



# Effects of partner forgiveness on romantic break-ups in dating relationships: A longitudinal study



Tsukasa Kato

Department of Social Psychology, Toyo University, 5–28–20 Hakusan, Bunkyo-ku, Tokyo 112–8606, Japan

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## ABSTRACT

Researchers of romantic relationships have highlighted the role of forgiveness in relationship maintenance. However, to our knowledge, there has not yet been a study conducted to examine the relationship between forgiveness and romantic relationship dissolution in a longitudinal context. Participants ( $N = 344$ ) completed scales related to forgiveness of a partner, relationship satisfaction, and romantic love, and provided their relationship status 10 months after completing the survey. A multivariate logistic regression analysis revealed that participants' scores on two dimensions of forgiveness were significantly associated with a low risk of break-up 10 months later, even after controlling for the effects of relationship duration, relationship satisfaction, and romantic love. Our findings suggest that forgiving a partner is an important factor in maintaining romantic relationships.

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## 1. Introduction

In previous research on conflict, communication, or conflict resolution in a romantic relationship context, a number of studies have focused on relationship stability (for reviews, see Fincham & Beach, 1999; Gottman & Notarius, 2002). Several theoretical frameworks, such as demand–withdraw communication (Eldridge & Christensen, 2002; Sullaway & Christensen, 1983), dyadic coping (see Bodenmann, 2005; Bodenmann & Randall, 2012), and the communal coping approach (see Lewis et al., 2006), explain the mechanism by which a partner's negative behavior or poor communication during romantic relationship conflicts—that is, conflict strategies—leads to divorce, separation, or break-up (Karney & Bradbury, 1995). In fact, there is considerable evidence that conflict strategies predict dissolution of dating (for a review, see Welsh and Shulman, 2008) and marital relationships (for reviews, see Gottman & Notarius, 2002; Karney & Bradbury, 1995).

### 1.1. Forgiveness as a coping strategy

Researchers (e.g. McCullough, Worthington, & Rachal, 1997; McCullough et al., 1998; Wieselquist, 2009) have highlighted the role of forgiveness in relationship maintenance, with some focusing on the function of forgiveness as an important strategy to address conflicts in romantic relationships. In line with the stress-and-coping theory of forgiveness, which was proposed by Worthington and colleagues

(Worthington, 2006; Worthington & Scherer, 2004) and has been used in other theoretical reviews (e.g., Strelan & Covic, 2006), we considered forgiveness as a type of coping strategy that is used in response to the interpersonal stressors of transgressions, betrayals, offenses, and wrongs. Strelan and Covic (2006) defined forgiveness as “the process of neutralizing a stressor that has resulted from a perception of an interpersonal hurt” (p. 1076). According to a theoretical framework on coping with interpersonal stress that was proposed by Kato (2013, 2014), forgiveness is included in constructive coping, which refers to actively seeking to improve, maintain, or sustain a relationship without aggravating others when encountering an interpersonal stressor.

Other researchers (e.g., Fincham, Beach, & Davila, 2004; McNulty, 2008, 2011) have provided evidence that forgiving a partner promotes positive conflict strategies or reduces negative conflict strategies. For example, a longitudinal study (Fincham, Beach, & Davila, 2007) found that higher levels of forgiveness in married couples were associated with lower levels of ineffective conflict strategies 12 months later. In addition, Hannon and colleagues (Hannon, Finkel, Kumashiro, & Rusbult, 2014) found that dispositional forgiveness was associated with a partner's conciliatory behavior when participants were primed with the scenario that their spouse broke the rules of their marriage. Other studies (e.g., McCullough et al., 1997) have also suggested that forgiveness promotes reconciliation behaviors toward the offender in a romantic relationship. Thus, forgiveness functions as an effective coping strategy for maintaining or improving a romantic relationship.

According to the transactional theory proposed by Lazarus and colleagues (Lazarus, 1999; Lazarus & Folkman, 1984), coping behavior is defined as “constantly changing cognitive and behavioral efforts to manage specific external and/or internal demands that are appraised

E-mail address: [mtsukasa@hotmail.com](mailto:mtsukasa@hotmail.com).

as taxing or exceeding the resources of the person” (p. 141, Lazarus, 1999). The transactional theory hypothesizes that the coping strategy employed changes according to the specific characteristics of stressful situations, and that it also changes over time in response to the same stressful event. Stressful episodes may repeatedly occur in a close relationship, and each time a person then determines whether to forgive his or her partner (i.e., whether to use forgiveness as a coping strategy). Thus, individual differences in forgiveness as a coping strategy can be assessed as the frequency of use of forgiveness.

### 1.2. Forgiveness and relationship satisfaction and stability

The current study focused on two elements of forgiveness that were proposed by Fincham and colleagues (Fincham, 2000, 2009; Fincham, Hall, & Beach, 2006) to promote not only reductions in negative responses but also increases in goodwill toward an intimate in close relationships: benevolence and unforgiveness. Fincham and colleagues stated that, although forgiveness research has primarily highlighted reductions in negative motivation toward the transgressor, positive motivation also plays an important role when the transgressor is an intimate partner. This is because, in close relationships, reductions in negative motivation alone are insufficient for relationship repair, given that they imply a return to a state of neutrality rather than positivity toward one's romantic partner.

