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# Forgiveness in marriage: Implications for psychological aggression and constructive communication

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## Abstract

Two studies examined whether forgiveness in married couples predicted partner reports of psychological aggression and constructive communication. Study 1 found that forgiveness of hypothetical acts of psychological aggression predicted partner reports of psychological aggression. Study 2 examined actual transgressions and found two underlying dimensions of forgiveness (positive and negative). The negative dimension predicted partner reports of psychological aggression, and, for husbands, the positive dimension predicted partner reports of constructive communication. All findings were independent of both spouses' marital satisfaction. The implications for understanding marital interaction and future research on forgiveness are discussed.

Marital conflict and marital communication have been at the forefront of marital research for the past 25 years, yielding a relatively clear picture of the topography of functional and dysfunctional patterns of behavior (Fincham & Beach, 1999). However, considerable room remains to better explain the observed patterns. Paradoxically, those we love are the ones we are most likely to hurt and may not always be the ones with whom we communicate most effectively. For example, verbal aggression is reported by 75% of men and 80% of women in a U.S. sample (Stets, 1990). This last observation is particularly sobering in light of Murphy and O'Leary's (1989) finding that psychological aggression in marriage (verbal aggression and nonverbal behaviors

that are not directed at the partner's body) predicts the occurrence of the first act of physical aggression. In addition, psychological aggression may exacerbate the effects of physical aggression (Arias & Pape, 2001). Finally, the victims of psychological aggression suffer deleterious effects and often judge psychological aggression as worse than physical aggression (see Murphy & Cascardi, 1993; O'Leary & Jouriles, 1994). Not surprisingly, psychological aggression (Murphy & O'Leary, 1989) and patterns of nonconstructive communication and withdrawal are linked to marital dissatisfaction (Roberts & Krokoff, 1990). Thus, a better understanding of the occurrence of psychological aggression and nonconstructive patterns of communication in marriage and identification of the contributory factors to this behavior are important in their own right as well as because of links to subsequent difficulties.

Forgiveness is a construct that might help us understand the occurrence of psychological aggression and general patterns of communication in marriage. That is, in addition to whatever role forgiveness may play in the aftermath of psychological aggression, it may

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also play an important role in setting the conditions for psychologically aggressive interactions in marriage. Although it is a complex construct without a consensual definition, at the center of various approaches to forgiveness is the idea of a transformation in which motivation to seek revenge and to avoid contact with the transgressor is lessened. This core feature immediately distinguishes forgiveness from constructs such as condoning (which removes the offense) and reconciliation (which restores a relationship and is therefore a dyadic process). At the same time, it allows the role of many features previously included in definitions of forgiveness (e.g., intentionality) to be investigated empirically. Whereas condoning or accepting partner psychological aggression may represent a form of inappropriate accommodation to abuse, forgiveness represents a willingness to exit from a potential cycle of abuse and recrimination.

Indirect evidence supports the importance of forgiveness in understanding aggression as well as more general patterns of communication. VanOyen Vitvliet and Ludwig (2001) showed that engaging in forgiving imagery (empathizing with the offender, granting forgiveness), relative to unforgiving imagery (rehearsing hurts, nursing grudges), is associated with less reported anger and sadness. Anger has also been shown to decline following a forgiveness intervention (e.g., Freedman & Enright, 1996). In short, forgiveness sets the stage for possible reconciliation with the transgressor, suggesting that it may have substantial implications for relationship outcomes (Worthington & Wade, 1999), as well as influencing both the propensity to engage in psychological aggression and the motivation to avoid the partner. In support of this view, spouses report that the capacity to seek and grant forgiveness is one of the most important factors contributing to marital longevity and satisfaction (Fenell, 1993).

#### *Forgiving in close relationships*

There is some direct evidence on the importance of forgiveness in close relationships. Initial studies show that forgiveness is related

to relationship well-being. For example, McCullough, Rachal, Sandage, Worthington, Brown, and Hight (1998) found that a composite measure of relationship commitment and satisfaction was negatively related to reported avoidance and revenge following a recent hurt and the worst relationship hurt as identified by participants in a romantic relationship. Importantly, pre- and posttransgression closeness were related, in part, through forgiveness. Worthington (1998), presenting a regression analysis of the same data, showed that forgiveness accounted for variance in current relationship closeness after relationship length, pretransgression closeness, characteristics of the hurt (impact and depth), and events since the hurt (apology and time since transgression) were entered into the regression equation. Thus, forgiving does appear to promote reconciliation (closeness).

