

THE CORRELATION BETWEEN RELATIONSHIP CLOSENESS AND EPISODIC
FORGIVENESS

by

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Abstract

The present study assessed the correlation between romantic relationship closeness and forgiveness. It was hypothesized that there would be a positive correlation between those in closer relationships and forgiveness. It was further questioned whether or not single people would yield lower levels of forgiveness as compared to those in romantic relationships. An online survey study was done that incorporated the Relationship Closeness Inventory (Berscheid et al., 1989), transgression scenarios and IOS Scale. There was a significant correlation between closeness on the IOS and forgiveness toward the transgression scenarios, but there was not a significant correlation between the RCI and forgiveness. There was a link between forgiveness and the IOS such that the more forgiving people were, the closer they identified themselves to be with their partner and vice versa. There was no significant difference in forgiveness between the single participants and those who were in a relationship.

Keywords: relationships, relationship closeness, transgression, forgiveness

The Correlation between Relationship Closeness and Episodic Forgiveness

Romantic relationships are complex structures which require maintenance and care to maintain. Part of the complexity of maintaining a romantic relationship is figuring out how to deal with transgressions within the relationship. Forgiveness is an important part of mending transgressions within romantic relationships. Studies have found a link between forgiveness and important factors of relationships, such as relationship closeness (Fincham and Beach, 2012). Relationship closeness has the potential to affect how relationships are maintained. Relationship closeness is defined as the strength of the emotional bond between the couples, along with their level of interdependence between each other (Dibble, Levine, & Park, 2012). Research has found a link between interdependence (relationship closeness) and the longevity of a relationship, along with how much time people spend together. If a couple exhibits higher levels of relationship closeness that is partially due to the amount of time they have been together and what they spend their time doing together (Berscheid et al., 1989).

To contribute to the importance of studying the link between relationship closeness and forgiveness, those within romantic relationships appear to view forgiveness as helpful and valuable to the construction of a healthy relationship. In a study conducted by Rye & Pargament (2002), college women who faced wrong-doings in their relationships participated in various forms of forgiveness training programs for six weeks, which taught them how to forgive their partner. One purpose of the study was to see if women felt that learning about forgiveness would help their well-being (in terms of stress, anxiety, and depression) after they had faced wrong-doing in their relationships. Supporting this hypothesis, the women in this study reported that they viewed forgiveness in relationships as an important skill to learn, and they also exhibited lower levels of stress, anxiety and depression after going through the forgiveness training

program than they did before beginning the program. In addition to the former study showing that people perceive forgiveness to be an important factor of a romantic relationship, in another study by Shola (2018), participants indicated that forgiveness contributed to marriage stability and relationship enhancement. In another study subjects were asked to observe different behaviors of couples and then to rate them. The participants rated forgiving partners as more committed and satisfied within their romantic relationships than non-forgiving partners (DiDonato et al., 2015).

Not only is forgiveness believed to be an important aspect of a relationship, but research also supports the idea that forgiveness helps people maintain positive habits within relationships and is linked with greater relationship commitment (Finkel et al., 2002). In addition to the aforementioned study, research shows a positive correlation between forgiveness levels and commitment in a romantic relationship after a transgression has occurred. In a longitudinal study which measured a couples' commitment before and after a transgression had occurred in their relationship, it was found that if forgiveness was granted to one's romantic partner after that transgression had occurred, relationship commitment levels increased (Ysseldyk & Wohl, 2012). Additionally, research has shown that forgiveness is positively related to pro-relationship behaviors such as approaching situations in a constructive manner, being willing to sacrifice for the relationship, and cooperating with a partner (Karremans & Van Lange, 2004). Research has further shown that forgiveness promotes other pro-relationship behaviors such as emotional empathy and affective reactions. These pro-relationship behaviors are traits that can predict forgiveness and can be predicted by forgiveness (Fincham et al., 2002). Through the provided research, forgiveness is continually connected to positive effects on romantic relationships.

Although research has found positive effects of forgiveness on relationships, other research has examined if forgiveness fosters any potentially harmful effects on romantic relationships. In a study by Luchies et al., (2010), forgiveness was linked with some harmful effects in romantic relationships such as harm to the forgiver's self-image. This harm to their self-image can occur if the person forgiving is led to feel unsafe or unvalued by their partner, and those feelings can have an impact on relationship closeness (Luchies et al., 2010). Thus, it is fruitful to determine how relationship closeness correlates with forgiveness.

