A DYADIC ASSESSMENT OF FORGIVENESS

IN INTIMATE RELATIONSHIPS

by

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

LIST OF FIGURES

LIST OF TABLES

ABSTRACT

This study investigated forgiveness from a dyadic perspective by examining intimate partners' recollections of specific incidents of offense and transgression in their relationship. This methodology facilitated the exploration of four broad questions: (1) How does internal forgiveness and expressed forgiveness differ? (2) Do responsibility attributions mediate the link between relationship evaluations and forgiveness? (3) In general, are intimate partners positively or negatively biased in their perceptions of one another's forgiveness? (4) Are partners reasonably accurate in their perceptions of each other's forgiveness? Thirty-six couples completed self-report assessments of incident negativity/severity, self-blame and partner-blame responsibility attributions, and self-report and perceived-partner internal and expressed forgiveness, in addition to a measurement of relationship quality. Internal and expressed forgiveness had distinct associations with responsibility attributions and slightly different bias scores. Contrary to predictions, attributions and relationship quality were found to independently predict internal forgiveness, while only relationship quality was related to expressed forgiveness. In general, both men and women were negatively biased, and at the same time, were moderately accurate in perceiving their partner's forgiveness. Implications for forgiveness theory and research and relationship processes are discussed.

INTRODUCTION

To err is human; to forgive, divine.

Alexander Pope (1711). *An Essay On Criticism: Part 2*

Contrary to Pope's dictum, research suggests that forgiveness is an important process in human relationships (Enright, 2001; Enright, Freedman, & Rique, 1998; Jackson, 1998; Kelly, 1998; Worthington et al., 2000), positively contributing to an individual's mental health and general well-being (Konstam et al., 2000; McCullough, 2000). However, not long ago the topic of forgiveness was reserved for the pulpit. From the time the scriptures were penned until recently, the clergy and theologians were the primary authorities of this domain. Fincham (2000) notes that as recently as 1987, forgiveness and its related synonyms were not even indexed in Psychological Abstracts. A similar point is made by Worthington (1998a) who comments that only five studies on forgiveness were published prior to 1985. Fortunately, the past seventeen years have produced significant strides in the scientific study of forgiveness. As of January 2002, a PsycINFO database search with forgiveness entered as the subject produced 282 publications since 1985, with journal articles accounting for 147 of the total. In spite of this significant increase in interest in the field, recent reviews (Fincham, 2000; McCullough, Hoyt, & Rachal, 2000; McCullough, Pargament, & Thoresen, 2000) have noted that the scientific understanding of this concept is still quite limited. Specifically, forgiveness has not thoroughly been investigated at the dyadic level, examined in the context of other important psychological constructs, or studied with both relational partners referencing the same relationship transgressions. The purpose of the following research was to address these lacunae in the forgiveness research by examining

forgiveness in the context of intimate heterosexual couples. Assessing forgiveness from a dyadic perspective allows one to acquire a more comprehensive picture of forgiveness in the context of other relationship processes.

The Nature of Forgiveness

Part of the challenge in scientifically investigating forgiveness has been the difficulty of defining the concept, although most researchers agree on what forgiveness is not. Forgiveness is not the condoning, excusing, pardoning, or forgetting of an offense. Forgiveness is also not the same as reconciliation, although it is probably a necessary, but not sufficient, step in this process. Baumeister, Exline, and Sommer (1998) discuss two dimensions of forgiveness: an intrapsychic state, characterized by the personal and internal mental/emotional state that a victim chooses, and the interpersonal act, characterized by the social actions which a victim chooses to portray to their perpetrator. Forgiveness can therefore be "a process that goes on entirely inside the mind of the victim, or it can be a transaction that occurs between two people, even without much in the way of inner processing" (Baumeister, Exline & Sommer, 1998, p.86). Differences in how dimensions of intrapsychic and interpersonal forgiveness are conceptualized and portrayed seem to account for much of the variation that is found among proposed models (see Enright, 2001; Gordon, 2000; McCullough et al., 1998; Worthington, 1998b). The models proposed by Enright (1991, 2001) and McCullough (McCullough et al., 1998; McCullough, Worthington, & Rachal, 1997) have received the most empirical attention and scrutiny, and have also been reasonably successful in applied settings.

Working from a clinical perspective, Enright and his colleagues have proposed a moral developmental process model of forgiveness that has been successfully applied in counseling interventions with elderly women hurt by injustice (Hebl & Enright, 1993), teenagers deprived of love from at least one parent (Al-Mabuk, Enright, & Cardis, 1995), incest survivors (Freedman & Enright, 1995), men hurt by the abortion decision of their partner (Coyle & Enright, 1997), and fifth graders experiencing difficulties with inner-city poverty (Hepp-Dax, 1995). Borrowing from the writings of British philosopher Joanna North, Enright defines forgiveness as:

> When unjustly hurt by another, we forgive when we overcome the resentment toward the offender, not by denying our right to the resentment, but instead by trying to offer the wrongdoer compassion, benevolence, and love; as we give these, we as forgivers realize that the offender does not necessarily have a right to such gifts. (Enright, 2001, p.25)

Enright's proposed model is firmly grounded in Kohlberg's (1969) theoretical framework of moral development and posits that forgiveness is a moral response to a relational offense. The victim proceeds through a series of forgiveness "guideposts" (as termed by Enright, 2001 p. 71) associated with one of four phases of forgiveness. At each guidepost the victim attempts to resolve a psychological dilemma involving cognitive, affective, and behavioral components of their relationship with the perpetrator. These four phases and their associated guideposts are as follows (from Enright, 2001, p.78):

Phase 1 – Uncovering your anger
- How have you avoided dealing with anger?
- Have you faced your anger?
- Are you afraid to expose your shame or guilt?
- Has your anger affected your health?
- Have you been obsessed about the injury or the offender?
- Do you compare your situation with that of the offender?

- Has the injury caused a permanent change in your life?
- Has the injury changed your worldview?

Phase 2 – Deciding to forgive
- Decide that what you have been doing has not worked.
- Be willing to begin the forgiveness process.
- Decide to forgive.

Phase 3 – Working on forgiveness
- Work toward understanding.
- Work toward compassion.
- Accept the pain.
- Give the offender a gift.

Phase 4 – Discovery and release from emotional prison
- Discover the meaning of suffering.
- Discover your need for forgiveness.
- Discover you are not alone.
- Discover the purpose of your life.
- Discover the freedom of forgiveness.

The author describes this as a process model because one phase naturally flows from the previous one. It is also a cognitive-developmental model because the advanced phases of the forgiveness process require greater social-cognitive capacities for empathy and altruism. In Enright's model, the decision to forgive and the intrapsychic processes of forgiving are included as one of the steps along the path to total forgiveness. Complete forgiveness includes offering the perpetrator the gifts of compassion, benevolence and love – decidedly interpersonal interactions.

Enright emphasizes that people will naturally vary in their need to systematically work through each guidepost, proposing that some individuals may not need to address certain stages, while others might easily move through several guideposts at one time. However, this model seems best suited for clinical settings, assisting individuals who have suffered significant transgressions or those whose affective and ruminative

dispositions have not granted them freedom from an offense. Moreover, it is unclear to what extent this model is an accurate description of actual psychological processes, versus a normative account of how individuals should effectively work towards forgiveness.

From a more explicit social-psychological framework, McCullough and colleagues define forgiveness as "a complex of motivational changes that occurs in the aftermath of a significant interpersonal offense. When an offended person forgives, his or her basic motivations to (a) seek revenge and (b) avoid contact with the offender are lessened and other relationship-constructive motivations are restored" (McCullough, Bellah, Kilpatrick, & Johnson, 2001, p.601). McCullough relates forgiveness to other social psychological constructs such as empathy-motivated helping, accommodation, and willingness to sacrifice, as each requires an individual to forfeit self-centered motivations (actual or potential) for the good of another person or for the sake of a relationship. The key component in McCullough's conceptualization of forgiveness is that of empathy by the victim for the perpetrator. McCullough has demonstrated empirical support for this approach by showing that empathy mediates the link between apology and forgiveness and, in an applied intervention, empathy training significantly helped seminar participants to forgive perpetrators of past offenses more than a non-empathy based control seminar (McCullough et al., 1998; McCullough, Worthington, & Rachal, 1997). McCullough's conceptualization of forgiveness is, however, primarily intrapsychic. The transformation of motivations through empathy for the perpetrator is a process that occurs within the mind of the victim.

To summarize, McCullough and Enright approach forgiveness from two different theoretical foundations, have somewhat different constructs in their proposed models, and

suggest applications of forgiveness in counseling with varying features. Nevertheless, the two models share some foundational elements; these include, the forgoing of inclinations toward anger, avoidance, and revenge, and the development of empathy for the perpetrator which leads to various relationship enhancing motivations. The Enright model could be construed as an expanded and interpersonally applied version of McCullough's model.

In the context of the current research, McCullough's model has some advantages over Enright's developmental process model. First, McCullough's model of forgiveness is readily testable and easily integrated with other areas of social-psychological research. In contrast, the complexity associated with Enright's phases of forgiveness constrains empirical testing. Second, McCullough's Transgression-Related Interpersonal Motivations (TRIM) Inventory (McCullough, 2000; McCullough et al., 1998), has demonstrated good psychometric properties. In a series of studies with university students and heterosexual couples in ongoing intimate relationships, the TRIM produced good predictive validity correlations with relationship specific variables (relational quality, commitment, and closeness), offense-specific variables (degree of apology, empathy and rumination) and social-cognitive variables (empathy for the perpetrator and rumination about the offense).

Although the TRIM adequately measures a victim's internal motivation-transformation, it fails to address the interpersonal expression of that transformation which could be important, especially when the offense and process of forgiveness occur in the context of ongoing relationships. It is possible that an individual could forgive a perpetrator but not communicate that forgiveness or, alternatively, an individual could

explicitly communicate their forgiveness to the perpetrator but never release their motivations for revenge or avoidance. Baumeister, Exline and Sommer (1998) distinguish these possible differences in internal and expressed forgiveness as "silent forgiveness" and "hollow forgiveness" respectively (p.86). Because the TRIM only measures the internal process of forgiveness, it was decided in the present study to assess both forms of forgiveness. Thus, partners responded to measures of expressed forgiveness (their own expressed forgiveness and perceptions of their partner's expressed forgiveness) in addition to the TRIM Inventory. Previous forgiveness studies have not assessed these two forms of forgiveness separately, therefore, specific hypotheses were not ventured as to how they might be related or how they might differ in their associations with other key variables (e.g., relationship satisfaction).