Fincham (2000) also found that forgiveness and marital satisfaction were related and went on to show that forgiveness predicted overall behavior toward the partner independently of marital satisfaction. Moreover, forgiveness fully mediated the relationship between responsibility attributions for partner behavior and reported behavior toward the partner. Finally, Kelly (1998) found that in narratives about forgiveness (96% of which involved close relationships), most motivations for forgiveness mentioned love, restoration of the relationship, or partner well-being (71%). These motivations suggest that forgiveness, as compared to its absence, is less likely to result in relationship aggression and is more likely to promote engaging in discussion with the partner.

#### *The need for a bidimensional characterization of forgiveness*

Although the construct of forgiveness has the potential to advance understanding of relationship aggression, this potential may be limited by current unidimensional conceptualizations of forgiveness used in research. Specifically, most researchers conceptualize forgiveness in terms of unforgiveness (i.e., revenge/retaliation and/or avoidance of a transgressor). But overcoming the resentment,

anger, retaliatory impulses, and so on of unforgiveness may be viewed as reflecting only one dimension of forgiveness. This dimension can be conceptualized as neutralizing an avoidance goal (rejection of the negative portrayal of the self reflected in the psychologically abusive behavior) and thereby removing the internal barrier to relatedness that was caused by a transgression. Perhaps because avoidance goals have an inherent primacy, measurement of forgiveness has focused on this negative dimension (e.g., McCullough et al., 1998) and a great deal of what has been learned about forgiveness rests on inferences made from the absence of a negative motivational orientation toward the harm-doer. Likewise, the reduction of negative motivation toward the partner may be critical if couples are to exit from the tit-for-tat mode of interaction that characterizes much of the problem-focused behavior of distressed couples.

Fundamental to forgiveness, however, is “an attitude of real goodwill towards the offender as a person” (Holmgren, 1993, p. 342). Forgiveness thus entails a positive motivational state toward the harm-doer that is not achieved simply by the lack of an avoidance goal or negative motivational state. Rather the positive dimension of forgiveness provides the motivational foundation for approach behavior. Because approach behavior appears to be subsumed by a different motivational system than is avoidance behavior (Gray, 1987), it is likely to be necessary to measure any such positive dimension of forgiveness directly, and not merely infer it from the absence of the negative dimension. Likewise, ambivalence may be a rather different motivational state than is strong negative motivation in the absence of positive motivation (Fincham, Beach, & Kemp-Fincham, 1997). Accordingly, although the tendency to impose a bipolar structure on constructs in social science is also evident in the forgiveness literature, forgiveness cannot be understood completely by studying unforgiveness, just as marital quality cannot be fully understood by the study of negative feelings toward the partner or optimism by the study of learned helplessness (Fincham,

2000). Second, negative and positive dimensions of forgiveness may have different determinants, correlates, and consequences. For example, it can be hypothesized that negative and positive dimensions of forgiveness predict avoidance/vengeance and conciliatory behaviors, respectively.

The potential of forgiveness to advance understanding of close relationships is also limited by overreliance on a single research method. In particular, data on forgiveness in close relationships is often restricted to examination of associations among variables obtained from a single source. Because forgiveness is usually conceptualized as an intrapersonal variable, albeit with an interpersonal referent, self-reported forgiveness seems quite appropriate. However, it is important to disentangle the source of data for forgiveness from the source of data on its correlates. Obtaining information from the partner about likely correlates of self-reported forgiveness helps considerably with the “shared-method” problem that characterizes much research on forgiveness to date.

#### *Predicting psychological aggression from forgiveness*

In the context of “common couple aggression,” the mix of physical and psychological aggression that emerges in surveys of the community (Johnson, 1995), a pattern in which one partner’s forgiveness is related to the other’s psychological aggression may be predicted. Because most common couple violence comprises reciprocal acts of rapidly escalating aggression, psychological aggression in such contexts is so highly reciprocal that it can be modeled as a property of the couple (Murphy & Blumenthal, 2000). Therefore, either partner could likely act as a “circuit breaker,” leading to a rapid de-escalation of the exchange. The ability of one spouse to forgive the partner for negative behavior, therefore, might lead to less negative behavior in the other. Indeed, if coercive, self-defensive goals that emerge in the context of conflictual interaction with the partner maintain psychological aggression (cf. Fincham & Beach, 1999); one partner’s stylistic

tendency to forgive should be the best antidote to the other's use of psychological aggression. Thus, one might legitimately ask whether one spouse's forgiveness is related to the psychologically aggressive behavior of the partner. Specifically, one might hypothesize that a partner's report of forgiving the other's transgressions would be inversely associated with the other's self-reports of psychological aggression. As this characterization of psychological aggression suggests, it is the willingness to forgo retaliation that should be pivotal in understanding low levels of psychological aggression. When one partner opts out of the reciprocal cycle of rapidly escalating psychological aggression, the other should be less likely to engage in psychological aggression.

