



To forgive or not to forgive: perceptions depend on role

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ABSTRACT

Forgiveness is often thought to be divine. But in three studies, we demonstrate a clear context where this is not the case: when our friends are the ones wronged, forgiveness can make us look bad. Study 1 establishes that victims are seen as morally good and loyal for forgiving a transgressor, whereas friends of victims who do the same are seen as morally bad and disloyal. Study 2 shows that this is not simply because people think non-victims are not allowed to forgive: when victims forgive first, their friends are judged more positively for forgiving. Study 3 demonstrates that when the victim has also transgressed, friends of victims have license to forgive – they are no longer considered immoral for doing so. We suggest these results may indicate why forgiveness can be difficult and discuss their importance for current theories about interpersonal forgiveness.

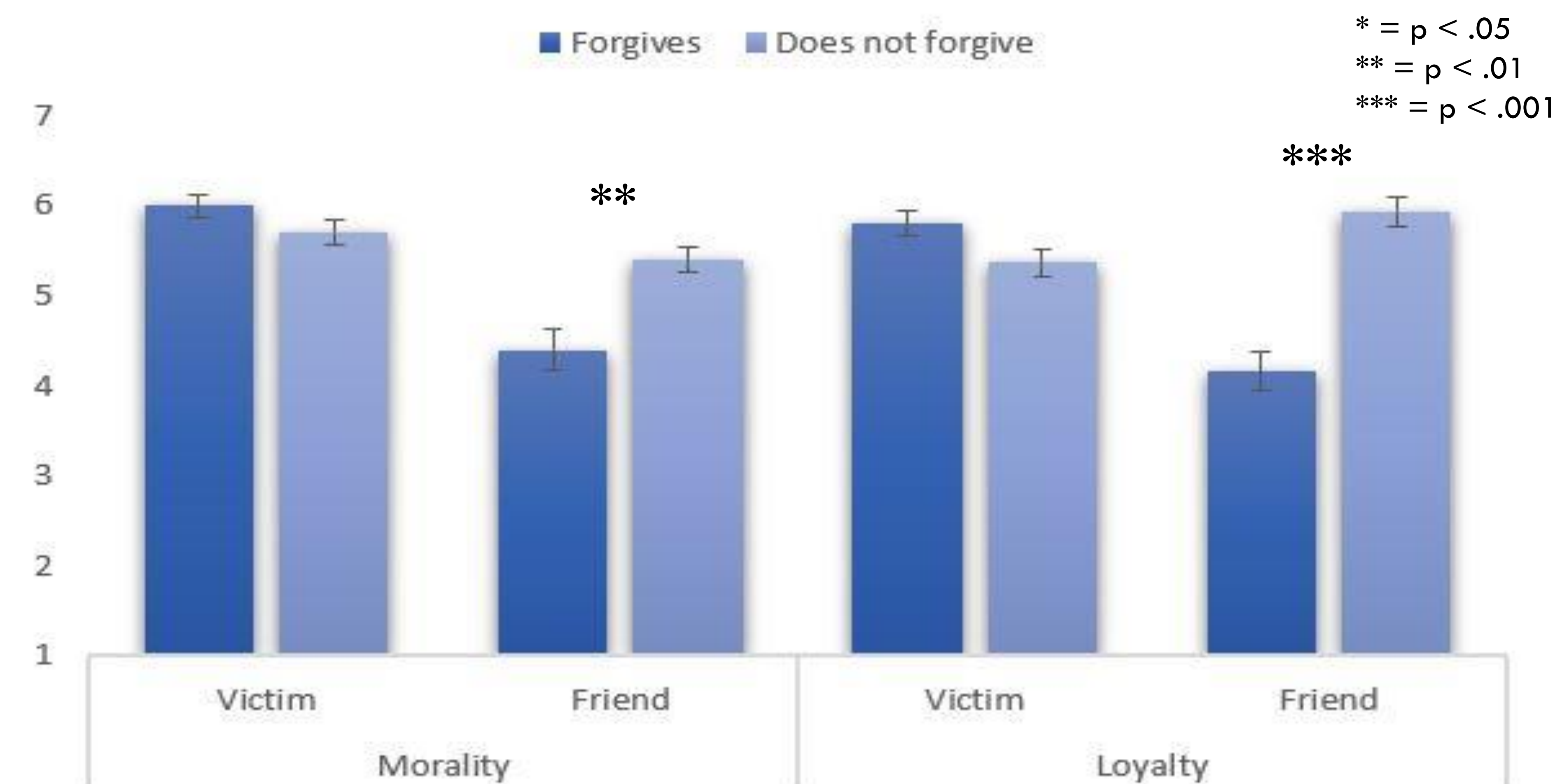
INTRODUCTION

- Forgiveness motivates prosocial, cooperative behavior and is important for repairing damaged relationships¹
- Those who forgive others for harming them recover more quickly from emotional pain, have more positive affect, and experience less grief²⁻³
- By age 5, kids view those who forgive a transgressor more positively than those who do not⁴
- However, some research has found that people are less willing to forgive their friends' transgressor than their own⁵
- We extend this research by examining how people evaluate those who forgive vs. do not forgive people who hurt them or their friend. We propose that when one is friends with a victim, not forgiving serves as a signal of loyalty to that friend. Thus, in many cases, we expect that non-forgiveness will be judged more positively than forgiveness
- We consider cases where a victim is harmed by a third-party transgressor, and his friend finds out. We are primarily interested in understanding how the friend is perceived in such cases for deciding to forgive or not.
- We also explore important boundary conditions in which we hypothesize that friends will not be evaluated negatively for forgiveness.

