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Forgiveness and Relationship Satisfaction: Mediating Mechanisms

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Abstract

Although the ability to forgive transgressions has been linked to overall relationship satisfaction, the mechanisms that mediate this association have not been established. We propose that the tendency to forgive a romantic partner increases relationship satisfaction via increased relational effort and decreased negative conflict. In two studies, we used structural equations modeling to examine these variables as potential mechanisms that drive this association. In Study 1 ($N = 523$) and Study 2 ($N = 446$) we found that these variables significantly mediated the association between forgiveness and relationship satisfaction. The findings were robust when examined concurrently and longitudinally, across multiple measures of forgiveness, and when accounting for baseline relationship satisfaction and interpersonal commitment. These two mechanisms parallel theorized positive and negative dimensions of forgiveness and the motivational transformation that is said to underlie forgiveness. Theoretical implications and implications for intervention are discussed.

Keywords

forgiveness; relationship satisfaction; self-regulation; conflict

The ability to forgive one's partner may be one of the most important factors in maintaining healthy romantic relationships (Fincham, 2009)¹. Although various studies have indicated that forgiveness predicts sustained relationship satisfaction in the face of partner transgressions (Fincham, Hall, & Beach, 2006), the mechanism(s) by which it does so remains relatively unexplored. Most conceptualizations of forgiveness emphasize a motivational change in which negative response tendencies toward the transgressor (e.g., retaliation, vengeance) decrease (McCullough, Fincham, & Tsang, 2003). However,

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¹Although many cross-sectional studies find forgiveness to be an important variable for improving relationship satisfaction, it should be noted that there are mixed findings on the longitudinal relation between forgiveness and later relationship satisfaction with some evidence indirectly supporting the relationship (Paleari, Regalia, & Fincham, 2005) and other findings supporting this relationship for only some spouses (McNulty, 2008).

decreased negative motivation alone is likely insufficient for relationship repair when the transgressor is an intimate partner because it implies a return to a state of neutrality rather than positivity towards the partner. Consequently, increased positive motivation (goodwill) towards the transgressor has been postulated as an additional component of forgiveness, especially in close relationships. This “positive” dimension is thought to underlie approach behavior in the face of a partner transgression (e.g., Fincham, 2000) and evidence for the role of this dimension has begun to accumulate (e.g., Fincham & Beach, 2002, 2007; Paleari, Regalia, & Fincham, 2009). Thus, forgiveness is theorized to promote not only a reduction in negative responses but also increased goodwill towards the transgressor; both of these dimensions informed our search for mediators of the association between trait forgiveness and relationship satisfaction.

Potential mediating mechanisms: Two types?

Conflict—Fincham, Beach, and Davila (2004) examined the effects of forgiveness on a potential mediator—conflict—in the association between the tendency to forgive one’s partner and positive relationship outcomes. In this study, they demonstrated that forgiveness was associated with improvements in conflict tactics. In a second, longitudinal study, wives’ tendency to forgive also predicted less ineffective arguing at a one-year follow up; however this association did not replicate longitudinally for husbands (Fincham, Beach, & Davila, 2007). In these two studies, the authors examined only a single negative variable as a potential mediating mechanism, namely, ineffective arguing. A more comprehensive examination of the dynamics at work in conflict would likely reveal that other negative behaviors are at work. Thus, in the present study a number of important interpersonal conflict tactics (reverse scored positive communication, negative communication, and physical assault) will be examined as potential mediators of the relationship between forgiveness tendencies and relationship satisfaction. We include reverse scored positive communication with our conflict tactics variable because we believe that the absence of positive communication is an important, nonredundant component of couple conflict tactics.

Self-Regulation—Focusing on negative mediating mechanisms alone is likely insufficient given the accumulating evidence that forgiveness comprises *both* positive and negative components. Although a number of studies now show that forgiveness is associated with positive relationship variables such as marital satisfaction (Fehr, Gelfand, & Nag, 2010; Fincham, et al., 2004; 2007; Gordon, Hughes, Tomcik, Dixon, & Litzinger, 2009; Karremans & Van Lange, 2004; 2008), to our knowledge only one variable—trust—has been shown to be a partial mediator of the relationship between forgiveness and relationship satisfaction (Gordon, et al., 2009; Wieselquist, 2009). However, a promising potential mediating variable that has not been investigated and that reflects the hypothesized positive dimension of forgiveness is self-regulation.