In the context of marital interaction and communication, it is also important to determine whether the construct of forgiveness adds conceptual value in a landscape already littered with conceptually overlapping constructs (Fincham & Bradbury, 1987; Gottman, 1998). Most notably, it is often useful to require that constructs do more than capture variance in commonly used measures of relationship satisfaction. In the case of forgiveness predicting partner psychological aggression, a stringent test of "surplus conceptual value" can be provided by controlling the marital satisfaction of both partners in the relationship.

The present studies therefore attempt to examine positive and negative dimensions of forgiveness in married couples to determine whether they predict partner reports of psychological aggression and constructive communication.

## Study 1

This analogue study examined positive and negative dimensions of forgiveness in response to hypothetical acts of psychological aggression performed by the partner. It was hypothesized that positive and negative dimensions of forgiveness would be moderately and inversely correlated. It was also predicted that responses to transgressions along both dimensions of forgiveness would be related to partner reports

of psychological aggression in the marriage. Finally, this study provided the opportunity to replicate the relation previously found between marital satisfaction and psychological aggression.

## Method

### *Subjects*

Forty-four couples, who had been recruited for a study on early marriage, participated in the study. Couples were in the first year of marriage and were recruited from registry records in South Wales, Great Britain. Husbands averaged 30.17 ( $SD = 5.51$ ) and wives 28.38 ( $SD = 5.15$ ) years of age. The modal spouse, whether husband or wife, had completed a post-high school diploma.

### *Measures*

*Psychological aggression.* The Spouse Specific Aggression Scale (O'Leary & Curly, 1986) was used to measure psychological aggression. Several studies have shown that the scale differentiates groups hypothesized to have different levels of psychological aggression (e.g., physically abusive vs. nonphysically abusive men; see O'Leary, 1999). Respondents rate the extent to which each of 12 statements is "characteristic" or "descriptive" of them (e.g., "I often make threats to my mate that I really don't intend to carry out," "I often say nasty things to my mate, especially when I am angrily discussing something with him/her"). In the present sample, internal consistency of the scale was high (coefficient alpha was .89 and .87 for husbands and wives, respectively).

*Forgiveness.* Positive and negative dimensions of forgiveness were examined in relation to two acts of psychological aggression ("Your partner swears at you or insults you," "Your partner threatens to hit you or throw something at you"). Spouses were asked to imagine each event occurring and to indicate the likelihood of each of two responses to each act. Two action tendencies were then assessed: One response asked about

a positive action tendency (“I would forgive my partner for this behavior”) and one asked about a negative tendency (“I would retaliate in some way to get my own back—e.g., be verbally aggressive, destroy something my partner valued”). Respondents indicated the likelihood of responding in the manner described on a 6-point scale ranging from 1 = *not at all likely* to 6 = *very likely*. The positive dimension and negative dimension responses were summed across the stimulus items yielding a single measure for each dimension. Higher scores indicated greater forgiveness and greater retaliation, respectively.

*Marital satisfaction.* The Marital Adjustment Test (MAT; Locke & Wallace, 1959) is a frequently used measure of marital quality. Locke and Wallace reported split-half reliability of .90, and found that the MAT discriminated between couples “judged to be exceptionally well-adjusted in marriage by friends who knew them well” and participants who “were known to be maladjusted in marriage” (p. 254). The MAT also correlates with clinicians’ judgments of marital discord (Crowther, 1985). Scores vary from 2 to 158, with higher scores reflecting greater satisfaction.

**Study 1 Results and Discussion**

Table 1 shows the correlations among psychological aggression, marital quality, and positive and negative forgiveness dimensions.

In keeping with our first hypothesis, there was a relatively small negative correlation between positive and negative forgiveness dimensions for both husbands (−.28) and wives (−.21). Moreover, husbands’ forgiveness correlated with wives’ reports of their psychological aggression toward the husband (−.48), whereas wives’ retaliation correlated with husbands’ reports of psychological aggression toward the wife (.38). This pattern of findings provides some support for assessing positive and negative dimensions separately and suggests that they are not simply mirror images of each other.