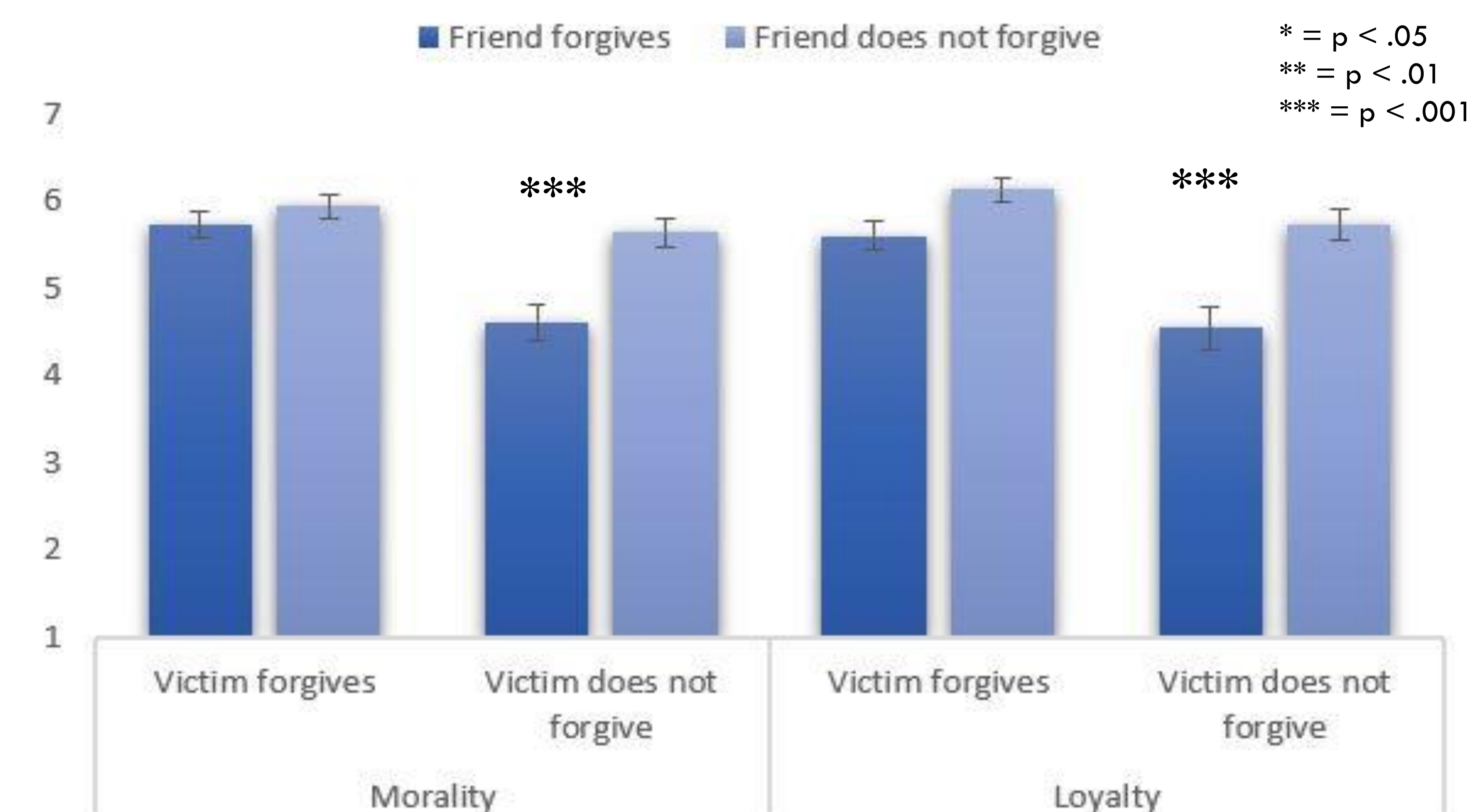
METHODS & RESULTS

In three studies (on mturk), participants were presented with a vignette introducing them to three targets: the victim, the victim's friend, and the transgressor. In each vignette, the transgressor stole the victim's idea at work and used it to get promoted. The victim and/or the victim's friend are either described as having forgiven the transgressor or not yet ready to forgive the transgressor. Participants then rated the victim and/or victim's friend on how moral, principled, good of a friend, and loyal they are. Because of strong correlations between ratings of moral and principled (S1: .71, S2: .70, S3: .74) and being a "good friend" and loyal (S1: .77, S2: .79, S3: .76), respectively, we combine these measures in each study.