Dyadic Considerations

Very few studies have assessed forgiveness with both members of the relational dyad, and no published work (to my knowledge) has assessed forgiveness with the dyad referencing the same relational transgression. Assessing forgiveness from a dyadic perspective places this construct and associated processes in the context where it is most frequently employed and experienced – in relationship interaction. This analysis also provides the opportunity to examine the intra-psychic associations that forgiveness has with other important relational processes, such as attributions, trust, commitment, relationship satisfaction, etc., in addition to investigating cross-partner effects. For example, if both Michael and Mary report how they employed forgiveness as a relationship repair strategy in overcoming a specific transgression, it is possible to measure both how Mary's forgiveness of Michael influences other relationship variables

for Mary, and how her forgiveness has influenced Michael and his perceptions of the relationship.

When investigating processes that affect both members of a dyad, problems are created for related data analysis. Because some variables tend to be significantly correlated across the dyad (e.g., relationship satisfaction), this violates the statistical assumption of variable independence. In other words, traditional analyses are not suitable because of shared variance that might be a product of dyadic processes and/or intra-individual psychological processes (Fletcher & Fitness, 1990). To overcome this issue, structural equation modeling (SEM) was employed to test and control for cross-partner effects. SEM is now commonly employed in research involving couples. This type of analysis possesses several critical advantages which were all applicable in this investigation. First, SEM deals with the problem of nonindependence between partners. Second, it allows analysis of both within-partner processes and cross-partner processes. Third, SEM makes it possible to test for significant gender differences. Fourth, it provides goodness of fit indices for hypothesized models (see Fletcher and Thomas, 2000).

The Role of Attributions

The role of responsibility attributions in the forgiveness process has not been extensively investigated. Yet, attributions have been shown to be important in relationship interaction, especially when negative behavior is involved (see Fincham, 2001). If there is a need for forgiveness, some degree of perceived offense is assumed to exist. The presence of an offense requiring forgiveness necessitates an offending

perpetrator and an offended victim (although one could be both a victim and a perpetrator). At some point following the interpersonal interaction that has resulted in the offense, the victim will attribute some level of blame or responsibility toward the perpetrator (and perhaps to self). In real life, a single offense-attribution-forgiveness sequence as described here may be a rarity; nevertheless, the components probably remain the same no matter how tangled the quid pro quo web of revenge and retaliation becomes. Hence, attributions of responsibility or blame should comprise a central component of the process of forgiveness and its consequences.

One important question concerns the relations between forgiveness and attributions (see Boon & Sulsky, 1997; Bradfield & Aquino, 1999; Fincham, 2000; Weiner, Graham, Peter, & Zmuidinas, 1991). Assuming that some degree of attributed responsibility is required in order to grant forgiveness in the first place, does forgiveness increase or decrease as the level of blame rises? Fincham's (2001) latest review details the links between attributions and relationship satisfaction, which have been repeatedly found in intimate relationship research. In happy relationships, individuals tend to view their partner's positive behavior as intentional and unselfish, attributing this to internal, stable, and global traits; negative behavior is described as unintential and unselfish, and attributed to specific, external, and unstable causes. In essence, individuals in satisfied relationships have a relationship-enhancing attribution pattern. In unhappy relationships, individuals see their partner's positive behavior as unintentional, and attribute it to specific, external, and unstable causes, while negative behavior is viewed as intentional and selfish and attributed to internal, stable and global causes. Essentially, partners in unhappy relationships have a conflict-promoting or relationship-demeaning attribution style.

Fincham (2000) notes that the processes that have been shown to influence responsibility attributions are also hypothesized to influence forgiveness. In his study with British couples, Fincham demonstrated that forgiveness and partner blame were negatively associated, forgiveness and marital quality were positively associated, and forgiveness mediated the link between partner blame and reported behavior. However, one important limitation of Fincham's design was the use of global measures of relationship quality, attributions and forgiveness. Thus, participants were responding in terms of their general tendency to forgive in the relationship, which could simply be a function of positive and over optimistic attitudes toward the relationship. Boon & Sulsky (1997) and Fitness (2001) also demonstrated that forgiveness is closely related to the degree of offense. The more severe the victim judges the offense, the less likely they will be to forgive the perpetrator. Darby and Schlenker (1982) reported similar results and concluded that one of the reasons a sincere apology was so effective in eliciting forgiveness was that it reduced blame. Admittedly, Fitness reported that when an offense was quite severe, even a clearly remorseful perpetrator can be considered to have fallen outside the bounds of forgiveness (Fitness, 2001). Although these studies demonstrated that the degree of offense moderates the likelihood of forgiveness, nevertheless, the degree of offense was always linked with the perpetrator's imputed responsibility.

The following research attempted to deal with the measurement problems mentioned above by having partners identify specific incidents of offense or transgression in their relationship. Then, the attributions and forgiveness of both partners were assessed in relation to these identified incidents. In this manner, forgiveness and attributions were measured at the same level in specific reference to the same incident. Additionally, the perceived severity of the incident was measured and controlled when analyzing the links

between satisfaction, blame, and forgiveness. Overall, I hypothesized that attributions might mediate the link between relationship evaluations and forgiveness. That is, higher relationship satisfaction or perceptions of relationship quality were predicted to reduce blame for negative events, which in turn would increase the level of forgiveness granted by the victim.

Bias and Accuracy in Forgiveness Perception

It is easy to imagine how accurately perceiving forgiveness, or perhaps more importantly, a lack of forgiveness, is adaptive to a relationship. If Mary has been severely offended by Michael, and her motivation to avoid him and even retaliate as a result of that offense is present, it could prove detrimental for Michael to blithely assume that everything is fine and not be perceptive to potentially overt signs of hurt and anger. Such negligence could possibly spur retaliation or even increase the likelihood of Mary leaving the relationship, given that such a response could be perceived by Mary as further evidence that Michael is cold, cruel, and uncaring.

Forgiveness bias

There is a great deal of literature concerned with bias and accuracy in person perception, and much of it remains controversial. One important undertaking is to distinguish between bias and accuracy. In the following study, one type of bias was measured, labeled forgiveness bias. This assessment was made possible by measuring forgiveness from two perspectives. Each participant first reported how much he or she forgave their partner for the offense in question, then the participants reported the extent to which he or she perceived their partner's forgiveness for that same incident.

Forgiveness bias (easily confused with accuracy) analyzes the differences in mean scores between participants' perceptions of their partner's forgiveness with the partners' self-reported forgiveness. Thus, forgiveness bias is concerned with means across groups. If Michael consistently perceives that Mary has forgiven him more than she actually has, this would indicate a positive, or relationship-enhancing, bias. On the other hand, if Michael consistently perceives that Mary has forgiven him to a lesser extent than she actually has, this constitutes a negative, or relationship-demeaning, bias. If the sample is more prone to a relationship-enhancing bias, then the mean judgment of the partners' level of forgiveness will be higher than the mean level of forgiveness actually sustained by their partners.

Measurements of bias have not previously been attempted with forgiveness, yet there are several findings in the literature which suggest possible hypotheses. Fletcher (Fletcher, 2002) highlights the well-documented finding that people are systematically positively biased in their judgments, the more they are committed and in love. In like manner, Murray (2001) summarizes the results of several findings by positing that, "The existing evidence suggests that individuals in satisfying, trusting dating and marital relationships find a sense of conviction by overstating the case for commitment – by seeing partners and relationships in the best, or most positive, light possible." (p.108)

Because forgiveness is an issue central to the relationship, and viewing one's partner as a forgiving person has positive implications for the self as well as the relationship, it was hypothesized that those individuals who are happier in their relationships (report higher relationship quality) would also be more positively biased (relationship-enhancing) in their perceptions of their partner's forgiveness.

At first glance, it might appear a plausible, straightforward assumption that people will generally exhibit a relationship-enhancing bias. After all, relationships are generally perceived in an optimistic and pollyannaish fashion (Fletcher, 2002; Murray, 2001). However, a positive forgiveness bias, compared with a negative forgiveness bias, could potentially have consequences that are more detrimental to relationships. Reprising the earlier argument, if Michael optimistically assumes that Mary has forgiven him, when in fact she has not, such behavior might only reinforce Mary's revenge and avoidance motivations, and strengthen her perception of Michael as insensitive, uncaring, and self-absorbed. On the other hand, a negative forgiveness-bias (the tendency to perceive the partner as less forgiving) might prompt Michael to stress his remorse and contrition and motivate conciliatory behaviors. Thus, at the general level, a negative bias might be more constructive for relationships than a positive bias.

Given that present research and theory point in two contradictory directions, I left this question open for exploration. That is, I made no predictions as to whether participants would generally be more positively biased (relationship enhancing) or negatively biased (relationship demeaning) in their perceptions of their partner's forgiveness.

Accurately perceiving forgiveness

The difference between bias and accuracy concerns the unit of analysis. Accuracy is best analyzed by examining individual differences in the extent to which individuals accurately track their partners judgments (which is not assessed by mean levels across groups). Intuitively, bias would seem to be linked to inaccuracy, and this is partly true. However, bias and accuracy can be independent (Fletcher, 2002). A thorough analysis of

accuracy was beyond the scope of the present study. Nevertheless, some preliminary

findings were gathered that assessed couples' estimations of one another's forgiveness.

This was accomplished by correlating individual's perceptions of their partner's

forgiveness with the partner's actual self-report forgiveness (across samples). This

produces accuracy correlations independently for men and women.

One problem in assessing accuracy in social perception is the number of

independent variables that could potentially moderate individuals' judgments. These

moderators fall roughly into three categories: Trait effects concern the degree to which

the trait being judged is observable, distinguishable from other traits, and the probability

of its occurrence. Target effects concern the degree to which the target displays the trait

(i.e., individual variation in expressiveness), and the degree to which the target displays

the trait in the judge's presence. Judge effects are related to the individual characteristics

of the judge(s), such as; general intelligence and perceptiveness, relationship to target,

and familiarity with trait (Funder, 2001; Thomas & Fletcher, 1997).

