



# Individual differences in implicit theories of relationships and partner fit: Predicting forgiveness in developing relationships

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## ABSTRACT

Extending past research on implicit theories of relationships (ITRs), we investigated how the role played by partner fit in predicting forgiveness varies as a function of individual differences in beliefs about the nature of relationships. We focused on developing relationships ( $M_{\text{Duration}} = 2$  months) to examine our proposed hypothesis that strong soulmate theorists, relative to weak soulmate theorists, rely heavily on information about partner fit in deciding whether to forgive. In contrast, work-it-out theorists' decisions about forgiveness do not vary as a function of partner fit. Results supported predictions. Soulmate beliefs, but not work-it-out beliefs, moderated the relation between partner fit and forgiveness. This research suggests that in developing relationships, individual differences in soulmate theories influence the role played by partner evaluations in the forgiveness process. Implications for relationship satisfaction and longevity are discussed.

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## 1. Introduction

Partner offenses are a nearly inevitable aspect of involvement in romantic relationships (Holmes & Murray, 1996). Responding to these offenses with forgiveness is associated with mental (Worthington, Witvliet, Pietrini, & Miller, 2007), physical (Lawler et al., 2003; Worthington & Scherer, 2004), and interpersonal well-being (Williamson & Gonzales, 2007). However, despite these benefits, gut-level impulses in the wake of conflict tend towards retaliation (Finkel, Rusbult, Kumashiro, & Hannon, 2002). Fortunately, after initial unforgiving motivations are evoked, individuals are willing to work towards forgiveness if the relationship and offender are valued (McCullough, 2008).

What influences these perceptions and predicts motivation to forgive? Research suggests that determinants include, for example, personality traits (e.g., Big Five; McCullough & Hoyt, 2002; Mullet, Neto, & Riviere, 2005), relationship functioning (e.g., commitment; Finkel et al., 2002) and features of the offense (e.g., severity; Williamson & Gonzales, 2007). Research has also recognized the importance of social cognitive variables (e.g., empathy; McCullough, Worthington, & Rachal, 1997) including recent research on the role that beliefs about the meaning of relationships play in

the forgiveness process (Finkel, Burnette, & Scissors, 2007). Building on existing research, we propose that willingness to forgive interpersonal offenses is influenced by individual differences in beliefs about the nature of relationships (*implicit theories of relationships*) and by aspects of the relationship, namely perceptions about whether one's current romantic partner is close to ideal (*partner fit*). Specifically, we investigate the idea that, in developing relationships, partner fit is an important component of the forgiveness process. We also suggest that partner fit is especially relevant when deciding whether to forgive for individuals who strongly believe that relationships are meant to be (soulmate theorists). In the next section, we review relevant literature before conceptualizing the current work.

### 1.1. Implicit theories

Individuals hold implicit theories of diverse human characteristics (e.g., intelligence) and these theories vary in the degree to which personal traits are viewed as fixed, called an *entity* theory, or viewed as malleable, called an *incremental* theory (Dweck & Leggett, 1988). The implicit theory approach has been extended beyond academic achievement to understand motivation and behavior in an array of domains including, for example, person perception (e.g., Dweck, Hong, & Chiu, 1993) and negotiation (Kray & Haselhuhn, 2007). What is more closely related to the current research is a new and rapidly expanding literature that demonstrates how implicit theories predict relationship outcomes (e.g., Franiuk,

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Cohen, & Pomerantz, 2002; Knee, 1998; Knee, Patrick, & Lonsbary, 2003).

Implicit theories of relationships (ITRs) are loosely derived from Dweck and Leggett's (1988) entity and incremental theories of personality. Individuals vary in the degree to which they subscribe to beliefs that romantic relationships are or are not meant to be (soulmate or destiny theory) and to beliefs about whether relationships benefit from the effortful resolution of challenges (work-it-out or growth theory). We adopt the terminology of Franiuk and colleagues' work (2002), referring to these beliefs as soulmate and work-it-out theories. These beliefs represent conceptually distinct dimensions rather than two ends of a single continuum. That is, individuals can believe in both soulmate theories and work-it-out theories. For example, an individual might believe that there is one partner who is right for them and also believe that their relationship with that partner will grow and develop as they work to overcome challenges together. Additionally implicit theories, like other types of schemas and beliefs, can be seen as both stable over time and temporarily accessible situation-level constructs (Franiuk, Pomerantz, & Cohen, 2004). Although research on ITRs suggests that after reading persuasive arguments for a particular theory, participants can be led to temporarily adopt that mode of thought, ITRs are relatively stable across time with test–retest reliabilities ranging from .40 to .74 (Franiuk et al., 2002; Knee, 1998). In the current study, we focus on the stable individual difference in relationship beliefs.