Study 1: Should you forgive? Friends vs. victim (n = 205)

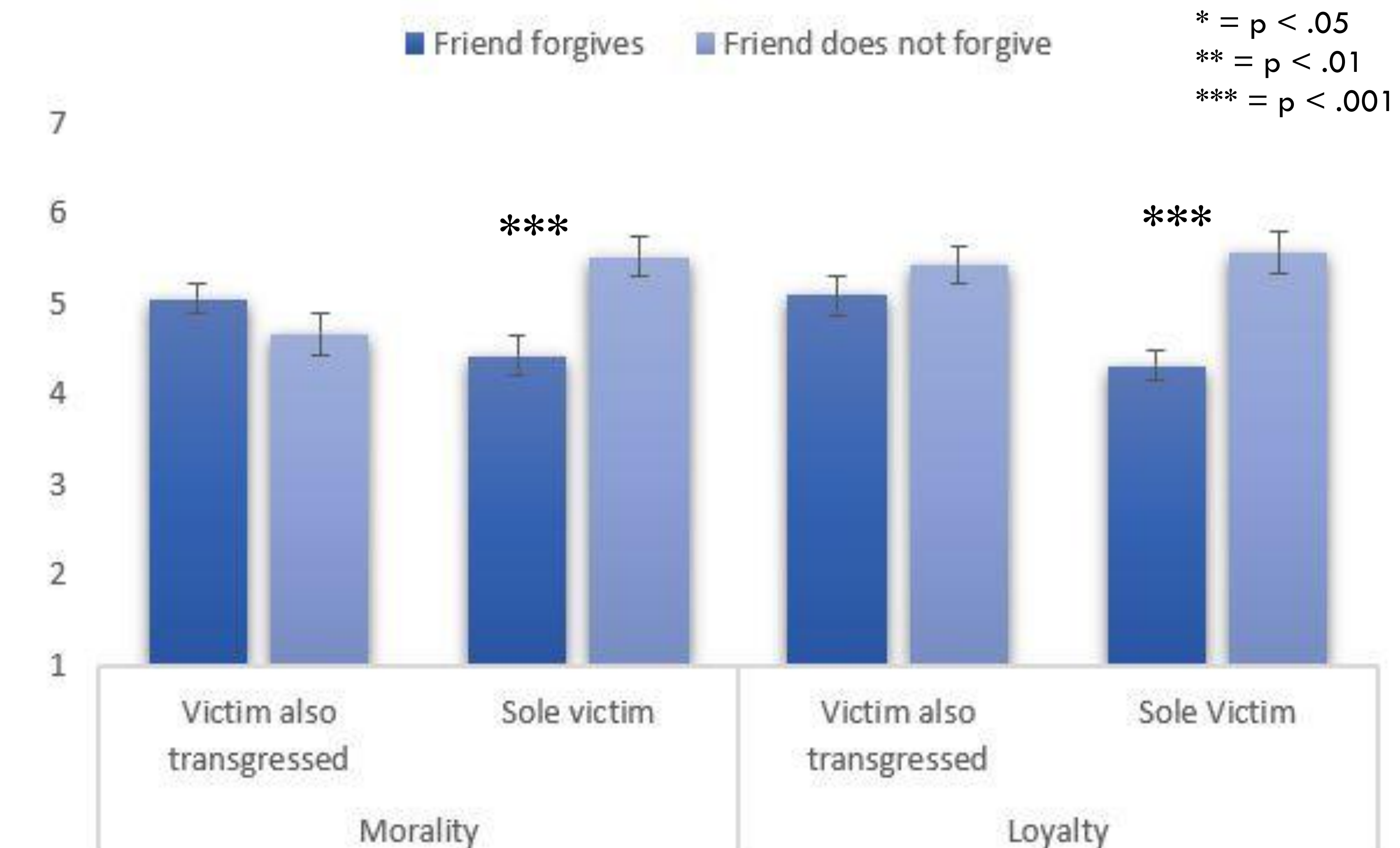


Study 2: Should a friend forgive?: Victim forgives vs. does not (n = 196)



RESULTS

Study 3: Should a friend forgive? Sole victim vs. victim is also a transgressor (n = 194)



DISCUSSION

- Victims appear to have the right to forgive (Study 2) and are evaluated positively for doing so (Study 1).
- Conversely, friends of victims are judged to be much more moral for not forgiving those who hurt their friends, unless the victim has already forgiven the perpetrator (Study 2) or if their friend (the victim) was also a transgressor (Study 3).
- Friends are seen as especially loyal for not-forgiving someone who harmed their friends.
- Future research will explore the mechanism underlying this effect: What about being a victim grants one the privilege to forgive? Can non-victims ever appear more loyal for forgiving? The potential drawbacks of forgiveness may contribute to why forgiveness is rare. Understanding how people perceive forgivers may have implications for easing individual and inter-group relations and cooperation.

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