

Forgiveness in Marriage: Putting the Benefits Into Context

James K. McNulty
The University of Tennessee Knoxville

The current longitudinal study examined the consequences of spouses' tendencies to forgive their partners over the first 2 years of 72 new marriages. Though positive main effects between forgiveness and marital outcomes emerged cross-sectionally, spouses' tendencies to forgive their partners interacted with the frequency of those partners' negative verbal behaviors to predict changes in marital outcomes longitudinally. Specifically, whereas spouses married to partners who rarely behaved negatively tended to remain more satisfied over time to the extent that they were more forgiving, spouses married to partners who frequently behaved negatively tended to experience steeper declines in satisfaction to the extent that they were more forgiving. Similar patterns emerged for changes in the severity of husbands' problems, such that husbands married to wives who frequently behaved negatively reported sharper increases in problem severity to the extent that they were more forgiving but reported more stable problem severity to the extent that they were less forgiving. These findings question whether all spouses should benefit from forgiveness interventions and thus highlight the need for further research on the most appropriate targets for such interventions.

Keywords: forgiveness, marriage, behavior, newlyweds, longitudinal

How should spouses respond to their partners' negative behaviors? A growing body of mostly cross-sectional research (for an exception, see Paleari, Regalia, & Fincham, 2005) has suggested spouses should benefit from forgiving such transgressions, as more forgiving spouses report more positive concurrent outcomes (for a review, see Fincham, Hall, & Beach, 2006). Yet, such cross-sectional studies are limited in at least two ways. First, cross-sectional research does not eliminate ambiguity in the causal direction of such positive associations, leaving it possible that happy partners are simply more forgiving. Second, noted by others (e.g., Murphy, 2002), forgiveness may have long-term costs thus far undetected by cross-sectional research; forgiven partners may feel little motivation to reduce their negative behavior, for example. Accordingly, the current investigation employed a four-wave longitudinal design to examine the effects of marital forgiveness on changes in marital outcomes over approximately the first two years of marriage.

The research presented in this article was supported by a Seed Grant Award to James K. McNulty from The Ohio State University, Mansfield. The author would like to thank Letitia Clarke, Timothy Dove, Kendra Krichbaum, Kevin McFarland, Lynn Ousley, Michelle Reeder, Jennifer Schurman, Lindsay Smother, Corwin Thompson, Renee Vidor, Harry Wallace, Karen Walters, and Danielle Wentworth for their assistance in measurement development, data collection, and data entry. The author would also like to thank Benjamin Karney for his helpful comments on a draft of this article.

Correspondence concerning this article should be addressed to James K. McNulty, Department of Psychology, The University of Tennessee, 1404 Circle Drive, Austin Peay Building, Knoxville, TN 37996.

Potential Long-Term Benefits of Forgiveness

One line of theorizing suggests that forgiveness should have at least two benefits to marriages over time (e.g., Gordon, Baucom, & Snyder, 2005). First, forgiveness should reduce marital conflict. Indeed, several studies have revealed that forgiveness is associated with tendencies to behave more positively in the marriage (e.g., Fincham, Beach, & Davila, 2004). Second, forgiveness should enhance spouses' cognitions. Indeed, a robust literature on marital attributions has suggested that positive attributions tend to be associated with more satisfying marriages (for a review, see Bradbury & Fincham, 1990), and forgiveness has been shown to be associated with such positive attributions (e.g., Gordon, Burton, & Porter, 2004). Consistent with such findings, the lone longitudinal study of forgiveness in marriage indicated that forgiveness indirectly affected subsequent satisfaction through subsequent forgiveness (Paleari et al., 2005), though no direct effects of forgiveness on changes in satisfaction were reported.

Potential Long-Term Costs of Forgiveness

However, the context in which forgiveness occurs is likely to be important (Bradbury & Fincham, 1991). Specifically, there are a number of reasons to expect that the frequency of partners' transgressions should moderate the effects of forgiveness. For instance, forgiveness may remove the accountability necessary to motivate changes in the transgressing partner (e.g., Zimbardo, 1970). Though such accountability may be unimportant in the context of rare transgressions, it may allow more frequent problems to worsen over time. Further, forgivers faced with numerous transgressions may feel frustrated or betrayed in a manner

that is qualitatively different than in those with relatively few partner transgressions to forgive. In addition, in high-frequency negative relationships the consequences for the self may be different, or perceived as different. For example, among women residing in a domestic violence shelter, those who reported being the most forgiving were the most likely to report intentions to return to their abusive partners (Gordon et al., 2004).