### 1.2. Implicit theories and relationship outcomes

Regardless of whether implicit theories of relationships are induced or assessed, differences in these beliefs influence the meaning assigned to events and consequently predict satisfaction, coping, and longevity in relationships (e.g., Knee & Canevello, 2006; Knee et al., 2003). Although a cursory analysis might lead one to think these beliefs directly influence relationship outcomes, more often they work through interaction and/or mediation effects (Knee & Canevello, 2006). An especially relevant consideration for soulmate theorists is the degree to which their partner matches their ideal (*partner fit*). For example, perceived partner fit, as assessed by the discrepancy between one's current partner and ideal partner, predicted relationship satisfaction for strong relative to weak destiny theorists (conceptually similar to soulmate theorists; Knee, Nanayakkara, Vietor, Neighbors, & Patrick, 2001). Similarly, strong, relative to weak, soulmate theorists who reported their specific partner was ideal also reported more relationship satisfaction and longevity (Franiuk et al., 2002). Additionally, in an experimental study, participants induced to hold a soulmate theory reported greater satisfaction to the degree they reported their partner to be close to ideal. In contrast, across studies, work-it-out theorists did not report fluctuations in relationship outcomes (e.g., satisfaction) as a function of partner fit (e.g., Franiuk et al., 2004; Knee, 1998).

Researchers have also found that ITRs and partner fit play an important role in helping individuals cope with relationship conflict. For example, soulmate theorists who believed that their partner was an ideal match for them engaged in relationship enhancing cognitions to maintain their relationship in response to conflict (Franiuk et al., 2004). In contrast, soulmate theorists who believed that their relationship partner was not an ideal match for them used relationship-detracting cognitive strategies. Inducing individuals to hold a work-it-out theory did not lead to biased processing based on partner fit (Franiuk et al., 2004). Similar patterns emerge when examining the interaction of implicit theories and anxious partner attachment in predicting forgiveness following interpersonal hurts. In the wake of partner betrayals, individuals with strong destiny beliefs, relative to weak destiny beliefs, report less

trust for their partner and reduced forgiveness when experiencing partner specific attachment anxiety. However, for growth theorists, forgiveness and trust do not differ as a function of attachment anxiety (Finkel et al., 2007). Work-it-out or growth theorists do not assign the same level of importance to partner evaluations as soulmate or destiny theorists.

Although past research has investigated the relation between ITRs, conflict and forgiveness, this research has yet to examine the direct effect of partner fit on forgiveness or the moderating role of ITRs in explaining the partner fit and forgiveness association. Additionally, research has not specifically investigated how implicit theories may function in fledgling relationships. In past studies examining the interplay between ITRs and partner fit, researchers have included participants from various stages of relationship development focusing on relationship maintenance in ongoing established relationships and/or examining relationship dissolution (e.g., Knee et al., 2001; Franiuk et al., 2002, 2004). However, recent research has recognized the need for more empirical work during the initiation phases of relationships (Sprecher, Wenzel, & Harvey, 2008). Building on this, we propose examining the interplay between implicit theories and partner fit in predicting forgiveness during relationship initiation stages. We focus on early relationships because it is during this stage that individuals should be vigilant about partner fit, especially strong soulmate theorists. These evaluations should, in turn, be important for forgiveness.

### 1.3. Overview and hypotheses

Specifically, we propose that partner fit will directly predict forgiveness such that believing one's partner is close to ideal will be related to greater forgiveness. Additionally, we suggest that the partner fit-forgiveness association will be moderated by ITRs. Specifically, we suggest that strong, relative to weak soulmate theorists' forgiveness will vary as a function of partner fit. When partner fit is high, soulmate theorists should be interested in maintaining the relationships in the wake of conflict. In contrast, when soulmate theorists are experiencing doubts about their partner, they are especially likely to interpret the offense as indicative of a future filled with unpleasant interactions and thus are more likely to respond with unforgiving sentiments. We base our predictions on (a) research suggesting that soulmate beliefs stem from the stability of impressions, with an emphasis on determining the compatibility of a potential partner based on discrete events (Finkel et al., 2007), and (b) an evolutionary theory that emphasizes the importance of valuing the relationship with the offender for forgiveness (McCullough, 2008).

In contrast to soulmate beliefs, work-it-out beliefs stem from the stability of obstacles with emphasis on development through overcoming challenges (Franiuk et al., 2002; Knee & Canevello, 2006). One might speculate that work-it-out theorists' orientation towards overcoming obstacles as a way to develop a relationship would directly predict forgiveness. However, in line with past ITR and forgiveness research, we suggest that work-it-out theorists should not automatically forgive an offense but rather should be oriented towards active conflict resolution (Finkel et al., 2007; Knee, Patrick, Vietor, & Neighbors, 2004). Additionally, work-it-out theorists are expected neither to be reactive to the vulnerability associated with doubts about one's partner nor to use current perceptions of their partner early in the relationship to diagnose long-term prospects when deciding whether to forgive an offense. Thus, although we expect partner fit to be a direct predictor of forgiveness and especially relevant for strong soulmate theorists, relative to weak soulmate theorists, we do not expect partner fit to interact with work-it-out theories to predict forgiveness.

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