As discussed previously, forgiveness could be a trait which is highly

interpersonally expressed and behaviorally observable, or it could be an internal process

that is invisible to the observer. Yet, inclinations toward revenge and avoidance are

arguably difficult to hide in the sphere of intimate relationships, in which case accurately

judging forgiveness could be mainly dependent on the perceptiveness of the judge and the

severity of the incident of offense or transgression. Fletcher (2002) has analyzed the

accuracy literature in close relationships and concluded that accuracy is typically a

function of both target and judge effects, and also relationship-level factors. One study by

Gagné and Lydon (2001) revealed that the judge's mindset was an important predictor of

accuracy for survival of dating relationships. Participants were significantly more accurate when in a deliberative, compared with an implemental, mindset. Because accurately perceiving the forgiveness of one's partner is a highly adaptive trait which could incline individuals toward a truth-seeking, as opposed to an ego-enhancing mindset, it is reasonable to predict that partners would produce a moderately high degree of accuracy in perceptions of forgiveness. Finally, previous accuracy research has revealed that women are often better at judging their partners thoughts and feelings than man (see Fletcher, 2002; Kenny & Acitelli, 2001). Based on these previous findings, I predicted (a) that individuals would produce significant levels of accuracy in perceiving their partner's forgiveness and, (b) women would be more accurate than men.

Hypotheses and Overview of the Present Study

In order to investigate these issues of attributions, bias, and accuracy in forgiveness from a dyadic perspective, the present research recruited couples in intimate relationships to participate in a questionnaire-based study on the processes couples use to recover from negative events in their relationship. Both partners responded to paper and pencil questionnaires that assessed their current thoughts and feeling about the same two specific incidents of offense or transgression in their relationship. The path diagram in Figure 1 (below) illustrates the hypothesized links between relationship satisfaction, attributions, and forgiveness, and the between-partner paths which this research investigated. The following questions and hypotheses were of particular interest:

Relationship Quality	Attributions	Forgiveness
Male	Male	Male
Female	Female	Female
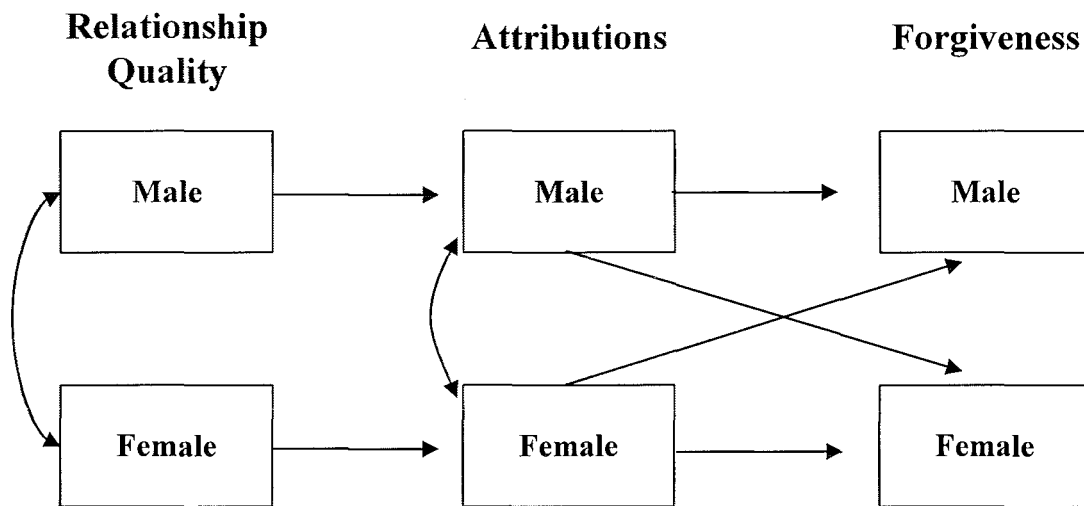
Figure 1: Proposed mediational model linking relationship quality with incident forgiveness. Double-headed arrows represent correlations.

(1) Is the tendency to forgive simply a product of marital quality, with couples in highly satisfying relationships exhibiting greater forgiveness? Or, do attributions mediate the association between relationship quality and forgiveness? Fincham's recent work (Fincham, 2000) revealed that forgiveness predicted retaliatory and conciliatory behavior even when controlling for marital quality. Nevertheless, marital quality and the tendency to forgive were strongly correlated ($r = .53$ for both husbands and wives) suggesting that the tendency to forgive might simply be the result of a healthy positive relationship. On the other hand, responsibility attributions have been shown to significantly contribute to the likelihood of forgiveness, as previously discussed (Boon & Sulsky, 1997; Darby & Schlenker, 1982; Fitness, 2001). Morover, Fletcher and Thomas (2000) demonstrated that attributions mediated the link between relationship satisfaction and behavior during interaction. *Thus, it was hypothesized that attributions would mediate the link between relationship evaluations and forgiveness.*

It is important to note that Figure 1 displays a model that assumes a causal

progression measured from left to right. Although the data were cross-sectional, this is a

reasonable assumption, given that relationship quality is a more global variable, in

comparison to the levels of attribution and forgiveness which concern specific behavioral

events.

(2) When an individual in a relationship blames their partner for offending them,

does this also influence their partner's degree of forgiveness? This possibility might seem

remote when addressing forgiveness for specific incidents in a relationship. For example,

if Michael has offended Mary, and Mary blames him, and Michael accepts responsibility,

why would Michael have any reason to forgive Mary for the offense he has caused?

However, such clear-cut transgressions are probably infrequent. More commonly, cases

of offense and transgression in intimate relationships are probably ambiguous in terms of

perceptions of responsibility and blame. If blame were reciprocal, then the need for

forgiveness would also be shared. Fletcher and Thomas (2000) found such cross-partner

effects when they utilized structural equation modeling (SEM) to analyze the mediating

variable of blaming attributions for ongoing marital problems and the outcome variables

of behavior and on-line cognitions. Their results revealed that husbands' increased blame

of their partners was associated with their wives' negative behavior, with the same pattern

displayed for the wives' attributions and their husbands' behavior (cross-partner paths and

within-partner paths statistically control for each other in this design).

These results suggest that when an individual blames their partner for ongoing

marital problems, these attributions affect both the behavior of the individual as well as

that of the partner. *Thus, it was hypothesized that increased partner-blame would be associated with less forgiveness on behalf of the partner.*

(3) Do individuals generally judge their partner to be more or less forgiving than they actually are? Present research and theory point in two contradictory directions. On the one hand there is abundant evidence that people are over-optimistic and rose-tinted in their perceptions of their relationships (see Murray, 2001). Additionally, viewing one's partner as forgiving oneself would seem to have positive implications for the self and the relationship. On the other hand, a negative forgiveness bias (the tendency to perceive the partner as less forgiving) could be more adaptive in relationships, prompting the perpetrator of an offense to stress their remorse and contrition and motivating conciliatory behaviors. Misconstruing the partner's state of mind as more forgiving than it really is could result in negative consequences over time as the perpetrator may be less inclined towards remorse and contrition. Therefore, specific predictions were not ventured as to whether participants would generally be positively biased (relationship enhancing) or negatively biased (relationship demeaning) in their perceptions of their partner's forgiveness.

Relationship research and theory does suggest a relatively unequivocal association between positive bias and relationship satisfaction. Several studies have found that dating and married couples who idealized their partners were more satisfied and had more stable relationships than couples who did not (see review by Murray, 2001). Intimates in happy and successful relationships ascribed more positive traits to their partner than their partner ascribed to themselves, perceived virtues in their partner significantly similar to their own high ideals, and reframed faults or weaknesses in their partner as signs of other virtues or

as unrelated to relationship well-being. *Thus, it was hypothesized that those individuals who were happier in their relationships would be more positively biased in their perceptions of their partner's forgiveness.*

(4) Are couples reasonably accurate in their perceptions of one another's forgiveness? This issue has not been addressed in the forgiveness literature and related studies did not suggest a clear hypothesis for this question. The research by Gagné and Lydon (2001) suggests that the judge's mindset is an important factor in predicting accurate judgments. In the context of perceiving a partner's forgiveness, a truth-seeking mindset is arguably more adaptive and beneficial for relationship stability than an unremitting pollyannaish complacency. *Therefore, I predicted that (a) individuals would produce significant levels of accuracy in perceiving their partner's forgiveness and, (b) women would be more accurate than men (based on previous research).*

METHOD

Sample

A total of thirty-six couples participated in this research ($N=72$). Thirty-nine percent of the sample (14 couples) were in dating non-cohabiting relationships, forty-two percent (15 couples) were living together, and nineteen percent (7 couples) were married. Relationships varied in duration between three months and thirty years, while the mean relationship length was three years five months ($SD = 6.5$ years). Participants ranged in age from eighteen to fifty years old, with a mean sample age of 24 years ($SD = 7.7$ years). Participants were recruited by way of notices displayed around the University of Canterbury campus and were offered a small financial incentive ($5 each) for the investment of their time.

Procedure

Each couple met with the primary researcher in one of the social psychological laboratories at the University of Canterbury. Participants read a one page informational sheet on the nature of the study, were thoroughly briefed on the procedure, assured that no deception was in any way employed in the course of the study, and were reminded of the confidentiality and anonymity of their responses prior to signing a consent form.

After completing the consent form, partners were separated to different locations in the laboratory where they could not see each other, yet still remained in sight of the researcher who they were instructed to signal with any questions, or after they had completed the first phase of the experiment. Participants' first task was to recall up to

four incidents of transgression or offense in the relationship, preferably occurring within the last year. They were asked to list two incidents in which the attitude, actions, or words of their partner had been offensive to them, and two in which they believed their attitude, actions, or words had offended their partner. Participants were asked to write a one-sentence synopsis, or description of these incidents so that their partner could recognize which incident was being recalled, and at the same time avoided disclosing any details of the transgression. Partners also rated how distressing each incident was on a seven-point scale (end points: "not at all" to "extremely"). When each participant had completed this first task, the descriptions were collected by the researcher, who then displayed these incidents independently to each person. After reviewing the descriptions with each partner, the researcher selected two incidents for further analysis, attempting to counterbalance roles of victim and perpetrator between the two incidents as much as possible, and favoring those incidents that were more recent and serious.

