



Trait forgiveness and enduring vulnerabilities: Neuroticism and catastrophizing influence relationship satisfaction via less forgiveness



Scott R. Braithwaite^a, Cindy M. Mitchell^{a,*}, Edward A. Selby^b, Frank D. Fincham^c

^a Brigham Young University, United States

^b Rutgers University, United States

^c Florida State University, United States

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ABSTRACT

Two studies examine whether specific cognitive tendencies and underlying personality traits inhibit the tendency to forgive and, in turn, decrease relationship satisfaction among emerging adults in committed romantic relationships (median relationship duration 1–2 years). In Study 1 ($N = 355$), trait forgiveness had a positive, direct association with later relationship satisfaction and mediated the effect of neuroticism on relationship satisfaction. In Study 2 ($N = 354$), forgiveness had a positive, direct association with relationship satisfaction and mediated the association between catastrophic rumination and relationship satisfaction. Forgiveness mediated changes in relationship satisfaction over time, with greater trait forgiveness predicting higher relationship satisfaction. Implications for research on forgiveness and for applied work on couple preventive interventions are discussed.

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1. Introduction

Forgiveness research has flourished in recent decades. However, forgiveness has largely been conceptualized in theoretical isolation, only rarely being linked to broader theories in couple research. Therefore, we examine the role that forgiveness plays in a broader theoretical model in couple research, the Vulnerability Stress Adaptation (VSA) model. Two major research questions are investigated. First, what enduring vulnerabilities inhibit the tendency to forgive *and* can the higher order trait of neuroticism better explain associations between proximal cognitive tendencies, like rumination, and forgiveness? Second, is the tendency to forgive a mechanism that mediates the negative effects of these enduring vulnerabilities on relationship satisfaction?

2. The role of forgiveness in couple relationships

Evidence that forgiveness plays an important role in maintaining healthy romantic relationships is accumulating. Forgiveness is associated with greater commitment and willingness to sacrifice for the benefit of a romantic partner (Karremans & Van Lange, 2004), reductions in anger, grief, anxiety and depression (Coyle & Enright, 1997; Freedman & Enright, 1996) and problematic conflict (Fincham, Beach, & Davila, 2007). The majority of evidence from cross-sectional and longitudinal

studies of forgiveness shows that forgiveness promotes more satisfying relationships (Fincham & Beach, 2007; Paleari, Regalia, & Fincham, 2005), though some evidence suggests that forgiveness may not be as adaptive in relationships marked by high levels of negative conflict (McNulty, 2008, 2010). However, the link between forgiveness and relationship satisfaction has focused largely on offense specific forgiveness, not the more general tendency to forgive. The tendency to forgive is distinct from offense-specific forgiveness because it is thought to reflect a trait-like attribute that is consistent across time, romantic partners, and situations (Brown, 2003). While offense-specific forgiveness occurs for a single transgression with a specific partner in specific contextual factors (e.g., the nature of the relationship, the offended individual's attribution for the offense, etc.), the tendency to forgive does not reflect highly contextualized situational factors; instead, it focuses on the broader tendency toward forgiveness across many contexts and situations.

One study that examined trait forgiveness assessed this general tendency to forgive using hypothetical offenses and asking participants to indicate how likely they would forgive the offender under those circumstances. In this study, they found that trait forgiveness marginally, prospectively predicted relationship satisfaction for husbands 12–14 months after initial participation and responses (Maio, Thomas, Fincham, & Carnelley, 2008). But because this study chiefly set out to examine other research questions about family roles and forgiveness, it did not provide much information about when and how trait forgiveness operates in romantic relationships. In this set of studies, we focused on understanding under what conditions trait forgiveness operates, and

* Corresponding author at: Department of Psychology, Brigham Young University Provo, UT 84602, United States.

E-mail address: cindymm818@gmail.com (C.M. Mitchell).

whether it might be an important mechanism of action, in promoting relationship health.

3. Forgiveness and the VSA model

With the exception of Kelley and Thibault's interdependence theory (1978), forgiveness theories have rarely been connected to broader theories in couple research. Another aim of this paper, therefore, is to make clear connections between the forgiveness literature and one of the important models in couple research, the VSA model (Karney & Bradbury, 1995). As its name implies, the VSA model has three major parts: enduring vulnerabilities, adaptive processes, and stress. Enduring vulnerabilities are traits, temperaments, or experiences that inhibit the ability to have a happy, successful marriage (e.g. poor communication skills, a traumatic childhood event, neuroticism). Adaptive processes—the hallmark examples of which are couple communication and conflict management—are interactive processes that occur within the couple relationship and are influenced by both partners' enduring vulnerabilities. Stress, as induced by short or long term life events, is a potent predictor of couple functioning, hampering even the adaptive processes of couples that come to marriage with few enduring vulnerabilities. These major components—enduring vulnerabilities, adaptive processes and stress—interact with one another to predict changes in relationship satisfaction, which go on to predict divorce.

The VSA model is useful for understanding couple processes from a basic research perspective as well as from a more applied research perspective that seeks to understand how to intervene and alter the course of marriage. Thus, making clear connections between this model and forgiveness research may help advance our understanding in both realms of research. In the present set of studies, we focus on the enduring vulnerabilities component and conceptualize problematic cognitive tendencies and personality traits as enduring vulnerabilities that are associated with less trait forgiveness and, in turn, less relationship satisfaction.

