Forgiving, a prosocial change of motivation towards a transgressor (McCullough et al., 1998), has repeatedly been documented to exert beneficial effects on the individual as well as on the relationship (Berry et al., 2001; Fincham et al., 2006).

Recent contextual approaches to close relationships, however, have found forgiving to be associated with steeper declines in marital satisfaction in newlywed couples characterized by high initial levels of distress (McNulty, 2008) and a higher likelihood of repeated negative partner behaviour (McNulty, 2010; 2011).

The communication researchers Waldron and Kelley (2008) have introduced the idea of forgiveness as a process of negotiated morality during which partners jointly have to work through specific forgiveness tasks (see Figure 1).

### Aim of the Present Study

We put forward the idea that unforgiving motivations (i.e., high revenge and avoidance motivation and a lack of benevolence) experienced in the aftermath of transgressions are associated with characteristic victim and perpetrator behaviours mirroring these relational negotiation tasks (see Table 1).

We examined forgiveness negotiation behaviours following real-life transgressions. Here, we focus on victim behaviours and their relations to transgression perceptions and (un-)forgiving motivations.

We hypothesized the revenge component to be associated with especially assertive behaviours, such as sense making and rule talk.

### Method & Results

- **Transgression recall study**
- **N = 236 in couple relationship, 82% ♀, age: M = 35.7, SD = 11.4**
- **36% married; relationship duration: M = 9.3 (Med = 5.5), SD = 9.6**
- **Report on recent partner transgression (< 2 years, ‘the fresher the better’)**
- **Time since transgression: M = 8.6 weeks (Med = 2.0, Mod = 0), SD = 15.7**

#### Table 2: Forgiveness Negotiation Behaviours and Transgression Perceptions

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Task</th>
<th>Victim</th>
<th>Perpetrator</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Manage Emotions</td>
<td>Express feelings, e.g. anger, hurt, disappointment</td>
<td>Express empathy; sympathize; try to console partner</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Make Sense</td>
<td>Ask for reasons and motives of partner behaviour; explore context</td>
<td>Give explanations; clarify context /circumstances</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Grant &amp; Seek</td>
<td>Express willingness to forgive; clarify/set conditions {’I’ll forgive you if...’}; payback revenge</td>
<td>Ask for pardon/apologize; make amends; offer compensation; signal regret</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Forgive</td>
<td>Suggest/set new rules; talk over dos and don’ts; impose restrictions</td>
<td>Suggest new rules; talk over dos and don’ts; accept restrictions</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The more unforgiving motivational states were experienced, the more forgiveness negotiation behaviours were reported; this was especially true for the revenge component. Associations were somewhat reduced when controlling for transgression perceptions, but mostly stayed significant.

In particular, the component of revenge motivation was not only linked to expressing one’s feelings (manage emotions) and payback revenge, but also and importantly with sense making and rule talk behaviours.

### Discussion & Outlook

In our view, assertive behaviours like sense making or rule talk represent key elements in forgiveness negotiation for holding the opportunity to actively address relational nuisances and problematic interaction patterns (cf. Gerlach et al., in press) – an opportunity of pronounced importance in distressed couples, but likely to be missed by those reacting overly forbearant.

Future research tracing relationship development over an extended period of time may determine whether these behaviours may account for the context-dependent long-term effects of forgiveness in couples.

Using a refined version of the instrument we are about to investigate real-life transgressions within a diary framework, hereby looking at the sequencing of forgiveness tasks and their coupling with temporal courses of forgiving motivations (cf. McCullough et al., 2003).

In these studies, we will also address the question of how these associations are moderated by relationship context. Moreover, taking into account the genuinely dyadic nature of forgiveness negotiation, in future research we will also examine perpetrator behaviours and partner effects using dyadic data.

### References


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