potentially affecting the

robustness of the findings. However, those who dropped out did not significantly differ from those who completed the study in terms of sex, age, type of center, DIAMONDS, or forgiveness (p values > 0.05).

Finally, this study faced challenges related to reliability, as reflected in relatively low Cronbach's α coefficients, with the lowest being 0.57 for the pOsitivity and Deception dimensions. Taber (2018) suggests that such levels can be acceptable in exploratory research, especially when studying underexplored constructs or diverse populations. Consistent with prior findings (e.g., Konaszewski et al. 2024), lower internal consistency in the maladjusted youth population is likely attributable to factors such as heightened impulsivity, variability in cognitive and emotional states, and potential disengagement during self-report assessments (Charles et al. 2021). Moreover, improving the reliability of these scales would require deconstructing and rebuilding them. While this could enhance reliability, it would likely compromise the content validity of the original DIA-MONDS scales, as established in prior psychometric work. Since this study was not designed as a psychometric evaluation of the DIAMONDS scale, we retained the scales' structure to align with the original validated framework. Additionally, these were only 3-item subscales, which inherently limits the potential for adjustments. The brevity of the subscales is also a known contributor to lower α values. For instance, simply doubling the scale length to six items would yield an α of 0.73. Despite these challenges, the careful interpretation of findings and rigorous analytical methods ensure that the results provide meaningful insights into forgiveness processes and inform the development of tailored interventions for this vulnerable group.

7 | Practical Implications

The findings of this study suggest that situational characteristics, as defined by the DIAMONDS model (Rauthmann et al. 2014), play a significant role in shaping emotional forgiveness among socially maladjusted youths. This insight has practical implications for forgiveness education programs, such as the REACH Forgiveness model (Worthington 2020). Educators and program facilitators might consider placing more emphasis on the situational characteristics that influence forgiveness, particularly when designing interventions aimed at elevating emotional forgiveness among participants. For example, understanding how dimensions like Adversity, Duty, and pOsitivity affect forgiveness processes could help educators develop strategies that address specific situational perceptions in participants, thereby enhancing their emotional forgiveness. Given that Adversity negatively impacts emotional forgiveness, programs could incorporate modules that help youths reframe or reinterpret adverse situations to reduce their negative emotional responses. In contrast, Duty, which is associated with responsibility and structured behavior, could be leveraged to encourage reflective practices and accountability that facilitate emotional forgiveness. Similarly, promoting awareness of how positive perceptions of a situation might paradoxically limit efforts to reduce negative emotions could guide the development of more balanced emotion regulation strategies. Integrating these situational considerations into forgiveness education programs could provide more comprehensive

approaches that combine cognitive, emotional, and contextual elements to better support forgiveness processes in diverse youth populations. Such approaches would not only align with structured methodologies but also address the need for targeted interventions that consider both the dispositional traits of individuals and the fluid nature of their situational assessments.

8 | Conclusions

Our findings advance psychological theories of forgiveness by underscoring the significance of situational factors, specifically the situational characteristics defined by the DIAMONDS model, in shaping forgiveness processes. Practically, these findings support incorporating situational awareness into established forgiveness education frameworks, such as the REACH Forgiveness model, to better tailor interventions to the situational contexts of participants. Notably, this study provides the first evidence that lower Adversity and higher Duty predict emotional forgiveness by reducing negative emotions toward an offender, while the nuanced role of pOsitivity—positively associated with prosocial emotions but a negative predictor for reducing negative emotions—calls for further exploration. The small effect sizes observed suggest the need for an integrated approach that combines situational and dispositional factors to fully capture the complexities of forgiveness. Future research should examine the dynamic interplay of these elements over time, using longitudinal designs to refine interventions aimed at fostering forgiveness, particularly among socially maladjusted youths. Ultimately, this study emphasizes the critical role of context in forgiveness and advocates for models that bridge situational and dispositional perspectives.

Ethics Statement

All procedures performed in studies involving human participants were in accordance with the ethical standards of the institutional and/or national research committee and with the 1964 Helsinki Declaration and its later amendments or comparable ethical standards. This study was approved by the Ethics Committee of the University of Economics and Human Sciences in Warsaw.

Consent

Informed consent was obtained from all individual participants included in the study.

Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

Data Availability Statement

The datasets generated during and/or analyzed during the current study are available from the corresponding author upon reasonable request.

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Appendix 1
Table A1

TABLE A1 | Correlations in the study ($N = 354$).

	1.	2.	3.	4.	5.	6.	7.	8.	9.	10.	11.	12.	13.	14.
2.	0.62***	—												
3.	0.03	0.04	—											
4.	0.12*	0.16**	0.32***	—										
5.	0.3***	0.3***	−0.12*	0.34***	—									
6.	−0.04	0.01	0.42***	0.22***	−0.07	—								
7.	−0.06	0.03	0.41***	0.32***	−0.06	0.49***	—							
8.	0.3***	0.35***	0.07	0.37***	0.41***	0.06	0.2***	—						
9.	0.08	0.01	0.01	0.11*	0.15**	−0.04	−0.06	0.04	—					
10.	0.01	−0.03	−0.04	0.04	0.02	0.03	0.06	0.07	0.3***	—				
11.	0.14**	0.11*	0.08	0.17***	0.22***	0.04	0.03	0.12*	0.77***	0.24***	—			
12.	−0.05	−0.04	0.06	0.08	0.07	0.11*	0.09	0.09	0.25***	0.76***	0.3***	—		
13.	−0.04	−0.11*	−0.11*	−0.07	−0.06	−0.11*	−0.12*	−0.11*	0.51***	0.13***	−0.14**	−0.01	—	
14.	0.09	0.03	−0.14**	−0.03	−0.04	−0.12*	−0.03	0.02	0.1	0.51***	−0.04	−0.16**	0.17***	—
15.	0.01	0.06	0.02	−0.04	−0.05	0.01	−0.04	−0.11*	0.01	0.11	−0.08	0.01	0.12*	0.14**
16.	0.18***	0.12*	0.01	0.03	0.11*	−0.07	−0.03	0.11*	−0.01	−0.07	0.03	−0.1	−0.08	0.07
17.	−0.06	0.01	−0.15**	−0.05	0.01	0.02	−0.08	−0.06	−0.03	−0.07	−0.01	−0.06	−0.05	−0.04

Note: 1 = Duty Time (T)1, 2 = Intellect T1, 3 = Adversity T1, 4 = Mating T1, 5 = pOsitivity T1, 6 = Negativity T1, 7 = Deception T1, 8 = Sociality T1, 9 = Emotional Forgiveness T1, 10 = Emotional Forgiveness T2, 11 = Positive and Prosocial Emotions Toward the Offender T1, 12 = Positive and Prosocial Emotions Toward the Offender T2, 13 = Reduction of Negative Emotions Related to the Offender T1, 14 = Reduction of Negative Emotions Related to the Offender T2, 15 = Sex (1 = female, 2 = male), 16 = Type of Center (1 = probation, 2 = educational), 17 = Age.
*$p < 0.05$; **$p < 0.01$; ***$p < 0.001$.