3.1. Cognitive tendencies as enduring vulnerabilities

Though initial efforts to treat couple distress were purely behavioral (Jacobson & Margolin, 1979), over time treatments expanded to include cognitions. Today, most approaches to couple treatment include cognitive elements in their conceptualizations of couple distress and treatment, even if they emphasize other processes such as acceptance (Jacobson & Christensen, 1996) or emotion (Johnson, 2004). It is surprising to note, therefore, the relative lack and narrow foci of research exploring how specific cognitive tendencies are associated with relationship satisfaction. In the early years of the transition to cognitive models there was some focus on relationship-specific cognitions (“disagreement is destructive”, “partners don't change”, etc.), but the majority of research on cognition in marriage has focused on attributions for partner behavior (Bradbury & Fincham, 1990). General cognitive tendencies (such as a tendency to ruminate, catastrophize, engage in “all or nothing” reasoning) were left largely unexplored. But these general cognitive tendencies are important to examine because, within the VSA framework, they may represent enduring vulnerabilities that influence adaptive processes. If so, the study of general cognitive tendencies may help us to identify, even prior to partner selection, individuals with an elevated risk for relationship problems. In the present studies, we aim to advance our understanding of the associations between cognitive tendencies, personality traits, relationship outcomes, and the mechanisms by which they operate.

4. The connection between cognitive tendencies and forgiveness

In contrast to the broader literature on couples, forgiveness research has made substantial progress in understanding how general cognitive

tendencies and personality traits can facilitate or inhibit forgiveness. Among the factors that inhibit forgiveness, a person's cognitive tendencies may be one of the most influential because forgiveness is an intrapersonal process with behavioral consequences. In nearly all conceptualizations of forgiveness, forgiveness entails a shift away from hostile thoughts and actions toward a transgressor (Kearns & Fincham, 2004); in some conceptualizations it also includes a shift past neutrality toward more pro-social cognitions and behaviors (McCullough, Fincham, & Tsang, 2003). This shift can be hindered or helped by how the offended person perceives the offense and the transgressor. For example, researchers have found that pro-relationship cognitions facilitate forgiveness, while being mistrustful and self-protective inhibits forgiveness (Gerlach, Allemand, Agroskin, & Denissen, 2012).

A more general cognitive tendency that has been repeatedly shown to influence forgiveness is the tendency to ruminate. McCullough et al. (1998) showed that rumination was related to decreased forgiveness and more retaliatory impulses toward an offender. However, Kachadourian, Fincham, and Davila (2005) found that the tendency to ruminate only impacted forgiveness in couples when it interacted with ambivalence toward the partner. There is also some evidence that rumination decreases over time in response to increases in forgiveness (McCullough et al., 1998).

To date, forgiveness researchers have examined the association between non-specific ruminative tendencies and forgiveness but they have not considered how specific forms of rumination may impact forgiveness. Because rumination has been linked to various problematic interpersonal behaviors and outcomes, and a number of different types of rumination may exist (Watkins, 2008), it is important to explore other forms of rumination in the context of forgiveness. In the present research, we examined catastrophizing or the ruminative tendency to chronically emphasize the potentially negative implications or consequences of an event (Garnefski, Kraaij, & Spinhoven, 2001). For example, a typical response to an interpersonal transgression for someone who has a tendency to catastrophize would be repetitively thinking “This is the absolute worst thing my partner could have done!” Since previous research has shown that the tendency to ruminate on partner transgressions decreases forgiveness, it is likely that catastrophizing may have a similar effect.

But perhaps research on these proximal cognitive tendencies reflects a higher order trait that has been well studied in the couple literature: neuroticism. Neuroticism is a personality trait marked by a tendency to experience high, enduring levels of negative emotion, especially in response to stress (Fisher & McNulty, 2008). Neuroticism is often framed as the opposite of “emotional stability”. A person high in emotional stability is less likely to perceive offense or to experience persisting distress after some negative event. In contrast, negative events tend to be more distressing to neurotic individuals, they tend to be more likely to perceive offense, and negative emotions tend to “stick” to them for longer. Prominent researchers of this trait have suggested that “many studies of the relation between negative affectivity and adverse outcomes focus on fine-grained traits that might be considered facets of neuroticism” (Lahey, 2009, p. 241). Neuroticism has been shown in a number of studies to be a potent predictor of relationship satisfaction, even over a span of 50 years (Kelly & Conley, 1987). Furthermore, neuroticism correlates substantially with depression and anxiety (Kendler, Neale, Kessler, Heath, & Eaves, 1993; Khan, Jacobson, Gardner, Prescott, & Kendler, 2005) and these conditions have also demonstrated associations with rumination (Nolan, Roberts, & Gotlib, 1998) and catastrophizing (Goubert, Crombez, & Van Damme, 2004). Research has also shown that neuroticism is related to decreased forgiveness through angry hostility (Brose, Rye, Lutz-Zois, & Ross, 2005) and vengeful ruminations (Berry, Worthington, O'Connor, Parrott, & Wade, 2005). Moreover, it is possible that what researchers have called “trait forgiveness” is actually just reflective of low levels of neuroticism given the established correlation between forgiveness and neuroticism (Brown, 2003; Steiner, Allemand, & McCullough, 2011).

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