The Current Study

In an attempt to provide direct evidence that the frequency of negativity moderates the effects of forgiveness on changes in marital outcomes, the current longitudinal study tested for a moderating role of a negative behavior previously shown to (a) have robust effects on marital outcomes and (b) vary substantially across couples: negative verbal behavior (Bradbury & Karney, 1993). It was predicted that spouses' forgiveness would be associated with more stable marital outcomes in marriages to partners who demonstrated infrequent negative verbal behavior but would be associated with increased problems and decreased satisfaction in marriages to partners who demonstrated more frequent negative verbal behavior.

Method

Participants

Participants were 72 newlywed couples married an average of 3.2 months ($SD = 1.6$). Husbands were 24.9 ($SD = 4.4$) years old, on average, and had completed 14.2 ($SD = 2.5$) years of education. Wives were 23.5 ($SD = 3.8$) years old, on average, and had completed 14.7 ($SD = 2.2$) years of education. The average combined income of couples was less than \$35,000 per year. (For additional details on this sample, see McNulty & Fisher, in press.¹)

Procedure

Participating couples were mailed a packet of questionnaires, a consent form approved by the university Institutional Review Board, and a letter asking spouses to complete the questionnaires independently of one another. Couples brought their completed questionnaires to a subsequent laboratory session in which they participated in two 10-minute videotaped discussions designed to assess the frequency of their negative verbal behavior. Each spouse privately identified an aspect of the marriage that was a source of tension for him or her (e.g., finances, in-laws, etc.). Couples were then left alone to "work towards some resolution or agreement" for each area of difficulty. Couples were paid \$60 for participating in this phase of the study.

At approximately 6-month intervals, couples were recontacted by phone and were mailed inventories of marital satisfaction and marital problems, a postage-paid return envelope, and a letter of instruction reminding couples to complete forms independently of each other. Couples were paid \$40 for participating in each additional phase of the

study. The current analyses are based on four waves of data covering approximately 2 years of marriage.

Materials

Marital satisfaction. Marital satisfaction was assessed with the Quality Marriage Index (Norton, 1983). The Quality Marriage Index is a six-item scale asking spouses to report the extent to which they agree or disagree with general statements about their marriage (e.g., "We have a good marriage"). Scores on the Quality Marriage Index range from 6 to 45 with higher scores reflecting more positive satisfaction with the relationship. Internal consistency of this measure was high (across the four waves, coefficient alpha ranged from .93 to .96 for husbands and .94 to .95 for wives).

Marital forgiveness. A measure of marital forgiveness was modeled after a measure of more general forgiveness: the Transgression Narrative Test of Forgiveness (Berry, Worthington, Parrott, O'Connor, & Wade, 2001). Spouses were asked to imagine themselves in four detailed situations in which their partner transgressed against them (e.g., the partner came home from a long day at work/school and snapped at and insulted the spouse) and subsequently to report whether they would "feel forgiveness" on a scale ranging from 1 (*definitely no*) to 7 (*definitely yes*) and "express forgiveness" on a scale ranging from 1 (*definitely no*) to 7 (*definitely yes*). Spouses' responses to these eight items were summed to create a scale that could range between 8 (indicating they would never feel or express forgiveness) and 56 (indicating they would definitely feel and express forgiveness every time). The measure demonstrated moderate positive correlations with two other measures of forgiveness—the Transgression Narrative Test of Forgiveness (Berry et al., 2001; husbands' $r = .43$, wives' $r = .39$) and the Tendency to Forgive Scale (Brown, 2003; husbands' $r = .31$, wives' $r = .42$)—suggesting adequate validity yet enough independence to support that marital forgiveness was measured as somewhat unique from the tendency to forgive more generally. The measure also demonstrated high internal consistency (husbands' coefficient alpha = .89, wives' coefficient alpha = .86).