In the broader psychological literature, self-regulation has been defined as altering behavior to inhibit a dominant response, usually in the service of longer term goals (Muraven & Baumeister, 2000). Kelley and Thibaut (1978) introduced a similar concept within a romantic relationships context called the transformation of motivation, a relationship-specific form of self-regulation wherein a partner inhibits responses that maximize their own short-term interests and, instead, responds in ways that maximize long-term relationships goals. Building off of these two ideas, Wilson, Charker, Lizzio, Halford, and Kimlin (2005) introduced the concept of behavioral self-regulation within romantic relationships. Unlike previous conceptualizations of self-regulation which focus more comprehensively on behavior, affect and cognitions, Wilson and colleagues focused exclusively on behavior that reflects a voluntary attempt to make one’s romantic relationship better. Not surprisingly, relationship self-regulation is associated with increased relationship satisfaction (Wilson et

al., 2005). However, the hypothesis that individuals high in trait forgiveness are more likely to self-regulate in an effort to improve their relationship has not been tested. We hypothesize that trait forgiveness will be associated with more relationship effort and, in turn, relationship satisfaction.

Finally, research on relationship self-regulation has already established that increases in relationship effort predict decreases in psychological aggression (Halford, Farrugia, Lizzio, & Wilson, 2009). We sought to extend these findings by examining the association between relationship effort and a latent variable comprised of multiple measures of conflict (positive and negative communication patterns as well as physical assault) and testing the hypothesis that relationship effort improves relationship satisfaction via a reduction in problematic conflict patterns.

In two studies, we tested the hypothesis that the tendency to forgive one's partner, operationalized as an individual difference variable, influences relationship satisfaction through both increased relationship effort and decreased negative conflict. Because emerging adulthood is a time when individuals are particularly open to learning about romantic relationships and tend to establish expectations and behavior patterns that often form the foundation for marriage (Ooms & Wilson, 2004; see Fincham, Stanley, & Rhoades, 2011), we examined our hypotheses in young adults. Moreover, recent survey data suggests that a burgeoning minority of Americans are delaying marriage or forgoing marriage entirely; thus, relationships traditionally termed premarital unions are becoming their own form of enduring relationships and are increasingly becoming the context for childrearing (Pew Social Trends Staff, 2010). In Study 1, we explore our hypotheses using structural equations modeling of cross-sectional data. In Study 2, we extend these findings using longitudinal data and test our hypotheses against a plausible alternate hypothesis. In both studies, we examine mediation following the recommendations of Shrout and Bolger (2002).

Study 1

Method

Participants and Procedure—Data were drawn from a larger study taking place in an introductory course on families across the lifespan. We obtained approval from the university Institutional Review Board prior to collecting any data. Participants who identified themselves as being in a committed romantic relationship ($N = 523$) took part in this portion of the larger study. Participants completed an on-line survey that included numerous measures, including those described below. Length of the romantic relationship was distributed as follows: 2 years or longer, 26%; 1–2 years, 20%; 7–12 months, 16% and 6 month or less, 40%. Cohabitors made up 12% of the sample. The average age of the sample was 19.5 (2.03). Women made up 84% of the sample and the ethnic background of the sample was distributed as follows: Caucasian, 69%; African-American, 13%; Hispanic, 7% and “Other” (e.g. European, Mixed Ethnicity, etc.), 11%.

Measures

Tendency to Forgive Scale: The four item scale of dispositional forgiveness developed by Brown (2003) was slightly modified so that the questions were targeted toward the respondent's romantic partner rather than toward “someone,” which is the wording of the original scale (e.g., “I tend to get over it quickly when *my partner* hurts my feelings”). This scale has shown good convergence with partner ratings and convergent and discriminant validity with other measures; specifically, it correlates inversely with vengeance and neuroticism, positively with another measure of dispositional forgiveness, perspective taking, and agreeableness, and is unrelated to empathetic concern, extraversion, openness

and conscientiousness. The measure has also shown good reliability over time (8 week test-retest $r = .71$) and internal consistency ($\alpha = .82$; Brown, 2003). In the present sample, $\alpha = .66$.

Communication Patterns Questionnaire – Constructive Communication (CPQ): The CPQ measures constructive communication, demand/withdraw, and mutual avoidance behaviors in couples. The CPQ is highly correlated with observationally coded problem solving behavior ($r = .72$, Heavey, Larson, Zumtobel, & Christensen, 1996; see also Hahlweg et al., 2000). In Study 1, alpha for the reverse scored positive scale was .89, and .85 for the negative scale; in Study 2, alpha for the reverse scored positive scale was .85, and .85 for the negative scale

Revised Conflict Tactics Scale (CTS-2): The CTS-2 is a psychometrically validated measure that assesses the methods couples use to resolve conflict (Straus, Hamby, Boney-McCoy, & Sugarman, 1996). Given that severe assault is relatively rare, and to reduce item load, we used the minor physical assault scale only (e.g. “I twisted my partner’s arm or hair”) to assess how frequently physical assault was occurring in the respondent’s relationship. In Study 1, $\alpha = .94$; in Study 2 $\alpha = .84$.