After the two incidents had been selected, participants responded to assessments of each incident's timeframe and severity, responsibility or blame attributions, and degrees of internal and expressed forgiveness. The researcher wrote down a short title for the episode in question at the top of the scales and participants were instructed to answer all the questions for that section specifically regarding the identified incident. Each person then completed a measure assessing global relationship quality, a few other scales unrelated to this study, and some demographic queries. Following this, participants sealed all of their information in a large envelope and placed it in a locked mailbox. Finally, the couple was brought back together, debriefed, and paid. The time to complete the entire experiment varied between couples from twenty-five to forty-five minutes.

Materials

Before working on the standardized questionnaires, participants answered three items about the approximate time frame of the incident, its negativity and seriousness (i.e., "Approximately how long ago did this incident take place?" "How negative was this incident?" and "How serious was this incident?" End points for the latter scale items were "not at all" to "extremely" on 7 point scales). The negativity and seriousness items for each incident were moderately correlated for both men (incident-A $r = .41, p < .05$, incident-B $r = .59, p < .01$) and women (incident-A $r = .73, p < .01$, incident-B $r = .65$, $p < .01$). Therefore, these scores were summed to produce an overall level of problem seriousness for each incident.

Attributions of responsibility

Participants responded to six items assessing their judgments of responsibility and blame for each of the incidents in question; three items assessed the participant's perceptions of their partner's level of responsibility, and three items assessed the participant's perceptions of their own responsibility (e.g., "My partner is to blame for this incident.", "My partner's behavior was motivated by selfish concerns.", "My partner's negative behavior was intentional and planned." End points = "disagree completely" to "agree completely" on 7 point scales). Similar items have been widely used in other attribution research and were adapted from work by Bradbury and Fincham (1992), Fletcher (1990), and Fletcher and Thomas (2000). Internal reliability analyses for the partner-blame and self-blame items across partners and incidents yielded item-total correlations ranging from .24 to .66 with alpha levels ranging from .53 to .76. Thus, the scores on these items were summed, producing a single value for responsibility

attributions toward partner and a single value for responsibility attributions toward self for each incident.

Forgiveness

A modified version of the Transgression-Related Interpersonal Motivations (TRIM) Inventory (McCullough et al., 1998) was employed to measure internal forgiveness (Table 1 below), and a single-question item measured expressed forgiveness ("I have communicated to my partner that I have forgiven him/her." End points = "not at all" and "very much" on 7 point scales). The TRIM is a twelve-item measure of an individual's avoidance (seven items) and revenge (five items) motivations identified with a specific offense. Because of potential item-overlap problems with the relationship quality measure, and the need to apply the questions to specific episodes of offense, the TRIM was modified to include only seven items. Three items assessed revenge and four items assessed avoidance. Additionally, in order to assess bias and accuracy in forgiveness, the TRIM and the expressed forgiveness questions were reworded to not only measure the participant's level of forgiveness for their partner, but also the participant's perceptions of their partner's forgiveness. For example, the expressed forgiveness item was reworded to read, "My partner has communicated to me that he/she has forgiven me." The questions for the modified version of the TRIM (participant forgiving partner) are displayed in Table 1 below. Endpoints for the revenge and avoidance items were "not at all" and "very much" on 7 point scales.

Table 1:
Modified TRIM Scale (McCullough, 1998) Assessing Participant's Level of Internal Forgiveness Relative to a Specific Incident

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Instructions: For the questions in this section, please indicate your **CURRENT** thoughts and feelings about your partner specifically regarding the offense in question. That is, these questions pertain to how you think and feel about this incident now. Please circle the appropriate **number** on the scale that indicates how much you agree or disagree with the following statements.

I feel that...
1. ...I want to make my partner pay.
2. ...I want my partner to get what they deserve.
3. ...I am going to get even.
4. ...I keep as much distance between us as possible.
5. ...I find it difficult to act warmly toward him/her.
6. ...I avoid him/her.
7. ...I withdraw from him/her.

Note: These seven items were reworded to also assess the participant's perceptions of their partner's forgiveness.

The TRIM was initially analyzed with exploratory factor analyses (within men and women and within condition). These analyses should be treated with caution given the low sample sizes. Nevertheless, all analyses initially replicated the two-factor revenge and avoidance structure that has been reported elsewhere (McCullough et al., 1998). However, inspection of the Eigen values and loadings on the unrotated factors strongly suggested that the items loaded only on one factor. Additional analyses of the item-total correlations and overall internal reliabilities of each scale supported the factor analytic results. Corrected item-total correlations and alpha reliability levels for the TRIM scales are presented in Table 2 below. Because of the adequate alpha levels and item-total correlations, the seven items on each TRIM scale were summed to produce single independent TRIM scores for each associated forgiveness variable.

Table 2:
Item-Total Correlations and Alpha Reliabilities for the TRIM Scale (Internal Forgiveness)

Scale Items:	Incident-A		Incident-B	
	r's	α	r's	α
Male TRIM items: Participant forgiving partner	.25 to .58	.69	.42 to .75	.84
Male TRIM items: Perceptions of partner's forgiveness	.45 to .85	.89	.26 to .77	.71
Female TRIM items: Participant forgiving partner	.37 to .81	.80	.28 to .67	.75
Female TRIM items: Perceptions of partner's forgiveness	.51 to .95	.93	.41 to .78	.82

Relationship quality

To assess overall relationship quality, the Perceived Relationship Quality

Components (PRQC) Inventory (Fletcher, Simpson, & Thomas, 2000) was utilized. This

eighteen-item scale measures six components: satisfaction, commitment, intimacy, trust,

passion, and love. Previous research has found that this scale provides a comprehensive

global assessment of relationship quality with good internal reliability, convergent

validity, and predictive validity (Fletcher, Simpson, & Thomas, 2000). Corrected item-

total correlations for this scale ranged from .27 to .61 with an alpha level of .85 for the

male participants and from .29 to .74 with an alpha level of .88 for the female

participants. The PRQC is displayed in Table 3 below. End points for this scale were set

at "not at all" and "extremely" on 7 point scales.

Table 3:
Perceived Relationship Quality Components Inventory (Fletcher, Simpson, and Thomas, 2000)

Instructions: For the questions is this section, please indicate your **CURRENT** thoughts and feelings about your relationship overall. Please circle the appropriate **number** for each of the questions below:

1. How satisfied are you with your relationship?
2. How content are you with your relationship?
3. How happy are you with your relationship?
4. How committed are you to your relationship?
5. How dedicated are you to your relationship?
6. How devoted are you to your relationship?
7. How intimate is your relationship?
8. How close is your relationship?
9. How connected are you to your partner?
10. How much do you trust your partner?
11. How much can you count on your partner?
12. How dependable is your partner?
13. How passionate is your relationship?
14. How lustful is your relationship?
15. How sexually intense is your relationship?
16. How much do you love your partner?
17. How much do you adore your partner?
18. How much do you cherish your partner?

RESULTS

Descriptive Analyses and Zero-order Correlations Among the Variables

Means and standard deviations for each scale are presented in Table 4. These

figures indicate that while both the men and women reported relatively serious offenses,

they refrained from excessive levels of blame. Both the forgiveness and relationship

quality measures reveal rather elevated means. This type of positively skewed pattern is

commonplace with normal couple samples (Fletcher and Thomas, 2000). Additionally, the

correlations across partners and within each incident revealed that the couples' ratings of

incident negativity/severity and relationship quality were moderately positively correlated.

All of the other cross-partner correlations proved to be inconsistent across incidents and

nonsignificant (except for the incident-A TRIM measure).

Table 4:
Means, Standard Deviations, and Correlations Across Partners for the Major Variables

Major Variables	Men N = 36		Women N = 36		Correlations across partners	
	Incident-A	Incident-B	Incident-A	Incident-B	Incident-A	Incident-B
Negativity/Severity	4.9 (1.6)	4.9 (1.1)	5.0 (1.5)	4.8 (1.2)	.71**	.32*
Partner-blame	3.1 (1.4)	2.9 (1.6)	3.5 (1.5)	3.3 (1.6)	-.17	-.25
Self-blame	3.4 (1.3)	3.6 (1.5)	3.3 (1.5)	3.2 (1.5)	-.30	.01
Self-Report Forgiveness (TRIM)	6.7 (.47)	6.6 (.56)	6.6 (.84)	6.6 (.66)	.36*	-.02
Self-Report Expressed Forgiveness	5.3 (1.9)	5.4 (1.9)	5.4 (1.6)	4.9 (2.1)	.04	.18
Partner-Perceived Forgiveness (TRIM)	6.5 (.66)	6.5 (.59)	6.5 (1.2)	6.6 (.77)	.02	.28
Partner-Perceived Expressed Forgiveness	4.8 (1.9)	4.3 (2.0)	4.9 (2.0)	5.2 (2.0)	-.01	.01
Relationship Quality	6.2 (.51)		6.1 (.61)		.38*	

Note: All means and standard deviations are based on a 7 point scale. The forgiveness measures were reverse coded so that higher scores represent higher levels of forgiveness. Standard deviations are in parentheses.
* $p < .05$ level; ** $p < .01$ level

Table 5:
Zero-Order Correlations Among Variables for Men Within Each Incident

Study Variables	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8
1. Negativity/Severity	--	**.29ª**	.08	-.24	.23	-.16	.23	-.05
2. Partner-Blame	.13	--	-.23	**-.31**	-.19	.06	**-.31ª**	-.24
3. Self-Blame	.22	-.28	--	.07	-.03	**-.40***	-.05	.03
4. Self-Report Forgiveness (TRIM)	-.17	**-.50****	.13	--	**.29ª**	**.32ª**	-.11	**.49****
5. Self-Report Expressed Forgiveness	.16	**-.32ª**	.25	**.42****	--	-.14	**.36***	**.40***
6. Perceived-Partner Forgiveness (TRIM)	-.17	-.15	-.20	**.40***	.22	--	.05	**.32ª**
7. Perceived-Partner Expressed Forgiveness	-.17	-.20	-.02	.07	.18	**.40***	--	.26
8. Relationship Quality	-.08	**-.29ª**	.09	**.42****	**.38***	**.43****	.21	--