Reported behavior. Reports of each spouse's negative verbal behavior were assessed by using the Verbal Aggression subscale of Form N of the Conflict Tactics Survey (Straus, 1979), which asks spouses to report the extent to which they and their partners exhibited six negative behaviors during the past year on a four-point scale ranging from 0 (*never*) to 3 (*more than twice*). Each spouse's level of negative behavior was estimated by combining their own reports of their behavior and their partner's reports of their behavior. Consequently, scale scores could range from 0 (indicating both partners agreed that the spouse had not engaged in any of the behaviors) to 36 (indicating both partners agreed that the spouse had engaged in each of the

¹ McNulty and Fisher (in press) also reported the marital satisfaction of a subset of the participants (59 couples) in this sample.

behaviors more than twice in the past year). The internal reliability for this scale was adequate (husbands' behavior, coefficient alpha = .84; wives' = .89).

Observed behavior. Each speaking turn from the videotaped discussions was coded by trained raters with a modified version of the Verbal Tactics Coding Scheme (Sillars, Coletti, Parry, & Rogers, 1982). A speaker received a negative code for speaking turns that either directly faulted, rejected, or criticized the partner, or indirectly criticized the partner through presumptive attributions, avoiding responsibility, or hostile questions. A speaker received a constructive code for speaking turns that were on topic and furthered the resolution of the conflict. One index of net negative behavior was developed for each spouse from these codes by dividing the number of each code by the total number of speaking turns of that spouse, subtracting the proportion of constructive codes from the proportion of negative codes, and averaging across the two discussions. Scores could range from -1.0, indicating every speaking turn was positive, to 1.0, indicating every speaking turn was negative. Adequate reliability was obtained on 25% of the interactions (for negative, intraclass correlation = .88; for constructive, intraclass correlation = .85).

Results and Discussion

Descriptive Statistics

As would be expected from a sample of newlyweds, husbands and wives reported relatively low levels of negative behavior (for husbands, $M = 6.2$, $SD = 4.1$; for wives, $M = 7.0$, $SD = 4.9$), were observed as exchanging relatively low levels of negative behavior during their interactions (for husbands, $M = -0.67$, $SD = 0.21$; for wives, $M = -0.66$, $SD = 0.22$), and reported relatively high tendencies to forgive their partners (for husbands, $M = 41.6$, $SD = 10.6$; for wives, $M = 41.7$, $SD = 8.7$). Also as expected, reports and observations of husbands' and wives' negative behavior were highly correlated (for reported, $r = .78$; for observed, $r = .69$). Husbands' and wives' levels of forgiveness were not significantly correlated with each other ($r = .08$). Paired samples t tests revealed no gender differences on these variables.

Cross-Sectional Associations

Several cross-sectional associations were consistent with findings from previous research. Specifically, spouses who reported being more forgiving of their partners reported being happier in their marriages (for husbands, $r = .39$, $p < .01$; for wives, $r = .29$, $p < .05$), having less severe problems (for husbands, $r = -.32$, $p < .01$; for wives $r = -.38$, $p < .01$), and behaving less negatively (for husbands, $r = -.30$; for wives, $r = -.24$); though more forgiving spouses were not observed to behave significantly less negatively (for husbands, $r = -.07$; for wives, $r = -.21$). Nevertheless, as with previous studies, the cross-sectional nature of these data makes it difficult to draw conclusions regarding the causal direction of these associations. Thus,

the primary analyses reported next control these associations and examine the effects of forgiveness on changes in satisfaction and problem severity over time.

Change in Problem Severity and Marital Satisfaction

Within-subject changes in satisfaction and problems were estimated by using hierarchical linear modeling (Bryk & Raudenbush, 1987). Of the original 72 couples, 69 completed three or more phases of data collection and could be included in the analyses. On average, husbands and wives became significantly less satisfied over time (for husbands, $t = -2.6$, $p < .05$; for wives, $t = -4.1$, $p < .001$), wives' problems became more severe over time ($t = 2.5$, $p < .05$), and husbands demonstrated no significant changes in problem severity (on average, $t = 1.2$, $p > .05$).

Main Effects of Spouses' Forgiveness on Marital Development

Preliminary analyses were conducted to test for main effects of forgiveness on between-subjects differences in these changes in satisfaction and problem severity, controlling for the cross-sectional associations between forgiveness and outcomes reported above. No significant main effects emerged for the effects of forgiveness on changes in satisfaction (for husbands, $t = -0.3$, $p > .05$; for wives, $t = 1.5$, $p > .05$) or changes in severity of problems (for husbands, $t = -1.2$, $p > .05$; for wives, $t = 0.6$, $p > .05$), suggesting that, on average, forgiveness is unrelated to marital development.