Behavioral Self-Regulation for Effective Relationships Scale – Effort Scale (BSRERS – Effort): The BSRERS—Effort measure (Wilson et al., 2005) assesses how much a person “works” at their relationship by regulating their behavior with the goal of improving the quality of the relationship. This measure has good psychometric properties, including good stability over one year ($r = .57$ and $.55$, for women and men, respectively) internal consistency ($\alpha \approx .81$ across multiple samples) and inter-partner consistency ($r \approx .50$ across multiple samples). In Study 1, $\alpha = .82$; in Study 2 $\alpha = .85$.

Couples Satisfaction Index (CSI): Starting with 180 items previously used to assess relationship satisfaction, Funk and Rogge (2007) conducted an Item Response Theory analysis to develop a 4-item measure of relationship satisfaction with optimized psychometric properties. Their measure correlates $.87$ with the widely used Dyadic Adjustment Scale and $-.79$ with the Ineffective Arguing Inventory. In Study 1, $\alpha = .91$; in Study 2 $\alpha = .94$ at T1 and $.93$ at T2.

Results

Analytic Approach—The data were analyzed using Structural Equations Modeling in Mplus 5.2 (Muthén & Muthén, 2004); the analyzed model can be seen in Figure 1. Before conducting analyses of the full structural model, the goodness-of-fit of the measurement models for the latent variables of relationship satisfaction and negative tactics were examined. In the negative tactics latent variable, the error variances for the two components of the CPQ were proposed to be correlated a priori. The items that comprised the relationship satisfaction and negative tactics latent variables all contributed to a good fit, so no changes were made to either of these variables. The full structural model provided a good fit to the data $\chi^2(22) = 54.55, p < .01, TLI = .98, CFI = .99, RMSEA = .05$. For our tests of mediation, we used the bootstrapping procedure in Mplus.

We first examined the direct effect of forgiveness on relationship satisfaction (path c in the usual mediation notation), absent the influence of the mediators; there was a significant direct effect of forgiveness on relationship satisfaction ($\beta = .17, p < .01$). In the full structural model (see Figure 1) forgiveness did not directly predict relationship satisfaction ($\beta = 00$); however, forgiveness did predict relationship effort ($\beta = .49, p < .01$) which, in turn, predicted relationship satisfaction ($\beta = .17, p < .01$). As can be seen in the first panel of

Figure 2, there was a significant indirect effect such that relationship effort mediated the association between forgiveness and relationship satisfaction (95% CI for indirect effect = .01—.06, $p < .01$). Similarly, forgiveness predicted less negative tactics in relationships ($\beta = -.18$, $p < .01$) which, in turn, predicted relationship satisfaction ($\beta = -.46$, $p < .01$). The second panel of Figure 2 shows that there was a significant indirect effect such that negative tactics mediated the relationship between forgiveness and relationship satisfaction (95% CI for indirect effect = .04—.13). To further illuminate the nature of these associations, we examined an alternate model where the paths from the mediators (effort and negative tactics) to relationship satisfaction were constrained to zero and found that in this model, forgiveness did significantly predict relationship satisfaction ($\beta = .17$, $p < .01$) suggesting that these two mechanisms mediate the association between forgiveness and relationship satisfaction. Thus, in support of our hypothesis, forgiveness was associated with improved relationship satisfaction via the mechanisms of increased relationship effort and decreased negative interpersonal tactics.

We also examined whether relationship effort is associated with relationship satisfaction via the mediating mechanism of decreased negative interpersonal tactics. We found that increased relationship effort predicted decreases in negative interpersonal tactics ($\beta = -.41$, $p < .01$). The association between effort and relationship satisfaction (see third panel of Figure 2) was mediated by negative interpersonal tactics (95% CI for indirect effect = .12—.26) such that relationship effort was associated with improvements in relationship satisfaction in large part via a reduction of negative interpersonal tactics.

Discussion

This study provides evidence for two mediating mechanisms in the association between forgiveness and relationship satisfaction: negative interpersonal tactics and behavioral self-regulation in the service of improving one's romantic relationship. When the impact of these mechanisms was accounted for, there was no direct relationship between forgiveness and relationship satisfaction in our study. These findings lend further support to the theory of transformation of motivation; specifically, they suggest that the tendency to forgive one's partner leads to a motivational shift associated with increased self-regulation in the service of long-term relationship improvement and a reduction in negative interpersonal tactics.

The present study is limited by the fact that it examines only concurrent associations between the variables and thus does not allow us to establish temporal precedence, an important step for inferring causation. Also, the reliability of our forgiveness measure was somewhat low ($\alpha = .66$), potentially attenuating the true relationship between forgiveness and the other variables in the model. Finally, a key alternate explanation for these findings—commitment—was not examined. To address these limitations, we conducted a second study.