Note: Incident-A is presented above the diagonal and Incident-B is presented below.
Figures in **bold** typeface represent significant or marginally significant correlations.
$N = 36$; ª $p < .10$; * $p < .05$; ** $p < .01$

The correlations among the major variables are presented in Table 5 for the men, and in Table 6 for the women. For the men, across both incidents higher perceptions of relationship quality were significantly associated with greater internal forgiveness, higher levels of expressed forgiveness, and greater perceptions of the partner's internal forgiveness. These positive relationships between the forgiveness variables and relationship quality replicate prior research (Fincham, 2000; McCullough, 2000) and are consistent with the hypotheses of this study. Additionally for both incidents, greater internal forgiveness was associated with reports of greater expressed forgiveness and increases in perceptions of the partner's internal forgiveness. As hypothesized and replicating Fincham (2000), for both incidents the more men blamed their partner the less likely they were to report forgiving her. Finally, for the men, recall of their partner's expression of forgiveness did not correlate consistently across incidents with any of the

other variables. Although impossible to determine how this relates to the presence of silent forgiveness, it does suggest that for male participants there is a perceived difference between the internal and expressed forms of forgiveness. There were a few other significant correlations, but these did not replicate across incidents.

Similar to their partners, Table 6 demonstrates that the correlations for the women for both incidents revealed that higher relationship quality was associated with greater forgiveness, both internal and expressed. Unlike the men, this positive relationship included the womens' perceptions of their partner's expression of forgiveness. Additionally, for both incidents, all of the forgiveness variables for the women were positively associated with one another, suggesting strong psychological connections among these constructs. In contrast, the correlations among the forgiveness variables for the men revealed more independence between variables. For the women there was also the possibility of a strong assumed similarity bias between their reported forgiveness levels and their perceptions of their partner's forgiveness. This was made evident by the significantly strong associations between internal forgiveness and perceptions of the partner's internal forgiveness, and the association between expressed forgiveness and perceptions of the partner's expressed forgiveness.

Unexpectedly, and also unlike their partners, the women exhibited more inconsistent associations between responsibility attributions and reports of forgiveness or perceived forgiveness. However, for both incidents, a higher rating of the incident's negativity/severity was related to increased partner-blame. Finally, the more women blamed their partner, the less likely they were to blame themselves.

Table 6:
Zero-Order Correlations Among Variables for Women Within Each Incident

Study Variables	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8
1. Negativity/Severity	--	**.36***	.25	**-.47***	-.09	**-.39***	.03	-.19
2. Partner-Blame	**.49****	--	**-.29ᵃ**	**-.30ᵃ**	-.14	**-.32ᵃ**	-.16	-.13
3. Self-Blame	-.28	**-.29ᵃ**	--	-.07	-.02	-.10	.03	-.01
4. Self-Report Forgiveness (TRIM)	-.05	-.27	-.05	--	**.53****	**.85****	**.35***	**.42****
5. Self-Report Expressed Forgiveness	-.13	-.01	-.28	**.39***	--	**.52****	**.75****	**.45****
6. Perceived-Partner Forgiveness (TRIM)	.20	.03	**-.29ᵃ**	**.77****	**.34***	--	**.49****	**.37***
7. Perceived-Partner Expressed Forgiveness	-.13	.11	**.33***	**.30ᵃ**	**.73****	**.41***	--	**.47****
8. Relationship Quality	.14	-.10	-.10	**.52****	**.35****	**.56****	**.32ᵃ**	--

Note: Incident-A is presented above the diagonal and incident-B is presented below.
Figures in **bold** typeface represent significant or marginally significant correlations
ᵃ $p < .10$; * $p < .05$; ** $p < .01$

SEM and Mediational Model Analysis

Overall fits and path coefficients for incident-A and incident-B

I hypothesized that responsibility attributions might mediate the link between relationship quality and forgiveness. As previously described, SEM allows for this model (Figure 1) to be tested while also identifying and controlling for effects within and across partners. EQS for Windows version 5.7b (Bentler, 1995) was used to analyze these results. Due to the inconsistency in correlations across domains, separate SEM analyses were conducted for each incident using the partner-blame and internal forgiveness (TRIM) variables, along with the relationship quality variables.

In order to test for gender differences in the paths, the relationship quality →

attribution and attribution → forgiveness paths were constrained as equal for both partners.

The Lagrange multiplier test (LM Test) was then utilized to determine if the paths

significantly accounted for variance if the constraints were released. The results revealed

that only two of these paths were significantly different across sex, the between partner

paths (diagonal paths) from Partner-Blame to Forgiveness. Thus, the remaining paths were

left as pooled across partners for both incidents. The relevant regression coefficients were

set as equal in their unstandardized form, which means that the standardized path

coefficients (as shown in Figures 2 and 3) may vary across gender. The perceived

negativity ratings of the incident were included mainly to control for this variable as a

possible artifact. For example, more blame might be related to less forgiveness because

more blame is associated with a more negative incident, with the negativity of the incident

accounting for the association. However, I have included the findings for this variable

given that the detailed results were of some interest.

The results from the SEM test for incident-A and incident-B are displayed in

Figures 3 and 4, respectively (page 36). Three separate indices were used to measure the

overall goodness of fit for the models: the Chi-Square Statistic (χ^2), the Comparative Fit

Index (CFI), and the Root Mean Square Error of Approximation (RMSEA). For incident-A

the fit indices were: $\chi^2 = 19.82\ (13,36)\ p = .10$; CFI $= .91$; RMSEA $= .12$. For incident-B

the fit indices were: $\chi^2 = 5.56\ (13,36)\ p = .96$; CFI $= 1.00$; RMSEA $= 0.00$. The data for

incident-B, thus, proved to be a better fit to the model than the incident-A data.

Examining the specific path coefficients for both incidents revealed that the Attribution → Forgiveness paths consistently exhibited a significant negative association, and the direct path from Relationship Quality → Forgiveness consistently exhibited a significant positive association, as had been predicted. Thus, these findings reveal that even when accounting for the incidents' negativity, the more participants blamed their partners, the less likely they were to forgive them. Additionally, for both incidents the happier participants were with their relationship, the more likely they were to forgive their partner, even when possible confounding variables, such as perceived incident negativity and the partners' judgments of relationship quality, were controlled. Finally, for the women across both incidents, transgressions judged as more serious and negative resulted in increased partner-blame. However, for the men this same relationship was only found for the incident-A data.

Independently across the two incidents, other path coefficients also proved significant. As predicted, the first link in the mediational path from Relationship Quality → Partner-Blame exhibited significant negative correlations for both partners but only for the incident-B data (although the results for incident-A were in the same direction). Thus, for incident-B, the happier participants were with their relationship, the less likely they were to blame their partner. Previous research has shown partner-blame can have significant effects on the behavior of the blamed partner (Fletcher & Thomas, 2000). This possibility was tested in the cross-partner (diagonal) paths between Partner-Blame and Forgiveness. For incident-A, a significant sex difference was found for individual's responses to their partner's blame. Women responded with less forgiveness the more their partners blamed them, even after their Partner-Blame was controlled for. The men

exhibited a similar association as the women for incident-A, but the effect was small, and in incident-B the result was negligible, suggesting that the men were not as sensitive to their partner's blame as were the women. Finally, an additional pair of cross-partner (diagonal) paths is not displayed in Figures 2 and 3, that of Relationship Quality →Partner-Blame. These paths were tested, but found to be non-significant and close to zero.

When the SEM analysis was repeated with expressed forgiveness entered as the dependent variable, the Partner-Blame → Expressed Forgiveness paths decreased substantially (r's ranged from -.09 to -.12) for both partners and incidents. On the other hand, the direct path from Relationship Quality → Expressed Forgiveness only exhibited slight changes in these associations for both partners and incidents (r's ranged from .29 to .41). The cross-partner (diagonal) paths from Partner-Blame → Expressed Forgiveness remained low and nonsignificant (r's ranged from -.16 to .15) and the rest of the paths were unchanged. This indicates that the individual's expression of forgiveness was affected more by their general feelings toward the relationship and not by how much they blamed their partner for the offense (unlike internal forgiveness) or how much their partner blamed them.

Mediational model analysis

Consistent with predictions, generally higher reported levels of relationship quality were related to lower levels of attributions, which in turn were associated with increased levels of internal forgiveness. Nevertheless, relationship satisfaction maintained high and significant direct paths with internal forgiveness when attributions were controlled. Thus, the results shown in Figures 2 and 3 are inconsistent with a mediational model, as had been

hypothesized. Both relationship quality and attributions independently explained internal

forgiveness levels (controlling for incident negativity).

Summary

The results were generally similar across incidents. Replicating research from both

the attribution (see Fincham, 2001) and forgiveness (McCullough et al., 1998; & Fincham,

2000) literature, participants in happier relationships blamed their partners less and forgave

them more, when assessed by both an internal and expressed forgiveness measure. At the

same time, the more negative an incident was perceived to be, the more likely individuals

were to blame their partners and the less likely they were to forgive them, although the

degree of blame did not affect the expression of forgiveness. Thus, the degree of internal

forgiveness was determined independently by both the quality of the relationship and the

extent to which the partner was to blame for the offense. Finally, women were also less

likely to forgive their partner the more their partner blamed them for the offense.