The above-described pattern of interspouse correlations also speaks to the second hypothesis concerning the relation between partner reports of psychological aggression and dimensions of forgiveness. That is, positive and negative dimensions of forgiveness appear to be related to the likelihood of partner psychological aggression. It remains, however, to examine this hypothesis in a multivariate context. In particular, it is important to examine both dimensions of forgiveness simultaneously as well as to control for any influence of marital satisfaction. If dimensions of forgiveness are unrelated to partner response after controlling for level of marital satisfaction, this would suggest that the observed relationship was mediated by the effect on marital satisfaction rather than being attributable to the direct effect of forgiveness on partner aggression. Thus, regression analyses were conducted in which partner reports

**Table 1.** *Correlations among psychological aggression and forgiveness dimensions*

Variable	2	3	4	5	6	7	8
1. Husband aggression	.46*	.35*	−.24	.38*	.08	−.53*	−.27
2. Wife aggression		.05	−.48*	.31*	.16	−.45*	−.45*
3. Husband negative forgiveness			−.28	.12	.10	−.34*	−.07
4. Husband positive forgiveness				−.12	.22	.33*	.34*
5. Wife negative forgiveness					−.21	−.27	−.13
6. Wife positive forgiveness						−.18	−.16
7. Husband satisfaction							.31*
8. Wife satisfaction							

\* *p* < .05.

of psychological aggression were predicted from own and partner satisfaction, and from reports of forgiveness and retaliation following the partner transgressions. The unique variance associated with satisfaction scores and forgiveness dimensions was obtained by omitting each pair of predictor variables from the equation and recomputing the equation. The change in  $R^2$  is the amount of unique variance associated with the pair of predictor variables.

Table 2 shows the results of these analyses. The pattern of findings noted at the bivariate level held at the multivariate level despite the fact that marital satisfaction was a significant predictor for husbands and for wives. Husbands' self-reported willingness to forgive (i.e., the positive dimension of forgiveness) was a significant predictor of partner psychological aggression ( $\beta = -.34$ ,  $t = 2.4$ ,  $p < .05$ ) even after controlling for the satisfaction of both partners. The negative dimension of forgiveness (retaliation) was not a significant predictor for husbands. Conversely, wives' self-report of retaliation (i.e., the negative dimension of forgiveness) was a significant predictor of partner psychological aggression ( $\beta = .29$ ,  $t = 2.2$ ,  $p < .05$ ) in the multi-variate context, whereas wives' self-report of the positive dimension was not. In addition, for husbands' forgiveness variables predicting wife psychological aggression, the set was only marginally significant ( $p < .06$ ).

Finally, the relation previously found between marital satisfaction and psychological aggression was replicated (wives:  $-.45$ ; husbands:  $-.53$ ). As might be expected, support was also obtained to show that psychological aggression was related to partner satisfaction. Wives' reports of their psychological aggression were also related to husbands' reports of satisfaction,  $r(44) = -.45$ ,  $p < .01$ , but husbands' reports of aggression were only marginally related to wives' satisfaction,  $r(44) = -.27$ ,  $p < .09$ .

The results of this study are at best preliminary and should be viewed with caution owing to the use of hypothetical behaviors and predicted responses to them. In addition, the use of single-item responses to assess positive and negative dimensions of forgiveness is less than optimal.

## Study 2

To address the limitations of Study 1, a second study was undertaken. In this study participants answered several questions about their responses to recalled partner transgressions. It was predicted that these responses would reflect the two hypothesized forgiveness dimensions and that dimensions of forgiveness for partner transgressions would predict psychological aggression in marriage. The study also provided the opportunity to replicate prior research showing a relation between marital

**Table 2.** Prediction of psychological aggression

	Husbands		Wives	
	$\beta$	$\Delta R^2$	$\beta$	$\Delta R^2$
Overall		.40**		.40**
Satisfaction		.24**		.16*
Husband	-.46**		-.31*	
Wife	-.12		-.22	
Partner forgiveness dimensions		.11*		.09 <sup>a</sup>
Positive	-.24		-.34*	
Negative	.29*		.14	

<sup>a</sup>  $p < .06$ .

\*  $p < .05$ . \*\*  $p < .01$ .

satisfaction and measures of forgiveness and to examine whether positive and negative dimensions of forgiveness are related similarly to marital satisfaction.

Whereas psychological aggression may be diminished by either spouse being willing to give up unforgiveness (i.e., acting as a circuit breaker), constructive communication may be facilitated more by a partner who is actively forgiving (i.e., engages the partner). That is, constructive communication may require more than merely not retaliating; it may require as well an approach orientation to the partner that is consistent with directly engaging issues and carefully listening to the partner. This approach orientation seems more consistent with the positive dimension of forgiveness outlined above. The present study therefore examines whether the two dimensions of forgiveness have differential predictive power with regard to psychological aggression and constructive communication.