Study 2

Study 2 was designed to extend the findings of the first study by showing a longitudinal relationship between forgiveness, conflict tactics, relationship effort, and relationship satisfaction and thereby allow direction of effects to be inferred with greater confidence. We also sought to examine the potential role of commitment in the observed pattern of results.

Commitment: The Real Driving Force Behind the Transformation of Motivation?

When an individual is wronged, generally the initial impulse is to react vengefully. Indeed some have argued that retaliation in such circumstances “is deeply ingrained in the biological, psychological, and cultural levels of human nature,” (McCullough & Witvliet,

2002, p. 446). Forgiveness represents an alternate approach in which the motivation driving these instinctive reactions is transformed. Because forgiveness represents a choice to go against what may be termed ones' initial instinct, researchers have been curious to explain why it is that people choose to forgive. One such explanation is interpersonal commitment; specifically, the determination to make a relationship work despite obstacles which is a construct termed "dedication" commitment. Previous research has demonstrated that commitment promotes pro-relationship motives and cognitions in the face of infidelity (Finkel, Rusbult, Kumashiro, & Hannon, 2002). Thus it is possible that this tendency to be deeply committed to the relationship despite obstacles is the real reason behind relationship effort, decreased negative interpersonal tactics and ultimately relationship satisfaction. The present study will examine this alternate hypothesis by illuminating the effect of forgiveness on relationship satisfaction when the effect of commitment (and baseline relationship satisfaction) is accounted for.

Finally, in Study 2 we included a different measure of forgiveness. This was done because using multiple methods of assessing the same construct helps to incrementally establish construct validity of the target construct as well as to increase confidence in the observed findings; by using multiple methods of assessment, we are able to rule out the possibility that dependencies associated with irrelevant measurement variance are driving the observed findings (Shadish, Cook, & Campbell, 2001).

Method

Participants—The data used in Study 2 ($N = 446$) comes from a second data set obtained using the same procedures as in Study 1 (no participants in Study 1 were included in Study 2). The average age of respondents in the sample was 19.9 (2.9). Women made up 81% of the sample and the ethnic background of the sample was distributed as follows, Caucasian, 69%; African-American, 11%; Hispanic, 10% and "Other"(e.g. European, Mixed Ethnicity, etc.), 10%. Length of the romantic relationship was distributed as follows: 3 years or longer, 18%; 2–3 years, 13%; 1–2 years, 19%; 7–12 months, 12% and 6 month or less, 38%. Cohabitators made up 12% of the sample. Sample attrition was less than 1% between baseline and follow up and there were no significant differences on baseline variables between those who completed follow-up and those who did not.

Procedure—Participants completed an online survey that measured relationship satisfaction, forgiveness, and dedication commitment. Two months after the initial assessment, participants completed the same measures used in Study 1 (communication patterns, physical assault, relationship effort and relationship satisfaction) thus allowing for a prospective examination of the impact of baseline relationship satisfaction, commitment, and forgiveness on later relationship satisfaction.

Variables

Forgiveness: Forgiveness was assessed using nine items that respondents rated following the statement "When my partner wrongs or hurts me..." on a six-point scale ranging from "strongly disagree" to "strongly agree." Three items assessed avoidance ("I tend to give him/her the cold shoulder", "I don't want to have anything to do with her/him", "I tend to withdraw from my partner"), benevolence ("I soon forgive my partner", "It is easy to feel warmly again toward him/her", "I am able to act as positively toward him/her as I was before it happened") and retaliation ("I find a way to make her/him regret it", "I tend to do something to even the score", "I retaliate or do something to get my own back"), respectively. The nine items were scored so that higher scores reflected a greater tendency to forgive. Items from this scale have shown good internal consistency in previous research ($\alpha = .87$; Fincham et al., 2008). In this study, $\alpha = .85$.

Dedication Commitment: This psychometrically optimized four item scale (Stanley & Markman, 1992) is designed to assess a desire to persist in a romantic relationship despite obstacles (e.g. “I want this relationship to stay strong no matter what rough times we may encounter”). This subscale has demonstrated adequate psychometric properties and internal consistency of $\alpha = .72$ in similar samples (Stanley, Whitton, & Markman, 2004). In the present study, $\alpha = .80$.

The measures of relationship satisfaction, relationship effort, communication, and conflict tactics described in Study 1 were again administered.

Results

Analytic approach—Our analytic approach was identical to that of Study 1. Examination of the measurement models suggested that the indicators comprising the relationship satisfaction latent variable all contributed to a good fit, so no changes were made. For the negative tactics latent variable, correlating the error variances for the CPQp and CPQn created a linear dependency (a Heywood case; Dillon, Kumar, & Mulani, 1987) which was remedied by removing the correlation and correlating the error variances of the CTS and CPQn. The full model provided a good fit to the data $\chi^2(27) = 46.01, p = .01, TLI = .99, CFI = .99, RMSEA = .04$ and is displayed in Figure 3.