Figure 2: Standardized path coefficients derived from an SEM test of the overall model from incident-A data. * Coefficients were significant at the $p < .05$ 2-tailed level.
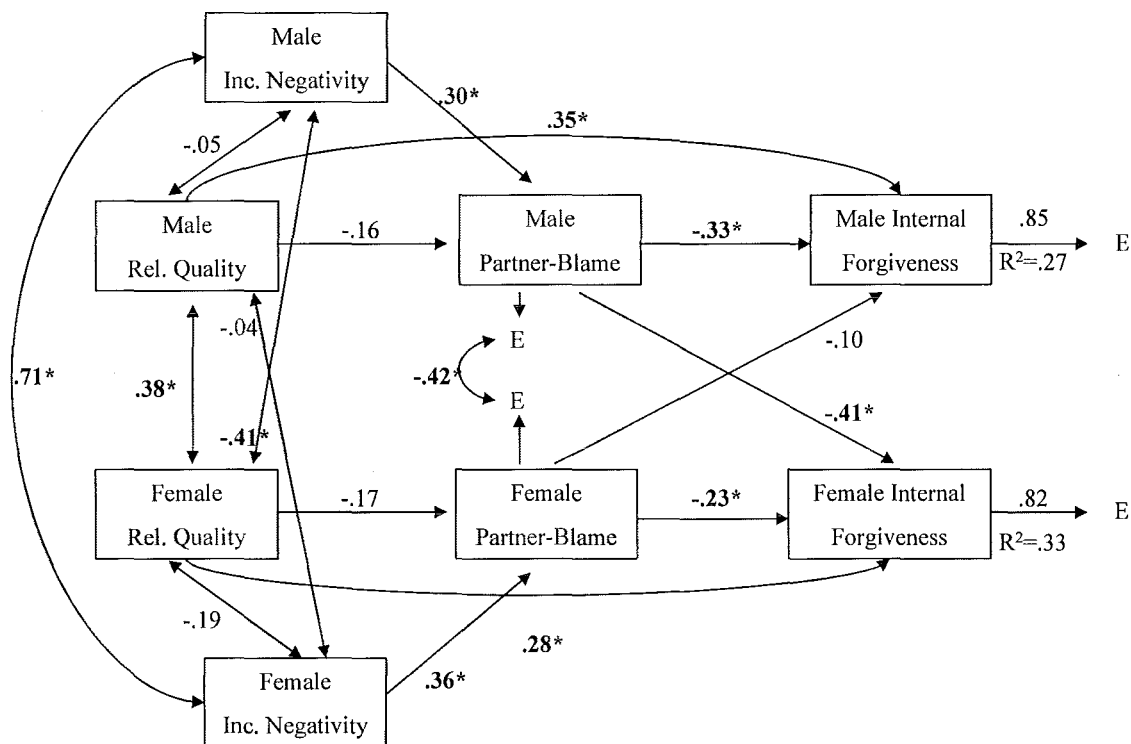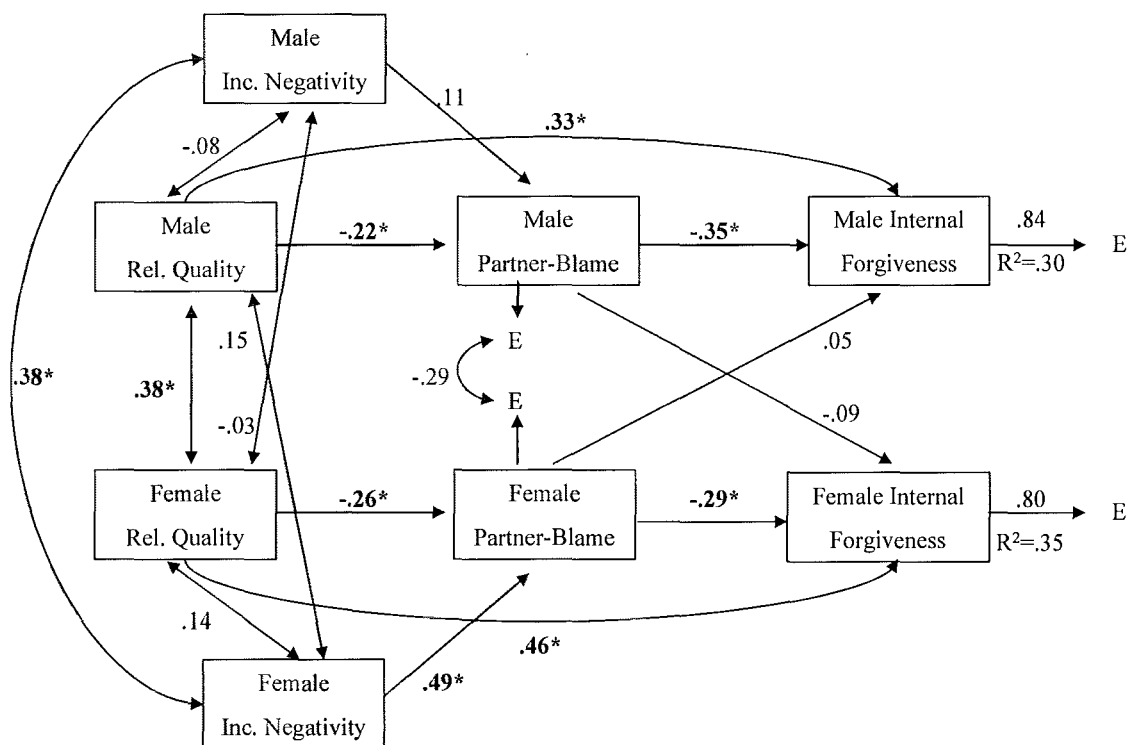

Figure 3: Standardized path coefficients derived from an SEM test of the overall model from incident-B data. * Coefficients were significant at the $p < .05$ 2-tailed level.

Bias and Accuracy in Forgiveness

Bias

Forgiveness bias was analyzed in this study by calculating the differences in mean scores between participants' perceptions of their partner's forgiveness with the partners' reported forgiveness. As described in the introduction, if Michael perceives that Mary has forgiven her more than she actually has, this would indicate a positive, or relationship enhancing, bias. On the other hand, if Michael perceives that Mary has forgiven him less than she actually has, this would be a negative, or relationship demeaning, bias.

Figure 4 displays the results of a within subjects 2 (self-report forgiveness versus perceived-partner forgiveness) X 2 (male bias versus female bias) analysis of variance
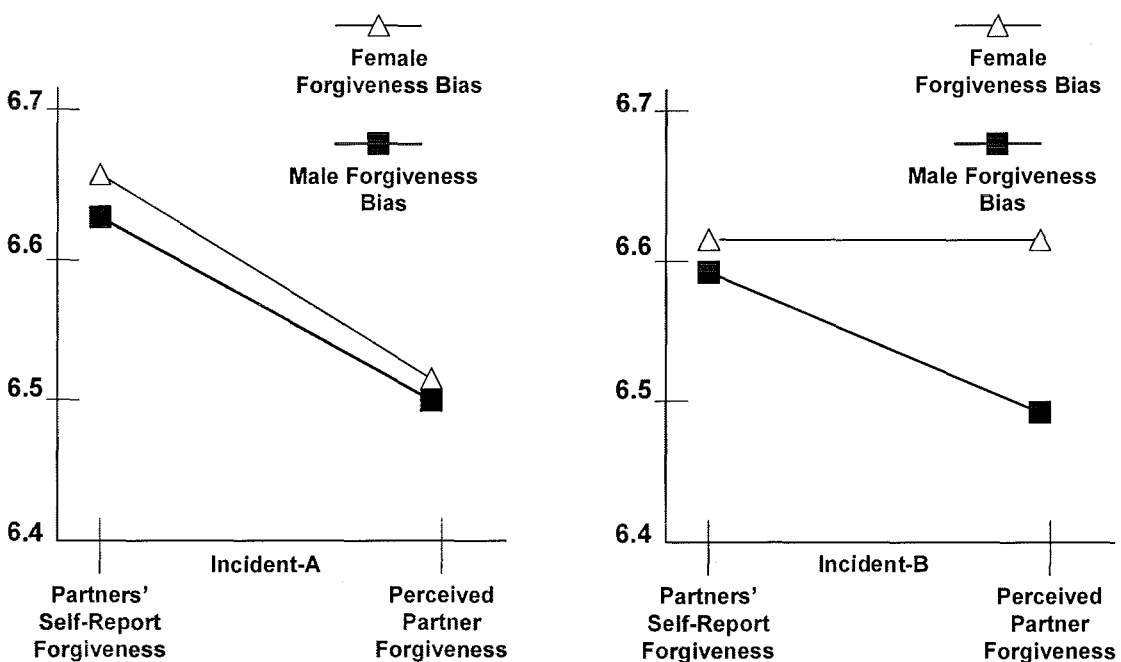

Figure 4: Results of 2 (self-report forgiveness vs. perceived-partner forgiveness) X 2 (male bias vs. female bias) ANOVAs for internal forgiveness bias.

conducted for each incident for internal forgiveness. Setting up the means in this way

effectively tests for overall levels of bias (one main effect, which compares the participant's

perceptions of their partners' forgiveness, with the partner's actual self-reported

forgiveness). Whether or not levels of bias differ according to gender is indexed by the size

of the interaction. The remaining main effect is not, however, interpretable. The

incident-A data exhibited one significant main effect $F(1,35) = 4.12$ $p < .05$, and the

associated means revealed that both the men and women held a negative partner bias,

diminishing or undercutting their partner's forgiveness (perceived-partner forgiveness, M

$= 6.5$; partners' self-report forgiveness, $M = 6.65$). The interaction effect were not

significant ($f < 1.0$). Although there were no significant effects for the incident-B data, the

male participants revealed a similar negative bias as in incident-A (perceived-partner

forgiveness, $M = 6.5$; partners' self-report forgiveness, $M = 6.6$), while the females

exhibited no bias. However, the associated interaction effect was not significant.