The use of multiple items to assess forgiveness allows us to assess directly the extent to which the construct of forgiveness requires more than one dimension for adequate representation. In addition, the multi-item scales allow for more sensitive tests of the hypotheses and may be less subject to global response bias than are single-item measures.

## Method

### Subjects

Sixty-six British couples participated in the study. Couples were recruited through advertisements in local media for a study on marriage. Husbands averaged 32.64 ( $SD = 7.69$ ) and wives 30.66 ( $SD = 6.23$ ) years of age. The modal spouse, whether husband or wife, had completed a university undergraduate degree.

### Measures

*Psychological aggression.* The Spouse Specific Aggression Scale (O'Leary & Curly, 1986), used in Study 1, was again used to measure psychological aggression.

*Forgiveness.* Forgiveness dimensions were assessed in relation to situations in which the respondent's partner had "wronged them" or "hurt them." Spouses indicated the extent to which they agreed or disagreed with six statements (e.g., "I think about how to even the score when my partner wrongs me," "When my partner wrongs me, I just accept their humanness, flaws and failures") using a 6-point ratings scale ranging from 1 = *strongly disagree* to 6 = *strongly agree*. Higher scores indicated greater agreement with the statement.

*Communication.* Spouses completed the 7-item Constructive Communication subscale of the Communication Patterns Questionnaire. This measure assesses communication in the context of a relationship problem. The Constructive Communication subscale is the sum of responses to three positive items (e.g., "During a discussion of a relationship problem both members suggest possible solutions and compromise") minus the sum of four negative items (e.g., "During a discussion of a relationship problem both members blame, accuse and criticize each other") and thus represents an index of positive interaction in the relationship. This measure was chosen as an index of communication behavior because it correlates highly (.70 for husbands, .62 for wives) with observed problem solving behavior (Heavey, Larson, Zumtobel, & Christensen, 1996).

*Marital satisfaction.* The Marital Adjustment Test (Locke & Wallace, 1959), used in Study 1, was again used to measure marital quality.

## Study 2 Results and Discussion

Table 3 shows the correlations among the items used to assess responses to partner transgressions. Confirmatory factor analysis using LISREL 8.30 was conducted to examine whether the forgiveness items reflected one or two underlying dimensions. When all six items were used as indicators of a single latent construct, a poor fit was found between the model and the obtained data for both husbands,  $\chi^2(9) = 26.06$ , goodness of fit = .88, and wives,  $\chi^2(9) = 59.05$ , goodness of fit =

**Table 3.** Correlations among items used to assess forgiveness dimensions for husbands (above diagonal) and wives (below diagonal)

Items	1	2	3	4	5	6
1. "... want to see hurt and miserable"	1.00	.47	.39	-.37	-.36	-.30
2. "... think of how to even the score"	.57	1.00	.31	-.35	-.34	-.35
3. "... think of ways to make them regret"	.59	.53	1.00	-.22	-.30	-.23
4. "... just accept partner's humanness, flaws and failures"	-.54	-.29	-.53	1.00	.52	.51
5. "... let bygones be bygones"	-.44	-.26	-.29	.56	1.00	.56
6. "... quick to forgive"	-.53	-.31	-.42	.53	.55	1.00

.77. Interestingly, each of the indicator loadings for this unidimensional model was statistically significant ( $\lambda_x$  ranged from .60 to .92 for husbands and  $-.55$  to .88 for wives). This discrepancy between model fit and indicator loadings underscores the need to consider a multidimensional model of forgiveness.

A two-factor model in which positive and negative items were hypothesized to load on separate factors was examined next. The two-factor model provided a much better fit of data for husbands and wives (husbands,  $\chi^2(8) = 7.28$ , goodness of fit = .97; wives,  $\chi^2(8) = 13.94$ , goodness of fit = .94) and the range of indicator loadings was smaller ( $\lambda_x$  ranged from .73 to .83 for husbands and .80 to .92 for wives).