Interactive Effects of Spouses' Forgiveness and Partners' Behavior on Marital Development

Primary analyses were conducted to examine whether the effects of spouses' forgiveness on changes in satisfaction and problems were moderated by their partners' negative behavior, again controlling for the cross-sectional associations between forgiveness and outcomes reported above. With respect to satisfaction, a pattern of significant negative interactions emerged between husbands' tendencies to forgive their wives and observations of the frequency of those wives' negative behaviors ($t = -1.98$, $p < .05$) and between wives' tendencies to forgive their husbands and reports of the frequency of those husbands' negative behaviors ($t = -3.26$, $p < .01$). Gender differences in these effects did not reach significance (for observed behavior, $\chi^2 = 1.8$, $p > .05$; for reported behavior, $\chi^2 = 3.1$, $p > .05$). With respect to changes in problems, a pattern of significant positive interactions emerged between husbands' tendencies to forgive their wives and both observations of those wives' negative behavior ($t = 2.50$, $p < .05$) and reports of those wives' negative behavior ($t = 2.41$, $p < .05$). Gender differences in these effects did not reach significance (for observed behavior, $\chi^2 = 0.22$, $p > .05$; for reported behavior, $\chi^2 = 0.17$, $p > .05$).

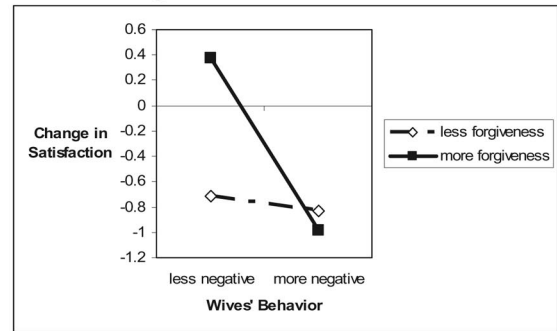
Deconstructions of the significant interactions are depicted in Figure 1. Consistent with predictions, among spouses married to partners who infrequently engaged in

Changes in Satisfaction

Wives' Forgiveness x Reports of Husbands' Behavior

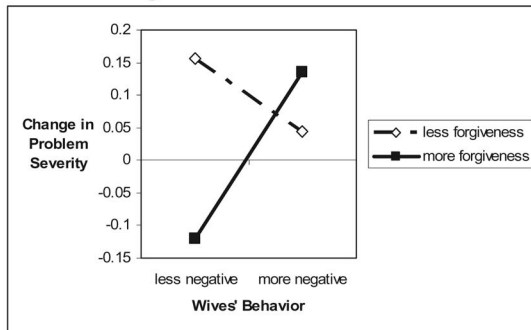


Husbands' Forgiveness x Observations of Wives' Behavior



Changes in Problems

Husbands' Forgiveness x Observations of Wives' Behavior



Husbands' Forgiveness x Reports of Wives' Behavior

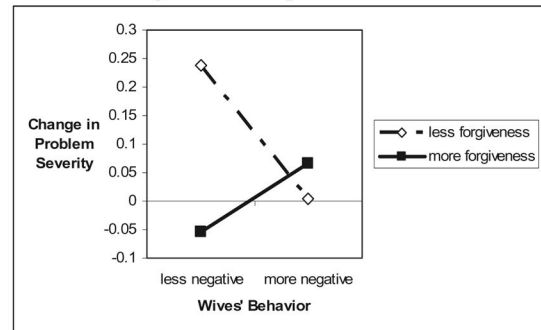


Figure 1. Verbal behavior moderates the association between forgiveness and changes in marital satisfaction and problem severity.

negative behavior, increased forgiveness appeared to be beneficial over time, whereas less forgiveness appeared to be harmful over time. In contrast, but also consistent with predictions, among spouses married to partners who frequently engaged in negative behavior, increased forgiveness appeared to be harmful over time, whereas decreased forgiveness appeared to be beneficial over time.

Implications for Future Research

Future research may benefit by expanding on these findings. Consistent with contextual models of marriage (e.g., Bradbury & Fincham, 1991), it may be that the effects of forgiveness, like the effects of many other relationship processes, are moderated by the broader marital context and so may benefit relatively healthy relationships more than they do troubled relationships. Indeed, recent research shows that the relationship context in the form of negative verbal behavior moderates the impact of positive expectancies for marriage in much the same way found for forgiveness in the current study (McNulty & Karney, 2004). To draw stronger conclusions, future research needs to examine the extent to which other measures of negativity moderate

the effects of other widely studied relationship maintenance strategies on relationship outcomes.