While research has studied the effects of forgiveness on romantic relationships, little research has investigated how relationship closeness might have an effect on forgiveness. However, reviews of the literature on forgiveness indicate that relationship closeness and forgiveness might be correlated (Fincham and Beach, 2012). The question that remains is whether closer relationships yield more forgiving attitudes towards one's romantic partner. If people within closer romantic relationships do exhibit more forgiving habits, perhaps these habits are part of what contributes to the relationships becoming 'close.' Delving more into the link between relationship closeness and forgiveness will provide some more information as to how the structure of close relationships are formed and how they are maintained. The first question posed here is whether there is a link between romantic relationship closeness and episodic forgiveness. Episodic forgiveness is defined as forgiveness which is given based off of the occurrence of one transgression independently, rather than trait forgiveness which is an individual's general tendency toward forgiveness. It is hypothesized that closer relationships will be linked to higher rates of episodic forgiveness. The second question regards whether people who identify as single will be more or less forgiving than people in relationships towards hypothetical relationship transgressions. It was hypothesized that single people would exhibit

less forgiving attitudes than people within relationships, as they would not be influenced by relationship commitment.

Method

Participants

Using Amazon's Mechanical Turk, 199 participants (58.79% male, 41.2% female) were recruited for this study in exchange for two dollars. Of the participants, 73.4% were in a relationship, and 58.8% identified as male. The participants' ages ranged between the ages of 18 to 73 ($M = 35.75$, $SD = 10.73$). The participants also ranged greatly in relationship length, with relationships as short as two months to as long as 594 months ($M = 100.17$, $SD = 105.90$).

Materials

Relationship Closeness. Two measures were used to assess relationship closeness. First, the Relationship Closeness Inventory (Berscheid et al., 1989) was used to assess self-reported relationship closeness based on how much time two people spend alone together, what they spend their time doing, how much their partner influences their thoughts, feelings and behaviors, and how much their plans and goals are affected by their partner. The survey first asked the subjects five questions which are used to assess the type of relationship the person is in and how long the relationship has lasted. The second question of the original survey lists a variety of different categories of relationships and asked the subjects to choose which category best describes their relationship. This second question was adjusted to include only the romantic categories of relationships which were: married, engaged, living together, dating only this person, and dating this person and others. Afterwards, a checklist of activities was given and the subjects were asked to tick-off the activities that they have done with their partner within the past week. Next, the subjects were given a list of 27 short statements regarding how much influence

the participant's partner has on their thoughts, feelings and behaviors, and were asked to rate their agreement with each statement using a scale of 1 (strongly disagree) through 7 (strongly agree). Such statements included, "X will influence my future financial security", "X influences the way I feel about myself" and, "X influences and contributes to my overall happiness". The final part of the survey asked participants to indicate how their partner affects their future plans by providing them with seven scenarios such as vacation plans, school related plans, marriage plans, financial expectations etc. The subjects were then asked to rate how much their partner affects each of these seven plans by marking a number from 1 (not at all) through 7 (a great extent).

Relationship closeness was also measured through the single-item Inclusion-of-Other-in-the-Self Scale (IOS Scale, Aron, Aron, & Smollan, 1992). Participants were instructed to select the picture that best described their relationship from seven drawings of intertwined circles. Each drawing displayed an image of two circles. The drawings showed the circles at different distances in respect to each other. The first drawing had the two circles far apart, while the next drawing displayed the circles being slightly closer together, and the circles eventually overlapped to different degrees in the remaining five images. The participant would pick how close they viewed themselves to be with their partner based on how far apart, or close together the circles were.

Transgression Scenarios. All participants were given a list of 12 scenarios of transgressions within romantic relationships and were asked to select the answer which best indicated how they thought they would respond to their partner in each given scenario. The participants were instructed that each of the given scenarios would be involving romantic relationships and that they should imagine that they were the one being subject to each given

scenario while in a romantic relationship. Transgressions were designed to range in severity such that half were what the experimenter considered severe and half were minimal. For each scenario, the participants were asked to rate how likely they would be to forgive their partner in each given situation from 1 (“Forgive without any remaining negative feelings”), 2 (“Forgive after some time”), 3 (“Forgive with residual negative feelings”), and 4 (“Will not forgive”). Example scenarios included, “Your partner did not take out the trash even though you asked them to,” “Your partner cheated on you by having sex with another person,” and “Your partner cursed at your close family member when they got into an argument with them.” For the full list of transgressions, see Appendix A. Participant answers across the scenarios were averaged into a composite forgiveness score such that lower numbers indicated greater forgiveness ($\alpha = .75$).

Design & Procedure

The goal of this research was to answer the question of whether or not romantic relationship closeness is linked to peoples’ episodic forgiveness towards their partner. Both individuals within romantic relationships and individuals who identified as single participated in the study. The people within romantic relationships were used to assess the link between relationship closeness and episodic forgiveness by determining if people in closer relationships exhibited more forgiving attitudes. The single participants served as a comparison group for forgiveness scores on the transgression scenarios.

The experiment was conducted online using Qualtrics. The participants first filled out the demographics questionnaire. The demographics questionnaire asked them their relationship status (single or in a relationship), duration of the relationship, age and gender. Afterwards, the participants were given the transgression scenarios questionnaire. The transgression scenarios were then followed by a question to assess the relevance of the transgression scenarios to each

participants' relationship. The question stated, "The previous questions detailed possible transgressions that someone might go through in a relationship. Given those transgressions in addition to other possible transgressions that occur in your own relationship, approximately how many transgressions have occurred in your relationship within the past 7 days." Participants then completed a task for an unrelated study.