As predicted, dedication commitment prospectively predicted relationship satisfaction ($\beta = .13, p = .01$), but it did not significantly predict effort or negative tactics. Baseline relationship satisfaction also prospectively predicted relationship effort ($\beta = .21, p < .01$), negative tactics ($\beta = -.29, p < .01$) and later relationship satisfaction ($\beta = .20, p < .01$). As predicted, the pattern of results from Study 1 held up when accounting for the impact of baseline relationship satisfaction and dedication on the examined variables. Specifically, forgiveness at baseline predicted later relationship effort ($\beta = .24, p < .01$), and negative tactics ($\beta = -.15, p = .02$). Effort directly predicted relationship satisfaction ($\beta = .24, p < .01$) as did negative tactics ($\beta = -.45, p < .01$). Absent the influence of the mediators, the direct effect of forgiveness on relationship satisfaction was $\beta = .05, ns$. As can be seen in the first and second panels of Figure 4, the relationship between forgiveness and relationship satisfaction was mediated by effort (95% CI for indirect effect = .03—.11, $p < .01$) and by negative tactics (95% CI for indirect effect = .01—.15, $p < .01$). Finally, relationship effort predicted less negative relationship tactics ($\beta = -.42, p < .01$); as can be seen in panel three of Figure 4, negative relationship tactics mediated the association between relationship effort and relationship satisfaction (95% CI for indirect effect = .13—.32). Interestingly, forgiveness predicted significantly less relationship satisfaction at follow up in the full model ($\beta = -.14, p = .01$). This association likely represents a suppressor effect (see MacKinnon, Krull & Lockwood, 2000 and Shrout & Bolger, 2002) given that the sign of this effect changes from positive to negative for c path (the direct effect with the mediators constrained to 0) versus the c' path (where the mediators are freely estimated). Again, these data suggest that relationship effort and negative tactics mediate the association between forgiveness and relationship satisfaction. Together, these results indicate that the associations between forgiveness, the proposed mediators, and relationship satisfaction hold up longitudinally and even when simultaneously accounting for the impact of baseline relationship satisfaction and dedication commitment.

Discussion

The results of this study allow stronger inferences to be drawn about the direction of the indirect effects of forgiveness on relationship satisfaction as assessment of the tendency to forgive one's partner preceded that of satisfaction by an 8 week period. Consistent with the results of Study 1, forgiveness predicted relationship self-regulation and negative

interpersonal tactics and both of these variables mediated the association between forgiveness and relationship satisfaction. These mediational mechanisms operated as predicted despite the inclusion of potent covariates in the model; namely, baseline relationship satisfaction and dedication commitment. It is also worth noting that the indirect paths were not significantly attenuated even when accounting for the impact of these variables. This suggests that even when accounting for the variance explained by baseline relationship satisfaction and dedication commitment, the tendency to forgive one's partner was related to later satisfaction in the manner just described.

General Discussion

How Does Forgiveness Enhance Relationship Satisfaction?

Although previous studies have documented an association between forgiveness and relationship satisfaction, no research has examined the mechanisms that drive this association. The present studies attempted to address this lacuna. We were able to extend previous findings that show forgiveness leads to less ineffective conflict tactics in relationships (Fincham et al., 2004, 2007) by demonstrating that negative conflict tactics mediate the relationship between forgiveness and relationship satisfaction. At a theoretical level this finding can be understood as follows: Resentment engendered by a transgression and a tendency toward unforgiveness is likely to fuel couple conflict and impede successful conflict resolution. In contrast, forgiveness appears to be a means of providing closure with regard to a transgression and sets the stage for reconciliation. In sum, forgiveness seems to short circuit the use of negative conflict strategies allowing the couple to exit from the negative reciprocity cycle that leads to distressed relationships.

Although decreased use of negative conflict tactics is one route through which forgiveness may influence relationship satisfaction, a positively focused means by which forgiveness may influence relationship satisfaction was also identified. Part of the challenge of forgiveness is to deal with frequent, and often unsought, reminders of the transgression. For example, in the case of infidelity, this might comprise such things as the unfaithful partner simply making eye contact with or talking to someone of the opposite sex. How one responds to these reminders is likely to make a difference to subsequent partner interaction and perhaps even to the course of the relationship. Specifically, we hypothesized that forgiveness would be positively related to aggrieved partners' self-regulation in the service of improving the relationship (relationship effort) which would, in turn, be associated with higher relationship satisfaction. Our results provided good evidence for this hypothesis. In Study 1, we found that relationship effort played a clear role in improving relationship satisfaction both directly and indirectly via a reduction in negative tactics. These findings were replicated in Study 2. Further, across both studies, we found that the association between relationship effort and relationship satisfaction was mediated by negative interpersonal tactics. These findings provide further evidence that increases in relationship effort are associated with increases in relationship satisfaction. They extend previous research by showing that reductions in negative interpersonal tactics are a mechanism of action in the association between regulation of relationship effort and relationship satisfaction.