Figure 5 displays the results of similar 2 X 2 ANOVAs conducted for expressed

forgiveness. Expressed forgiveness revealed slightly greater effects then the internal

forgiveness measures. The incident-A data exhibited one significant main effect $F(1,35) =$

10.98 $p < .01$, and the associated means revealed that both the men and women held a

negative partner bias (perceived-partner forgiveness, $M = 4.75$; partners' self-report

forgiveness, $M = 5.3$), similar to the internal forgiveness measure. The interaction effect

was nonsignificant ($f < 1.0$). The incident-B data also exhibited a significant main effect for

expressed forgiveness $F(1,35) = 4.67, p < .05$, and the associated means again revealed that

participants held a negative bias, diminishing their partner's forgiveness (perceived-partner
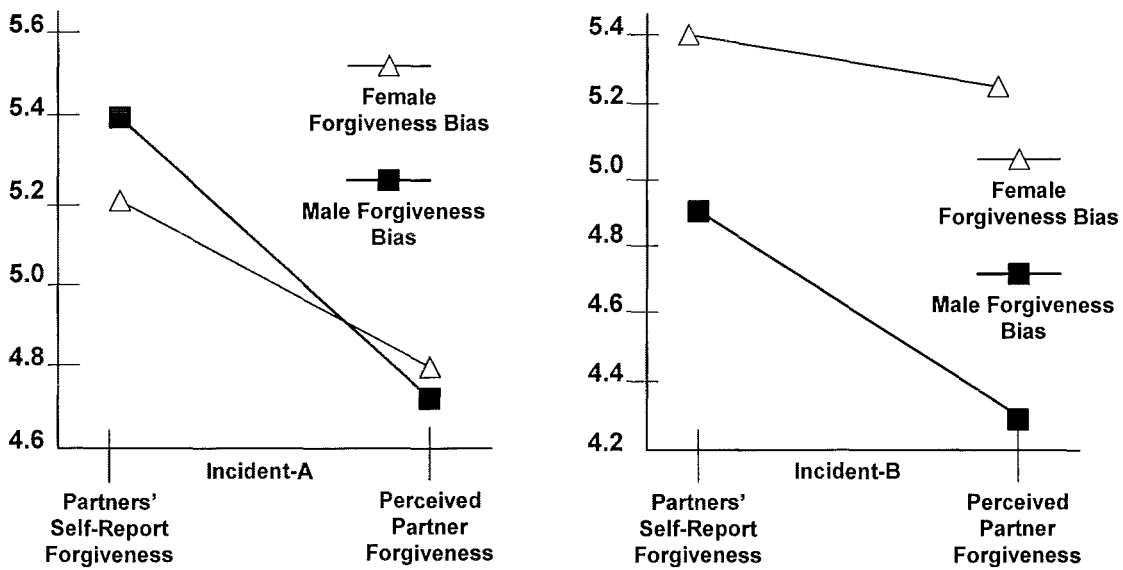
Figure 5: Results of 2 (self-report forgiveness vs. perceived-partner forgiveness) X 2 (male bias vs. female bias) ANOVAs for expressed forgiveness bias.

forgiveness, $M = 4.75$; partners' self-report forgiveness, $M = 5.15$). The interaction effect was nonsignificant ($f < 1.0$). In summary, participants revealed a tendency to diminish their partner's forgiveness, for both the internal and expressed forgiveness measures suggesting a relation between how these two forms of forgiveness are perceived.

To assess individual differences in forgiveness bias, difference scores between participants' perceptions of their partner's forgiveness and partners' reported forgiveness levels were calculated for both internal and expressed forgiveness measures. Thus, a score of zero equaled no bias, a negative score represented the tendency to diminish partner-perceived forgiveness, and a positive score represented the tendency to enhance partner-perceived forgiveness. The difference scores were correlated with relationship quality and the result can be seen in Table 7. While the men exhibited no association between relationship quality and partner bias across both forgiveness measures, the women

revealed a significant positive correlation for both incidents, but only for the internal

forgiveness measure. Thus, for women, as judgments of relationship quality increased, so

did a tendency toward positive forgiveness bias. This significant correlation was

maintained when the confounding variable of incident negativity was controlled for

(incident-A, $r = .38$, $p < .05$; incident-B, $r = .45$, $p < .01$).

Table 7:
Correlations between Forgiveness Bias and Relationship Quality

Bias - Participants	Incident-A	Incident-B
Internal Forgiveness Bias - Men	-.12	.16
Internal Forgiveness Bias - Women	**.41***	**.45****
Expressed Forgiveness Bias - Men	-.01	.06
Expressed Forgiveness Bias - Women	.25	.04

Note: Figures in **bold** typeface represent significant correlations
* $p < .05$; ** $p < .01$

As noted earlier, women exhibited high levels of assumed similarity; that is, they

produced exceptionally strong correlations between self-report forgiveness and

perceived-partner forgiveness. To test whether the associations between forgiveness bias

and relationship quality were a function of assumed similarity, these correlations were

replicated while controlling for perceived-partner forgiveness. Results revealed that

women's perceptions of their partner's forgiveness accounted for the bulk of the association

between relationship quality and forgiveness bias, reducing the correlations to

nonsignificant levels: incident-A = .20 (*ns*); incident-B = .05 (*ns*). It is concluded that

women in happier relationships were less inclined toward the general negative-bias in their

perceptions of their partner's forgiveness to the extent that they assumed their partner's

forgiving response would be similar to their own.

Accuracy

A thorough investigation of accuracy in forgiveness was beyond the scope of the

present research report (although it is intended to further assess accuracy in subsequent data

analyses)[1]. Nevertheless, internal forgiveness and expressed forgiveness variables were

correlated between partner-perceived forgiveness and the partner's self-reported

forgiveness to gather preliminary evidence of participants' abilities to discern their

partner's forgiveness. Table 8 (below) displays these correlations for both forgiveness

measures and both incidents. These findings reveal inconsistent results across incidents.

For incident-A, the women revealed a significant level of accuracy between their estimates

of their partner's forgiveness and his actual reported forgiveness for both internal and

expressed forgiveness. The men also revealed inconsistency in accuracy across incidents.

The men exhibited good accuracy between their perceptions of their partner's forgiveness

and her actual forgiveness estimates for both internal and expressed measures, but only for

incident-B. Thus, accurate perceptions of the partner's forgiveness appears to be

incident-specific.

---

1. After calculating individual difference scores representing accuracy and actual similarity, further structured
equation modeling will be used to test path analysis models.

Table 8:

Forgiveness Accuracy Correlations Between Perceived-Partner Forgiveness and Partner's Actual Forgiveness for both Internal and Expressed Measures of Forgiveness

	Incident-A		Incident-B	
Participants	Internal Forgiveness	Expressed Forgiveness	Internal Forgiveness	Expressed Forgiveness
Male Accuracy	.09	-.08	**.41***	**.37***
Female Accuracy	**.34***	**.43****	.21	.09

Note: Figures in **bold** typeface represent significant correlations
$*p < .05; \ **p < .01$

DISCUSSION

The results of this study generally replicated prior attribution and forgiveness research (Boon & Sulsky, 1997; Fincham, 2000; Weiner et al., 1991) by showing that men and women in happier relationships blamed their partners less and forgave them more than individuals in less satisfied relationships. Moreover, these results held-up when the seriousness of the incident was controlled for. It was also found that more negative and serious incidents of offense and transgression resulted in increased partner-blame and less forgiveness (controlling for partner effects). I predicted that responsibility attributions would mediate the link between relationship evaluations and forgiveness; however, neither internal forgiveness nor expressed forgiveness evinced this pattern of associations. Instead, greater relationship quality and decreased partner-blame independently explained elevated internal forgiveness, while increased expressed forgiveness was only associated with more satisfying relationships. I also hypothesized that increased partner-blame would be associated with less forgiveness on behalf of the partner. This hypothesis was supported in one of the incidents, with the female participants demonstrating less forgiveness for their partner the more their partner blamed them for the offense.

Both men and women tended to perceive their partner as less forgiving (negatively biased) then they actually were. However, women in happier relationships were not as prone to a negative bias as women in less satisfied relationships (there was no association between forgiveness bias and relationship quality for men). The final hypotheses predicted that (a) individuals would produce significant levels of accuracy in perceiving their partner's forgiveness, and (b) women would be more accurate than men. The results

showed that both women and men produced significant levels of accuracy, but only for fifty percent of the incidents. Finally, women did not prove to be any more accurate overall than men. I now turn to an in-depth discussion and explanation of these results.

Attributions and Forgiveness

As discussed earlier, a limitation of previous forgiveness research (e.g., Fincham, 2000) has been the assessment of general attributions and forgiveness tendencies in relationships, rather than utilizing specific measures of these constructs as applied to actual incidents of offense and transgression. The present study addressed this issue by having both partners in a relationship focus on two specific negative incidents, which they had previously experienced. As reported, I found no evidence that attributions mediated the link between relationship evaluations and forgiveness. It is possible that psychological processes other than attributions potentially mediate this relationship. Conversely, it is also possible that relationship evaluations and forgiveness in intimate relationships are inextricably intertwined. Thus, other variables (e.g., perceived incident severity, attributions, apology, etc.) may moderate the association between the two constructs, but because of their fundamental relatedness, a mediating variable is not necessary. The McCullough et al. (1998) findings support this alternative. These authors found that perceived closeness (a similar construct to relationship evaluations or perceived quality) maintained significant relationships with the revenge and avoidance subscales (analyzed separately) of the TRIM, when controlling for the effects of partner apology and actor empathy.

The divergence between the internal and expressed forgiveness constructs and their associations with responsibility attributions could be related to the measurement of these variables. Expressed forgiveness was measured with a single-item question, as compared to the modified TRIM inventory that contained seven items. The lower reliability of a single-item might explain the poor correlations between expressed forgiveness and attributions. However, the same single-item expressed forgiveness measure did produce significant correlations with relationship satisfaction, which counts against this methodological explanation. A different possibility relates to the point that forgiveness can be expressed in a variety of ways (Kelly, 1998), verbally and nonverbally, explicitly ("I forgive you") and implicitly ("It's no big deal" or "No worries"). Thus, it is possible that when participants responded to the statement, "I have communicated to my partner that I have forgiven him/her", explicit verbal communication was the primary source of the memory, and not the variety of other non-verbal and often unconscious ways that forgiveness may have been communicated or displayed.

The cross-partner prediction that a participant's increased partner-blame would result in decreased forgiveness from their partner was only confirmed for one out of four possible paths. Thus, these results did not completely replicate the consistent cross-partner effects found by Fletcher and Thomas (2000) between the attributions' of husbands and wives and their interactive behavior during a ten-minute problem-solving discussion. This prediction for my study depended on an assumption that responsibility attributions for couples' incidents of offense and transgression would often be reciprocal, wherein both partners would significantly blame one another for a given offense. Correlations between self-blame and partner-blame were conducted to test the accuracy of

this assumption. The results indicated that as individuals increased their partner-blame

for an offense, their partner also increased their self-blame for the same offense

(r's ranged from .31, $p < .10$ to .68, $p < .01$), suggesting that partners generally agreed

about who was responsible for a given offense. Within each sex, the results indicated that

individuals were moderately more likely to blame their partner to the extent the self was

less blame-worthy. However, these correlations were weak (r's ranged from -.23, $p < .20$

to -.29, $p < .10$). Overall, the assumption of reciprocal blame was not wholly accurate,

and this may account for the absence of cross-partner effects.