To examine further whether a two-factor model is more appropriate than a unidimensional model, a model comparison procedure introduced by Bollen (1980) was used. By comparing the hypothesized two-factor model to a model where the zero-order association between the two dimensions of forgiveness is constrained to be one (thereby positing a single factor), two- and one-factor models can be compared by interpreting the change in  $\chi^2$  (per change in  $df$ ) as a  $\chi^2$  statistic. When the association between positive and negative dimensions was constrained to unity, there was a poor fit to the data (husbands,  $\chi^2(9) = 28.06$ , goodness of fit = .88; wives,  $\chi^2(9) = 56.34$ , goodness of fit = .77). Allowing positive and negative dimensions to covary resulted in a significant change in  $\chi^2$  for a one degree of freedom change for both husbands and wives (husbands,  $\Delta\chi^2 = 20.78$ ,  $p < .001$ ; wives  $\Delta\chi^2 = 42.4$ ,  $p < .001$ ). Accordingly, the

two-factor solution provides a better fit to the data than does a single-factor solution. The resulting two forgiveness indices yielded alpha coefficients that were acceptable for research instruments (positive dimension, wives = .79, husbands = .78; negative dimension, wives = .81, husbands = .78).

Table 4 shows the correlations among aggression, marital satisfaction, communication, and the two forgiveness dimensions. Although the correlation between the forgiveness dimensions was substantially higher in this study than in the first study (husbands:  $-.49$ , wives:  $-.57$ ), the two dimensions only shared a small portion of their variance. Consistent with prior research on forgiveness in marriage, marital satisfaction was significantly related to the negative dimension for husbands,  $r(66) = -.36$ ,  $p < .01$ , and wives,  $r(66) = -.46$ ,  $p < .01$ . The positive forgiveness dimension was also related to satisfaction for wives,  $r(66) = .51$ ,  $p < .01$ , but not husbands,  $r(66) = .20$ , *ns*. The two dimensions also accounted for significant amounts of variance in satisfaction for both wives ( $R^2 = .30$ ,  $F(2, 63) = 13.4$ ,  $p < .001$ ) and husbands ( $R^2 = .13$ ,  $F(2, 63) = 4.7$ ,  $p < .001$ ). However, the positive dimension,  $\beta = .36$ ,  $t = 2.8$ ,  $p < .01$ , accounted for unique variance in wives' satisfaction, whereas the negative dimension,  $\beta = -.34$ ,  $t = -2.55$ ,  $p < .05$ , accounted for unique variance in husbands' satisfaction. These findings again point to the utility of distinguishing the two forgiveness dimensions, and the potential for gender differences in the way dimensions of forgiveness are related to marital satisfaction.



**Table 4.** Correlations among psychological aggression, communication and forgiveness dimensions

Variable	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
1. Husband aggression	.50**	.49**	-.41**	.50**	-.39**	-.41**	-.46**	-.60**	-.56**
2. Wife aggression		.41**	-.26*	.58**	-.50**	-.26*	-.42**	-.50**	-.53**
3. Husband negative forgiveness			-.49**	.61**	-.40**	-.36**	-.40**	-.57**	-.38**
4. Husband positive forgiveness				-.44**	.29*	.20	.22	.51**	.58**
5. Wife negative forgiveness					-.57**	-.29*	-.46**	-.45**	-.44**
6. Wife positive forgiveness						.34**	.51**	.44**	.53**
7. Husband satisfaction							.63**	.54**	.48**
8. Wife satisfaction								.54**	.54**
9. Husband communication									.60**
10. Wife communication									

\*  $p < .05$ . \*\*  $p < .01$ .

Importantly, for both husbands and wives forgiveness dimensions were related to partner aggression. Forgiveness dimensions were also related to communication in the expected manner. To investigate these relationships, regression analyses similar to those conducted in Study 1 were computed. The unique variance associated with satisfaction measures and forgiveness dimensions as well as with each satisfaction and forgiveness dimension is shown in Table 5. Interestingly, forgiveness dimensions accounted for approximately the same amounts of variance in aggression as spouses' marital satisfaction (husbands 8.2 vs. 9.3; wives 9.4 vs. 7.1), showing that they account for considerable variance beyond that shared with marital satisfaction.

Replicating the results of Study 1, the negative forgiveness dimension of wives predicted husbands' psychological aggression independently of the marital satisfaction of both partners. In addition, however, in the current investigation the negative forgiveness dimension predicted partner aggression independently of marital satisfaction and the positive dimension for husbands as well.

With regard to constructive communication, the positive dimension of husband's forgiveness accounted for unique variance in

wives' reports of communication. Wives' forgiveness also predicted husbands' reports of communication, but neither forgiveness dimension alone accounted for unique variance in husband's communication. Accordingly, the negative dimension of forgiveness was related to partner psychological aggression (for both partners), whereas the positive dimension of forgiveness was related to partner constructive communication (albeit only uniquely so for husband's forgiveness).