So What is the Relationship Between Relationship Satisfaction and Forgiveness?

Interestingly, when accounting for the influence of the mediators on relationship satisfaction—concurrently and longitudinally—the direct effect of forgiveness on relationship satisfaction reduced to $\beta = .00$ in Study 1 and $\beta = -.14$ in Study 2. This pattern of findings could be explained in at least two ways. First, simulation studies have shown that when mediating variables completely mediate the association between an IV and a DV,

suppression (when the indirect effect has the opposite sign of the direct effect) occurs approximately 50% of the time; this is a phenomenon dubbed empirical suppression (Shrout and Bolger, 2002). Therefore it is possible that the change in sign (from positive to negative) that emerged is an empirical artifact resulting from a model with mechanisms that fully mediate the relationship between forgiveness and relationship satisfaction, particularly in Study 2 where the strength of the indirect effect (axb) exceeded the strength of the direct effect (c).

A second—and very interesting—possibility is that when we account for baseline satisfaction and the “positive impact” of forgiveness (via the mediators), all that is left over is the “negative impact” of forgiveness (seen longitudinally in Study 2). McNulty (2008) has shown that forgiveness is adaptive for couples only when relationships do not have high levels of negative communication (2008), ostensibly because there is no “penalty” for bad behavior, so the bad behavior continues and—over time—erodes relationship satisfaction. Others have observed similar findings (Luchies, Finkel, McNulty, & Kumashiro, 2010). The observed pattern of results may lend credence to this line of theorizing and even expand it given our research tested a model that included important couple-level contextual variables not included in McNulty’s 2008 study (i.e., commitment). On a more positive note, however, the present studies also provide evidence that negative communication patterns may be altered by forgiveness and relationship effort (which is also promoted by forgiveness).

It is interesting to note, that the null association between relationship satisfaction and forgiveness in Study 1 became a statistically significant negative association ($\beta = -.14$) in Study 2 when we accounted for the stability of relationship satisfaction over time (in addition to commitment and the mediators). Other have discussed the importance of accounting for the stability of relationship satisfaction in order to avoid potentially spurious findings where forgiveness serves as a proxy for relationship satisfaction (see Fincham, Hall, & Beach, 2005). The present study underscores the importance of this recommendation given that the relationship between forgiveness and relationship satisfaction changed dramatically when we accounted for the influence of our mediators, dedication, and relationship satisfaction stability. Future research will ideally examine whether this pattern replicates with the additional goal of determining whether our findings represent empirical suppression or the negative residual effects of forgiveness that are made manifest after accounting for the positive effects of forgiveness. For example, perhaps those who are high in trait forgiveness are apt to be more passive or excessively avoidant of conflict and this causes an erosion of relationship satisfaction over time. Future research could profitably examine these questions and whether this effect replicates with both trait and offense-specific forgiveness in the context of romantic relationships.

Theoretical Implications

The present studies have implications for two broader theoretical models, interdependence theory, and conceptualizations of forgiveness. As regards interdependence theory, we provided a much clearer view of the role of forgiveness in the transformation of motivation and the mechanisms by which this transformation operates. Specifically, when individuals have more forgiving tendencies, they are more likely to self-regulate with the goal of improving their relationship and to inhibit their tendency to damage their relationship by using negative interpersonal tactics like hitting, berating, or avoiding their partner. Previous research has suggested that forgiveness is central to the transformation of motivation, but the present study is the first to show how the transformation of motivation associated with forgiveness actually operates in repressing initial instincts and enhancing productive relationship behaviors.

As regards conceptualizations of forgiveness, we identified two mechanisms linking the tendency to forgive to relationship satisfaction, one that involves the relative absence of negative behavior (negative conflict tactics) and one that involves the presence of positive behavior (behavioral regulation). These two mechanisms parallel the motivational change that is said to underlie forgiveness in intimate relationships, namely, decreased negative motivation and increased positive motivation toward the transgressor. Moreover, each mechanism was found to operate in the presence of the other showing that both are important, non-redundant means by which forgiveness tendencies may influence relationship satisfaction.