Similarly, these findings raise questions regarding the universal benefits of interventions that promote marital forgiveness. The current findings provide some justification for such interventions by showing that forgiveness can be beneficial initially and can help keep marriages to benevolent partners stable over time. At the same time, however, these findings challenge the idea that such interventions should be beneficial in high-conflict marriages, noting the potential for forgiveness to lead to declines in satisfaction. Nevertheless, given the specific measures and unique sample used here, future research needs to determine when and how forgiveness improves marriages.

References

- Berry, J. W., Worthington, E. L., Jr., Parrott, L., III, O'Connor, L., & Wade, N. G. (2001). Dispositional forgiveness: Development and construct validity of the Transgression Narrative Test of Forgiveness (TNFT). *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin*, 27, 1277–1290.
- Bradbury, T. N., & Fincham, F. D. (1990). Attributions in marriage: Review and critique. *Psychological Bulletin*, 107, 3–33.

- Bradbury, T. N., & Fincham, F. D. (1991). A contextual model for advancing the study of marital interaction. In G. J. O. Fletcher & F. D. Fincham (Eds.), *Cognition in close relationships* (pp. 127–147). Hillsdale, NJ: Erlbaum.
- Bradbury, T. N., & Karney, B. R. (1993). Longitudinal study of marital interaction and dysfunction: Review and analysis. *Clinical Psychology Review, 13*, 15–27.
- Brown, R. P. (2003). Measuring individual differences in the tendency to forgive: Construct validity and links with depression. *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin, 29*, 759–771.
- Bryk, A. S., & Raudenbush, S. W. (1987). Application of hierarchical linear models to assessing change. *Psychological Bulletin, 101*, 147–158.
- Fincham, F. D., Beach, S. R. H., & Davila, J. (2004). Forgiveness and conflict resolution in marriage. *Journal of Family Psychology, 18*, 72–81.
- Fincham, F. D., Hall, J. H., & Beach, S. R. H. (2006). Forgiveness in marriage: Current status and future directions. *Family Relations, 55*, 415–427.
- Gordon, K., Baucom, D. H., & Snyder, D. K. (2005). Forgiveness in couples: Divorce, infidelity, and couples therapy. In E. L. Worthington (Ed.), *Handbook of forgiveness* (pp. 407–422). New York: Routledge.
- Gordon, K. C., Burton, S., & Porter, L. (2004). Predicting the intentions of women in domestic violent shelters to return to partners: Does forgiveness play a role? *Journal of Family Psychology, 18*, 331–338.
- McNulty, J. K., & Fisher, T. D. (in press). Gender differences in response to sexual expectancies and changes in sexual frequency: A short-term longitudinal study of sexual satisfaction in newly married couples. *Archives of Sexual Behavior*.
- McNulty, J. K., & Karney, B. R. (2004). Positive expectations in the early years of marriage: Should couples expect the best or brace for the worst? *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology, 86*, 729–743.
- Murphy, J. G. (2002). Forgiveness in counseling: A philosophical perspective. In S. Lamb & J. G. Murphy (Eds.), *Before forgiving: Cautionary views of forgiveness in psychotherapy* (pp. 41–53). London: Oxford University Press.
- Norton, R. (1983). Measuring marital quality: A critical look at the dependent variable. *Journal of Marriage and the Family, 45*, 141–151.
- Paleari, F. G., Regalia, C., & Fincham, F. (2005). Marital quality, forgiveness, empathy, and rumination: A longitudinal analysis. *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin, 31*, 368–378.
- Sillars, A. L., Coletti, S. F., Parry, D., & Rogers, M. A. (1982). Coding verbal conflict tactics: Nonverbal and perceptual correlates of the “avoidance-distributive-integrative” distinction. *Human Communication Research, 9*, 83–95.
- Straus, M. A. (1979). Measuring interfamily conflict and violence: The Conflict Tactics (CT) Scales. *Journal of Marriage and the Family, 41*, 75–88.
- Zimbardo, P. G. (1970). The human choice: Individuation, reason, and order vs. deindividuation, impulse, and chaos. In W. J. Arnold & D. Levine (Eds.), *Nebraska symposium on motivation, 1969* (Vol. 17, pp. 237–307). Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press.

Received October 19, 2006

Revision received February 21, 2007

Accepted February 22, 2007 ■