When investigating forgiveness at the incident-specific level, further research

could profitably explore the role of forgiveness as a mediator between attributions and an

array of emotions and behaviors. Fincham (2000) began this type of research by

investigating attributions and self-reported post-offense negative behavior. Further

studies could investigate attribution-forgiveness-behavior links for rumination, incident-

related hurt, anger, shame and resentment, feelings of loyalty/disloyalty to the

relationship, and accommodation processes.

Bias in Perceptions of Forgiveness

A novel result of this study was the evidence for an overall negative forgiveness

bias for both men and women. Although this finding contradicts Murray's view that

couples are endemically over-optimistic in their perceptions of their partner and

relationship (see Murray, 2001), it does concur nicely with error-management theory

proposed by Haselton and Buss (2000). These researchers posit that a function of human

psychology is the development of decision rules biased toward committing one type of

error over another. Accordingly, social perceivers adopt biased response tendencies that serve to minimize the relative costs, or maximize the relative benefits, of asymmetrical errors. An example of such an error-biased tendency is the household fire alarm. Because the consequences of a fire are so severe, the fire alarm is designed to be extremely sensitive (biased) to any form of heat or smoke. The result is that false alarms often occur (false negatives) from minor kitchen mishaps, such as burning the morning toast. Haselton and Buss (2000) demonstrated that men tended to be positively biased in their perceptions of women's sexual intent, where as women were negatively biased in their perceptions of men's commitment intentions. Hasselton and Buss explain these findings from an evolutionary perspective, arguing that for men over-inferring a women's sexual intent (perceiving intent when there was none) holds less negative reproductive consequences than under-inferring a women's sexual intent and missing a reproductive opportunity. For similar reasons, women would have the reverse tendency in perceiving a man's commitment intent. For women, a tendency to over-infer that a man is committed to you and your offspring (positively biased), could result in much more negative consequences than a tendency to under-infer a man's commitment (negative bias) and reject potential mates that were truly committed.

When the options of a positive versus a negative forgiveness bias are considered from an error-management theory perspective, a negative bias could be similarly viewed as the safest alternative. Like the household fire alarm, a negative forgiveness bias could act as a relationship fire alarm, by sensitively perceiving unforgiveness and occasionally raising false-alarms. The opposite tendency of carelessly assuming that one's partner is no longer motivated toward revenge or avoidance (a positive bias), when in fact they are, may well result in medium or long-term negative consequences for the relationship,

especially when such actions are perceived by the partner as further evidence of callousness or malice. Viewing the partner as less forgiving than he or she actually is should promote continued peace offerings and assurances of regret, which may elicit reconciliation and reassurances of forgiveness, and ultimately maintain the positivity of the relationship. Further research on forgiveness perception could prove to be a profitable domain in which to test error management theory.

It was hypothesized that individuals who were happier in their relationships would also be more positively biased in their perceptions of their partner's forgiveness. Whereas the results for the female participants (but not male participants) supported this hypothesis, further analysis revealed that women in happier relationships perceived their partner as more forgiving, to the extent that they expected their partner's forgiving response to be similar to their own. Previous studies have also noted an association between assumed similarity and evaluations of relationship satisfaction. Specifically, Thomas, Fletcher, and Lange (1997) found that couples who were happier with their relationships tended to use assumed similarity as a heuristic for judging the thoughts and feelings of their spouse when viewing a videotaped recording of their ten-minute problem-solving discussion. The particular finding in my study, however, is difficult to interpret. It could be the product of an unconscious tendency to project the self onto the partner. Conversely, individuals might be quite rationally using a "similarity" heuristic to make intelligent deductions about their partner's state of mind (Funder, Kolar, & Blackman, 1995; Nickerson, 2001).

If women were using assumed similarity as an effective judgment tool, then this finding could possibly be explained by the tendency of men to avoid conflict and

problem-related communication, as noted by Gottman (see Gottman, 1994). He reports that in both satisfied and unsatisfied relationships, women generally engage in discussions concerning relational issues, whereas men generally avoid these conflict discussions. In unsatisfied marriages, these general tendencies result in further criticism and complaining on behalf of the women, and withdrawal, stonewalling, and defensiveness on behalf of the men. Thus, women might be more likely to use assumed similarity as a heuristic for judging their partner's degree of forgiveness, because their partner generally tends to avoid discussing conflict related issues.

Accuracy in Perceptions of Forgiveness

As noted, bias is analyzed at the mean level, and is concerned with the aggregate or general tendency of the perceiver, while accuracy is (or should be) analyzed at the individual level, and concerned with the perceivers' ability to judge correctly the extent to which a given trait or disposition is represented in the target. The way in which the results varied across incidents is difficult to explain. Women accurately perceived their partners forgiveness for incident-A, but not for incident-B. Conversely, men accurately perceived their partner's forgiveness for incident-B, but not for incident-A. Because incident assignment was random, there does not seem to be a methodological explanation for this finding. In addition, as Table 4 demonstrates, the incidents were perceived, overall, in similar ways for incident severity/negativity, responsibility attributions, internal and expressed forgiveness, and partner-perceived internal and expressed forgiveness. Thus, the accuracy level for perceived forgiveness appears to be dependant upon unknown characteristics concerning the type of offense or transgression and other circumstances (intrapersonal as well as interpersonal) in which the incident took place.

In summary, this study found preliminary evidence that intimate partners can be both significantly biased and, at the same time, moderately accurate in their perceptions of forgiveness.

General Implications for Forgiveness Theory

McCullough's conceptualization of forgiveness as a transformation from revenge and avoidance motivations towards positive, relationship-enhancing motivations (McCullough, 2000; McCullough et al., 1998; McCullough et al., 1997), proved to be a useful basis for studying specific incidents of offense and transgression in couples' relationships. The TRIM inventory adequately measured internal forgiveness; however, when used in conjunction with the PRQC, modification was necessary in order to avoid problems due to item-overlap. One possible limitation of McCullough's model and the TRIM inventory is the focus on the negative side of the transformational process without accounting for the positive side. In other words, revenge and avoidance have been identified as two of the main relationship-destructive motivations, but what are the specific relationship-constructive motivations that forgiving individuals produce? Identifying these constructs and distinguishing them from reconciliation processes is the other-side-of-the-coin in understanding forgiveness as a motive-transformation process.

The results of this research suggest that internal forgiveness and expressed forgiveness, while conceptually related, retain some degree of autonomy. A plausible argument is that in most cases of offense and transgression, the expression of forgiveness would probably come after internal forgiveness, unless the victim was coerced. In this sense, the first relationship-constructive motivation that forgiveness produces could be an

implicit and/or explicit expression of forgiveness. Another possibility, especially in intimate relationships, is that forgiveness could transform feelings of estrangement and animosity to those of benevolence and good-will, and motivate the desire to restore the well-being of the individual (perpetrator or victim) and restore the relationship (Exline & Baumeister, 2000; Kelly, 1998).

Limitations

As a result of the cross-sectional design of this study, it was not possible to unequivocally determine causal relationships among the variables, and the possibility of third or missing variables playing a causal role must also be considered. The predicted model in Figure 1 assumed a causal path from the global evaluations of relationship quality that pre-existed the specific incidents of offense and transgression, to the specific attributions of offense and forgiveness responses. However, it is possible, of course, that specific incidents of offense or transgression, especially those judged as highly serious and injurious, could cause the entire relationship to be re-evaluated(Fitness, 2001).

A related methodological limitation of this research involves the ordering of the questionnaires. To prevent the participants' recall from biasing their thoughts and feelings surrounding the incidents under investigation, it was decided to leave the relationship evaluation questionnaire until the end of the study, even though this meant that the recall of a particularly hurtful episode might prompt participants to reconsider their relationship evaluation. Ideally, the PRQC should have been given well in advance of the participants arrival at the laboratory to guard against priming effects.

Another issue that constrained power was the relatively low sample size. With more participants, it would have been possible to further investigate the relationship of attributions and forgiveness by dividing the sample according to incidents of joint and individual responsibility. Such a division would have allowed the analysis of how the effects vary when each partner is to blame, or when the blame is reciprocal[2]. Additionally, because couples knew ahead of time that they were participating in a study addressing previous negative issues in their relationship, it may have been unlikely that couples in unhappy relationships were willing to participate in this research. Thus, the sample could have been biased towards satisfied and healthy relationships.

Conclusion

Exploring forgiveness from a dyadic perspective, as applied to specific incidents of offense and transgression in intimate relationships, has proven to be a useful method for investigating a variety of issues previously untouched. Overall, this research has broken new ground by documenting differences between internal and expressed forgiveness, highlighting the tendency for individuals to be generally negatively biased in their perceptions of their partner's forgiveness, while at the same time demonstrating reasonable accuracy. The associations between relationship evaluations, attributions of incident responsibility, and forgiveness documented in prior research with general measures of individuals in relationships, has also been replicated in this study using couples referring to two specific negative incidents in their relationship and structural equation modeling.

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[2] Alternately, a multiple regression approach could be used, through testing the interactive products of the two variables. However, such analyses are notoriously conservative and would, thus, also benefit from an increased sample size.

McCullough describes forgiveness as a "complex" of motivational changes (McCullough, Bellah, Kilpatrick, & Johnson, 2001). This research has highlighted some of the complexity inherent in the domain of intimate relationships, where forgiveness, and a lack of forgiveness, is frequently experienced. Forgiveness is no longer reserved for the pulpit, and clergy and theologians are no longer the only authorities in this domain. As scientists untangle the complex links between forgiveness and other relationship processes, this understanding should both increase scientific understanding and assist the clergy, counselor, and the clinician, in helping couples achieve healthier relationships.

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