Notwithstanding the important advances represented by the current findings, several limitations of the research need to be acknowledged. First, both studies use correlational, self-report data; it is therefore critical in future research to develop ways of investigating the mechanisms identified using experimental methods. Second, the extent to which the findings can be generalized beyond our sample (which over represented women) is unclear. Even though research is needed to replicate these findings in other relationships (e.g., marriage) and life stages, it is worth noting that even if our findings applied only to the population investigated this would be important in its own right. Romantic relationships in emerging adulthood set the stage for long term relationship behavior and their consequences are real (Braithwaite, Delevi, & Fincham, 2010).

In any event, many researchers have concluded that forgiveness is the cornerstone of a successful relationship (e.g., Worthington, 1994). This belief underpins the development of several new marital interventions that emphasize forgiveness, particularly in the context of marital infidelity (e.g., Baucom, Gordon, Snyder, Atkins, & Christensen, 2006). The present research points to the possibility of addressing forgiveness for less severe transgressions when they hamper progress in couple therapy. Given popular misconceptions that impede forgiveness (e.g., it condones bad behavior, is a sign of weakness) gains might be made by including psycho-education regarding forgiveness in therapy. Thus, in addition to advancing understanding of forgiveness in relationships, our research has identified potential points of intervention for such researchers. We look forward to this continuing interplay between basic and applied research.

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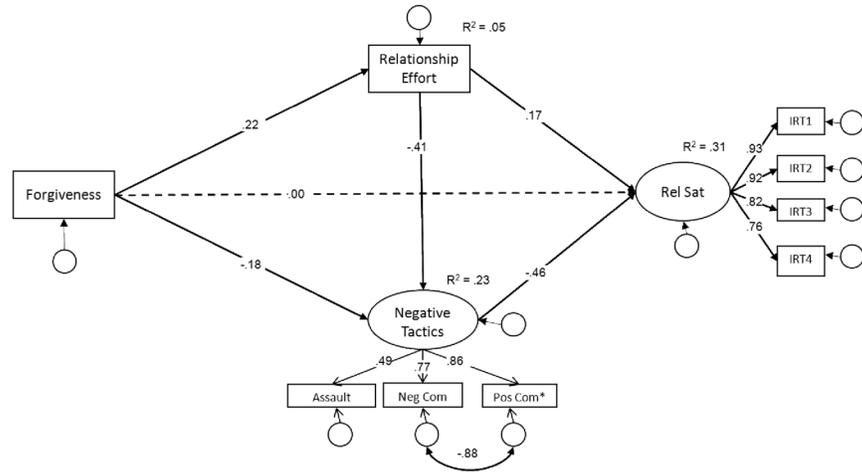


Figure 1.
 Model for Study 1.
 Note. * Indicates the scale was reverse scored. Dashed line indicates a non-significant path ($p > .05$).

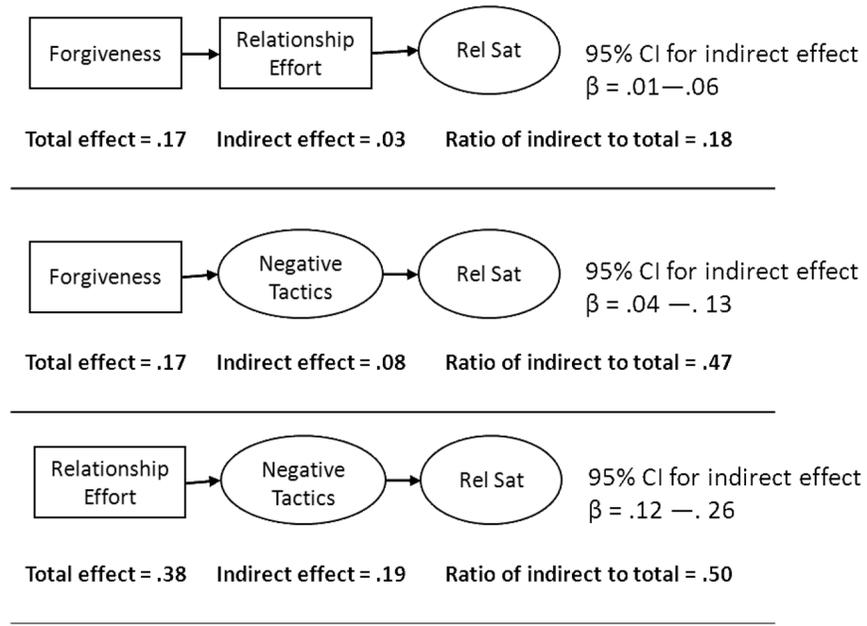


Figure 2.
 Mediation paths for Study 1 (all significant at $p < .01$).

