



Background

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).

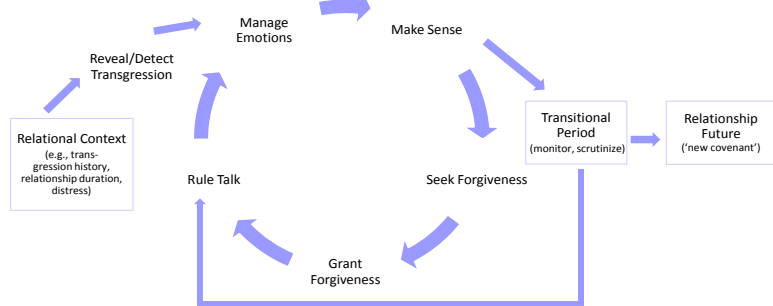
Aim of the Present Study

We put forward the idea that unforgiving motivations (i.e., high **revenge** and **avoidant 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.

Figure 1: A Process Model of Forgiveness Negotiation



(modified after Waldron & Kelley, 2008)

Table 1: Victim and Perpetrator Behaviours

Task	Victim	Perpetrator
Manage Emotions	Express feelings, e.g. anger, hurt, disappointment	Express empathy; sympathize; try to console partner
Make Sense	Ask for reasons and motives of partner behaviour; explore context	Give explanations; clarify context /circumstances
Grant & Seek Forgiveness	Express willingness to forgive; clarify/set conditions ('I'll forgive you if...'); payback revenge	Ask for pardon/apologize; make amends; offer compensation; signal regret
Rule Talk	Suggest/set new rules; talk over dos and don'ts; impose restrictions	Suggest new rules; talk over dos and don'ts; accept restrictions

(modified after Gerlach, Agroskin, & Denissen, in press)

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

	Manage Emotions	Make Sense	Grant Forgiveness	Payback Revenge	Rule Talk	Seek Forgiveness *
Severity	.53***	.40***	.02	.17***	.32***	-.02
Intentionality	.35***	.27***	-.08	.21***	.32***	.03
Intrusiveness	.49***	.42***	.05	.15**	.27***	-.02

Transgressions perceived as **severe**, **intentional**, and **intrusive** were associated with more forgiveness negotiation behaviours.

*Perpetrator behaviours as reported by victims

Table 3: Forgiveness Negotiation Behaviours and (Un-)Forgiving Motivations

	Manage Emotions	Make Sense	Grant Forgiveness	Payback Revenge	Rule Talk	Seek Forgiveness *
Revenge	.61***	.51***	.02	.31***	.38***	.20**
Avoidance	.36***	.10	-.24***	.25***	.13*	-.06
Benevolence	-.22***	.01	.61***	-.16**	-.16**	.14*

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 to **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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