**Discussion**

The current investigation examined the implications of forgiveness for psychological aggression and constructive communication within marriage and, in doing so, also investigated the structure of forgiveness. Forgiveness is an essential element of marriage precisely because marital partners often hurt one another, and in the absence of some forgiveness it is relatively easy for chains of negative reciprocity, with increasing levels of psychological aggression and abuse, to develop and overwhelm the positive aspects of the relationship. Indeed, marital researchers have long been intrigued by the prominence of negative reciprocity with its concomitant

**Table 5.** Prediction of partner's reported psychological aggression and communication

	Aggression		Communication	
	$\beta$	$\Delta R^2$	$\beta$	$\Delta R^2$
			Husbands	
Overall		.33**		.43**
Satisfaction		.09*		.17**
Husband	-.12		.35**	
Wife	-.26		.15	
Wife forgiveness dimensions		.08*		.08*
Positive	-.02		.16	
Negative	.32*		-.21	
			Wives	
Overall		.24**		.52**
Satisfaction		.07		.17**
Husband	.15		.16	
Wife	-.34*		.34**	
Husband forgiveness dimensions		.09*		.20**
Positive	-.10		.48**	
Negative	.28*		.04	

\*  $p < .05$ . \*\*  $p < .01$ .

reciprocal psychological abuse among distressed couples and have identified it as one of the most reliable markers of a discordant relationship (Weiss & Heyman, 1990). Likewise, marital support and constructive discussion of marital problems have been identified as central for healthy marital relationships. To engage the partner positively, however, requires more than merely forgoing retaliation. Despite an extensive literature on the topography of negative reciprocity and positive marital exchanges, the motivations that give rise to constructive communication and to negative reciprocity have proven elusive (Fincham & Beach, 1999). In the current investigation we linked forgiveness, constructive communication, and psychological aggression in a manner that provides the beginnings of a motivational account of negative transactions in the marital relationship.

#### Structure of forgiveness

First, we hypothesized that forgiveness was not bipolar but rather two-dimensional. In Study 1 we found that the two hypothesized

dimensions of forgiveness were only weakly correlated and showed different patterns of connection with partner psychological aggression. In Study 2, we used multi-item measures and so were able to examine the hypothesis of a two-dimensional structure more rigorously. Confirming our hypothesis we found that the two-dimensional structure fit the data significantly better than the one-dimensional structure. In addition, each of the items loaded on its hypothesized dimension. As in Study 1, the two dimensions showed different patterns of connection with partner psychological aggression. Thus, it appears that forgiveness is not unidimensional and that it is important to keep separate the positive and negative dimensions of forgiveness.

Second, we assessed both dimensions of forgiveness for either hypothetical (Study 1) or actual events (Study 2) in which the partner acted in a hurtful manner. Our interest was in determining whether such self-reported tendencies to forgive would be related to partner-reported interaction. In particular, we wondered whether stylistic unforgiveness in the form of retaliation or

positive forgiveness in the form of readiness to forgive would relate to partner psychological aggression (Studies 1 and 2) or constructive communication (Study 2). In both studies evidence of a connection between forgiveness dimensions and couple interaction variables was found. Partially supporting our hypotheses, unforgiveness was strongly related to psychological aggression. In Study 1 wives' self-report of unforgiveness was associated with their husbands' report of psychological aggression. This relationship remained significant net of both wives' readiness to forgive and both partners' reports of marital satisfaction. For husbands, however, the relationship between self-reported unforgiveness and partner-reported psychological aggression was in the same direction, but was nonsignificant. Only husbands' readiness to forgive emerged as a significant predictor of wives' reports of psychological aggression. In Study 2, unforgiveness was associated significantly with partner psychological aggression for both wives and husbands. This suggests that the stylistic tendency to seek revenge (i.e., to be unforgiving of partner behavior) may be especially associated with the patterns of negative reciprocity that lead to psychological aggression. At the same time, the results suggest that, at least in the context of ordinary levels of couple aggression, either partner can diminish the level of psychological aggression in the dyad. The lower an individual is on the unforgiveness dimension, the less likely their partner is to display psychological aggression.

The positive dimension of forgiveness or readiness to forgive, on the other hand, is a significant predictor of psychological aggression only in the case of husband's forgiving responses to the hypothetical situations. There is not a significant effect of wives' readiness to forgive in the hypothetical context, nor is there a significant effect of readiness to forgive on psychological aggression for either partner when forgiveness tendencies are assessed in the context of actual recalled hurts. It may be, therefore, that unforgiveness is more central in understanding the couple patterns associated with psychological aggression. When we examine constructive communication patterns,

the effect of readiness to forgive is stronger. For husbands, readiness to forgive is a strong predictor of wives' constructive communication, and accounts for most of the variance added by the set of forgiveness dimensions. For wives, the relative importance of positive and negative dimensions of forgiveness is less clear in that there is a significant effect of the two dimensions considered jointly, but neither is significant individually. It appears therefore that the positive dimension of forgiveness may be more salient as it relates to constructive engagement with the partner.