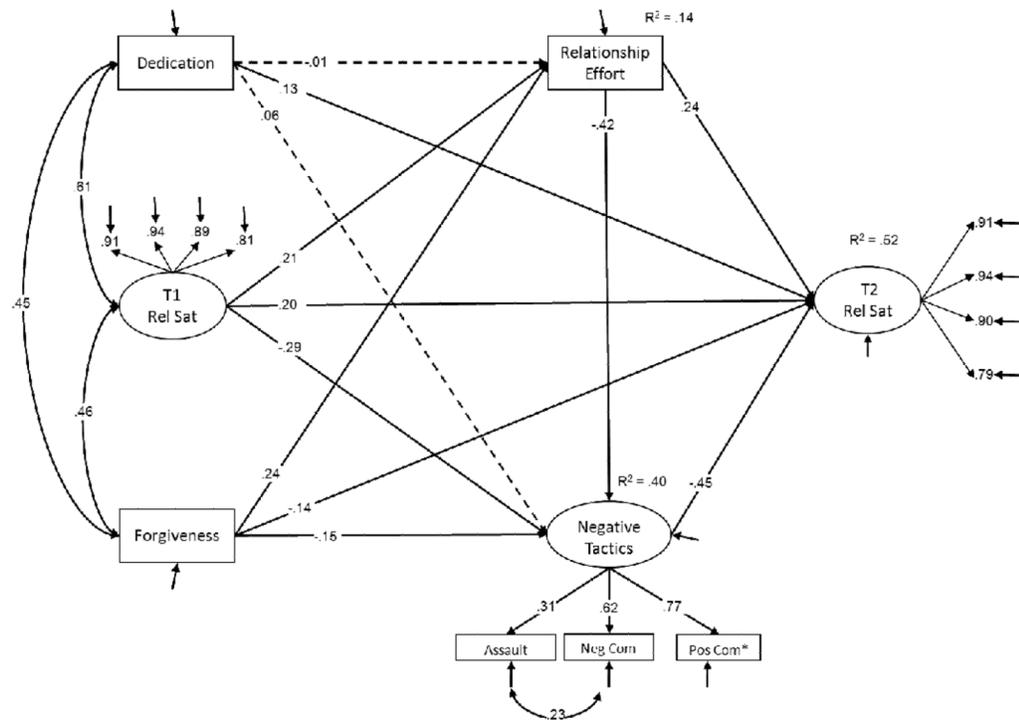


Figure 3.
Model for Study 2.

Note. * Indicates that scale was reverse scored. Dashed line indicates a non-significant path ($p > .05$).

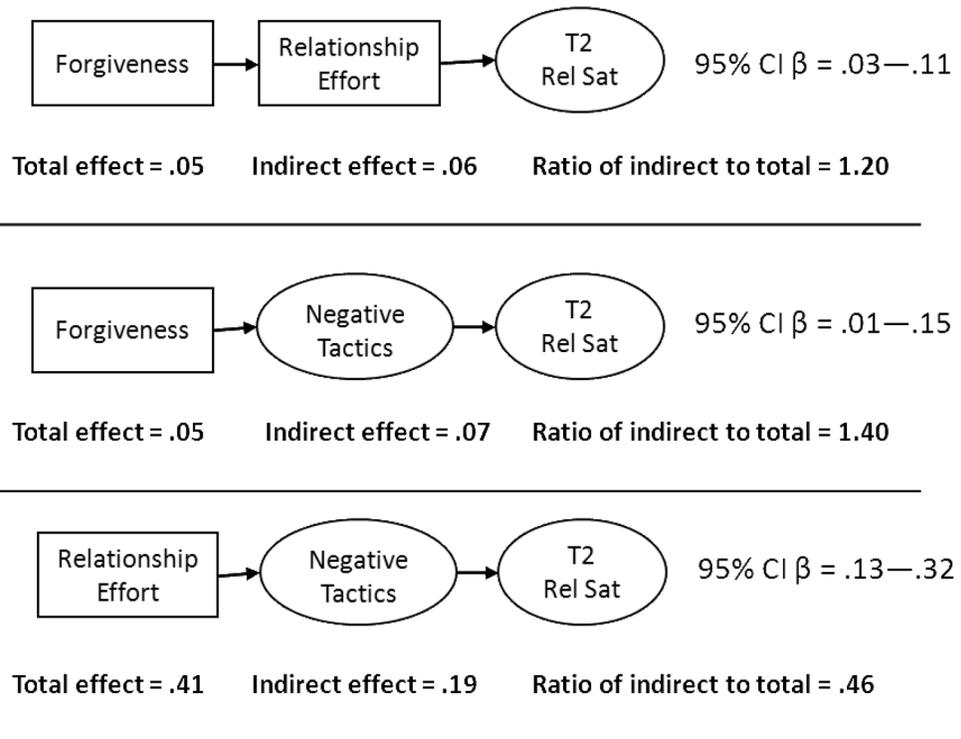


Figure 4. Mediational paths for Study 2 (all significant at $p < .01$).