A number of studies have shown that a greater tendency to forgive one's partner is associated with higher levels of relationship satisfaction or quality (for a meta-analytic review, see Fehr, Gelfand, & Nag, 2010), which are needed to retain romantic or marital stability. For example, in a sample of university students in committed romantic relationships, Braithwaite and colleagues (Braithwaite, Selby, & Fincham, 2011) found that the tendency to forgive a partner increased relationship satisfaction through decreasing negative conflict strategies (e.g., demand/withdraw, nonconstructive communication, and avoidance behaviors). Another researcher (Wieselquist, 2009) demonstrated that forgiveness promotes one's trust in a partner, which enhances dating relationship satisfaction. In a meta-analytic study (Fehr et al., 2010), the weighted mean of the correlations between forgiveness and relationship satisfaction was found to be .36 (95% CI [.27, .44],  $k$  effect sizes = 21,  $n$  = 3678). Furthermore, it is known that relationship quality is associated with romantic stability. For example, a meta-analytic examination (Karney & Bradbury, 1995) of longitudinal studies showed that marital satisfaction promoted marital relationship maintenance.

To our knowledge, no longitudinal study has examined the relationship between forgiveness of a partner and romantic relationship dissolutions. However, one cross-sectional study (Hall & Fincham, 2006) showed that individuals who broke up following a partner's infidelity tended to report lower levels of forgiveness of a partner's infidelity than did those who stayed together (statistical test results were not provided). On the basis of the above research on conflict strategies and satisfaction, we hypothesized in the current study that benevolence toward one's partner, as one element of forgivingness, would promote romantic relationship maintenance, and that unforgiveness of one's partner would increase the risk of relationship dissolution in dating couples. The current study controlled for relationship satisfaction and experiences of romantic love, both of which are centrally important to romantic relationship change. In fact, previous studies (e.g. LeBel & Campbell, 2009; Salvatore et al., 2011; Sprecher, 1999) have shown that relationship satisfaction and romantic love predict relationship stability in dating couples.

## 2. Method

### 2.1. Participants and procedure

Participants ( $N$  = 371), whose ages ranged from 18 to 28 years, were recruited from several Japanese colleges. A requirement for

participation was involvement in a romantic, committed heterosexual relationship. None of the 371 participants were married, and all were born in Japan and indicated that their ethnicity was Japanese. They completed measures related to forgiveness of, relationship satisfaction with, and romantic love for their partner (Time 1). Approximately 10 months after the survey was completed (Time 2), the participants were asked whether or not they were still in a committed relationship with the same partner from Time 1 and then completed several questionnaires. Of the 371 participants, 27 dropped out of the study before completing the questionnaire at Time 2 for unknown reasons. The final sample included 344 participants (men = 165, women = 179;  $M$  = 19.34 years,  $SD$  = 1.61), with a mean romantic relationship duration at Time 1 of 8.90 months ( $SD$  = 12.14).

All procedures followed were in accordance with the ethical standards of the responsible committee on human experimentation (institutional and national) and with the Helsinki Declaration of 1975, as revised in 2000. Informed consent was obtained from all participants for being included in the current study. All participants received a pen valued at ¥100 (approximately \$1.25 USD) for taking part in each part of the survey at Times 1 and 2 (i.e., two pens per person).

### 2.2. Measures

Three native Japanese-speaking psychologists independently translated all measures into Japanese, and the measures were then back-translated into English by a native English-speaking psychologist. After the back-translation, the original and back-translated questionnaires were compared for discrepancies. Modifications were made to the translated questionnaires after discussion among the translators.

#### 2.2.1. Relationship status

Relationship status was assessed at Time 2 by asking participants whether or not they were still in a relationship with the same partner. Responses were coded as 0 = no and 1 = yes. The period of time between Times 1 and 2 was determined based on previous studies (e.g. Appel & Shulman, 2015; Ha, Overbeek, Lichtwarck-Aschoff, & Engels, 2013; LeBel & Campbell, 2009; Salvatore et al., 2011; Weisskirch & Delevi, 2013) of romantic stability in young adults. A 12-month time period was used most frequently in these previous studies.

#### 2.2.2. Forgiveness of partner

The self-report Forgiveness of Partner Scale (FPS; Kato, 2015) is designed to measure the propensity of individuals to forgive their partner in a romantic or marital relationship who has committed a transgression. The FPS comprises two subscales (Appendix A) of benevolence (five items) and unforgiveness (five items), which are consistent with the two dimensions of forgiveness in close relationships that were proposed by Fincham and colleagues (Fincham, 2000, 2009; Fincham et al., 2006). The two subscales of the FPS have been found to be significantly correlated with personality traits, relationship satisfaction with one's partner, and empathy for the partner's actions, all of which are theoretically related constructs (Kato, 2015). In a sample of Japanese college students (Study 1 in Kato, 2015), the Cronbach's alphas for benevolence and unforgiveness subscales were .81 and .83, respectively.

Participants in the current study rated their response to each item using a 4-point Likert scale ranging from 0 (*disagree*) to 3 (*strongly agree*). The instructions were as follows: “Please recall the specifics of your own experiences of negative events occurring in the relationship with your partner, or offenses by a partner with whom you are currently involve in a committed relationship. Please read each item and indicate to what extent you used that strategy in the situations you encountered.” In this way, the current study measured trait forgiveness, that is, the degree to which participants tended to forgive negative events or offenses that were caused by a specific partner. In the current

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