It is also worth noting that all effects in the current study were obtained independently of own and partner marital satisfaction. Hence, tendencies to forgive the partner are not merely indicators of level of overall marital satisfaction by either partner. Instead, they appear to capture an aspect of dealing with negative partner behavior that is independent of global satisfaction with the relationship. As such, the results of the current series of studies indicate the potential importance of developing marital interventions that go beyond the enhancement of marital satisfaction. There is little reason to expect that enhancement of satisfaction alone can disrupt the patterns of negative reciprocity that result in psychological abuse and aggression. Yet, finding ways to disrupt patterns of "ordinary couple aggression" is essential to successful marital therapy. Accordingly, finding ways to help couples deal more effectively with their own tendencies toward unforgiveness and perhaps helping them approach the positive aspects of being ready to forgive could provide new and useful tools for marital therapists.

#### *Implications for research and practice*

The appeal of forgiveness interventions in marital therapy is that they may target directly the motivational underpinnings of behavior patterns long thought to be associated with problematic marital outcomes. If so, interventions that are able to shift the underlying motivational patterns have the potential to be far more powerful than current skills training approaches (Fincham & Beach, 1999). In addition, keeping separate the avoidance/

retaliation dimension of forgiveness and the approach dimension highlights the potential for several different ways of moving couples in the direction of greater marital health. At the same time, the negative forgiveness dimension (unforgiveness) may have some primacy. It appears that unforgiveness is related to patterns of psychological aggression. If so, it may be prudent to deal with unforgiveness before attempting to develop more constructive patterns of communication by fostering greater readiness to forgive.

A gender-linked pattern of the findings also deserves some mention. In particular, the role of the positive dimension of forgiveness (readiness to forgive) is more prominent for men than for women. In Study 1, men's readiness to forgive was a significant predictor of partner psychological aggression, and in Study 2, men's readiness to forgive was a significant predictor of partner constructive communication. Accordingly, it may be important to examine gender differences in the role of forgiveness in marriage (see Fincham, Paleari, & Regalia, 2002). Given the imbalance in power that may characterize many heterosexual relationships, and the different types of hurtful behaviors that may characterize common relationship transgressions, it should not be surprising if gender differences emerge in the way forgiveness is related to marital processes.

### *Limitations*

The current data are cross-sectional. Accordingly, even though they are consistent with the particular causal ordering provided in the current study, they might also be consistent with a variety of other causal orderings. For example, the current study cannot rule out the possibility that when spouses have more constructive communication styles and display less psychological aggression their partners are more forgiving of them in hypothetical and recalled situations. However, this causal ordering would imply a strong role for couple satisfaction in accounting for the connection between forgiveness and relationship processes. Because we were able to control for satisfaction without diminishing the strength

of the relationship between forgiveness and relationship processes, it appears unlikely that marital satisfaction mediates this relationship.

In addition, the data are all self-report. Accordingly it is possible that some relationships observed in the data are due to shared-method variance. However, the fact that we were able to find independent dimensions of forgiveness suggests that shared-method variance has not entirely confounded our results. In addition, the viability of shared-method variance as an explanation for the observed results is further decreased because we were able to control for marital satisfaction without diminishing the magnitude of observed relationships and because the dimensions of forgiveness predicted different outcomes. Finally, our ability to predict across partners, with each partner's report of forgiveness predicting the other's report of relationship processes suggests, at a minimum, that we are tapping a reality that is shared by both partners.

Notwithstanding the above observations about self-report, the present data do not provide information on forgiveness transactions in marriage. There is an urgent need to obtain data on such behaviors because forgiveness motivations may be imperfectly translated into actual behaviors and may themselves become the subject of conflict. The lack of data on forgiveness behavior poses a challenge for the broader literature on forgiveness which may collapse under its own weight absent such data.

Accordingly, the current investigation lays the groundwork for future studies of forgiveness and marital processes. In future research it will be important to (a) keep separate positive and negative dimensions of forgiveness, (b) be alert to the possibility that positive and negative dimensions of forgiveness may have somewhat different antecedents and somewhat different consequences, (c) examine possible gender differences in the way forgiveness is related to relationship processes, and (d) study actual forgiveness behaviors. These considerations will be particularly important as researchers begin to examine the role of forgiveness longitudinally and the utility of forgiveness interventions in helping distressed couples.

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