Next, participants who indicated having a romantic partner were asked to indicate the initials of their partner. The participants then took the relationship closeness measure which provided the indicated initials to remind participants who they were responding about. These participants then completed the IOS scale. Finally, all participants were debriefed about the study.

Results

One factor of the Relationship Closeness Inventory (time-spent-together; Berscheid et al., 1989) had to be excluded from the analysis because the participants' answers indicated a lack of understanding of how to properly respond to the question formatting. The other two factors were calculated and summed according to the regular RCI scoring instructions.

Main Analyses

On average, participants reported they were most likely to forgive most of the scenarios "after some time" ($M = 2.29$, $SD = .37$). To test whether individuals in closer relationships would exhibit higher rates of forgiveness, a series of correlations were conducted. Inconsistent with the study's hypothesis, there was no significant correlation between scores on the RCI and forgiveness $r(144) = -.026$, $p = .755$. Forgiveness and the IOS scale were found to have a negative association $r(144) = -.156$, $p = .060$. There was a negative association because the forgiveness measure was scored inversely. The more forgiving one was, the more closely they

identified themselves with their partner. These results support the hypothesis that forgiveness and relationship closeness are linked.

Finally, to assess whether individuals predicted varying levels of forgiveness based on whether they were currently in a relationship and imagining a specific partner commit these transgressions rather than single and imagining a distant hypothetical, an independent samples *t*-test compared forgiveness scores across these two groups. The results indicated that there was no significant difference in how likely single ($M = 2.23$, $SD = .40$) versus non-single ($M = 2.3$, $SD = .36$) participants thought they would be to forgive the scenarios, $t(197) = 1.31$, $p = .191$.

Additional Analyses

To examine whether the present study replicated past research, we additionally examined the correlation between forgiveness, closeness (on the IOS), and relationship satisfaction. The scores on the forgiveness measure were coded to indicate that lower forgiveness scores meant more forgiveness. The results replicated past research in that overall forgiveness was negatively correlated with relationship satisfaction ($r(144) = -.272$, $p = .001$). The transgressions scenarios were categorized into one of two groups: low severity and high severity transgressions. Both the low severity and high severity transgressions were negatively associated with relationship satisfaction, $r(144) = -.267$, $p = .001$; $r(144) = -.185$, $p = .026$, respectively.

Discussion

The purpose of this study was to determine if there is a correlation between relationship closeness and episodic forgiveness. Past research has shown that forgiveness is viewed as an important factor within relationships and that forgiveness promotes pro-relationship behaviors (Berscheid et al., 1989; Rye & Pargament, 2002; Shola, 2018; DiDonato et al., 2015; Karremans & Van Lange, 2004). Through these pieces of research, it has become clear that forgiveness

appears to be an important factor of romantic relationships and could impact how those relationships are maintained. The purpose of studying forgiveness in connection with relationship closeness was due to the link between relationship closeness and longevity of romantic relationships (Berscheid et al., 1989). It was hypothesized that relationship closeness and forgiveness would be linked to each other. The results of the present study suggest that there may be a correlation between relationship closeness and forgiveness. Being that relationship closeness has been linked with relationship longevity, and in the present study relationship closeness and forgiveness appeared to be correlated with each other, it is possible that forgiveness also might have a link with relationship longevity.

Although an association was found with the IOS measure, there was no significant correlation between the RCI and the transgressions scenarios. Given that one section of the RCI measure was excluded from the analyses of this study, future research should ensure that the participants properly understand how to respond to the given questions in order for the RCI to give a proper assessment of relationship closeness.

Another element of the study was to assess if people who identify as single would exhibit higher or lower levels of forgiveness than people within relationships and the results of this study indicated that there was no significant difference between forgiveness levels of those who are single versus those who are in a relationship. Thus, although individuals in romantic relationships appear to value the concept of forgiveness (Rye & Pargament, 2002), they do not appear to be more motivated to claim they would forgive their partner than individuals not currently in romantic relationships.

Limitations

One of the main limitations in the present study was our inability to use the time-spent-together aspect of the *Relationship Closeness Inventory* (Berscheid et al., 1989). Participants were provided with two scales in order to indicate the hours and minutes spent on each task every week. Unfortunately, the results suggest that while some participants used this scale correctly (for example, indicating they spent two hours and thirty minutes on a task, others selected options indicating greater than sixty minutes and seem to have used the minutes scale to provide more precise estimates of their hourly estimates. Because of this discrepancy, the present study had to use a more limited, and un-validated calculation of relationship closeness that omitted these scores.

Another potential limitation in this study is the use of a new measure to assess forgiveness. Although the present measure is un-validated, a few elements of the results suggest that this measure was successful in capturing forgiveness levels. Beyond demonstrating acceptable levels of reliability across the scenarios, this measure also demonstrated concurrent validity, as it correlated with relationship satisfaction, just as other measures of trait forgiveness do. However, future studies should either validate the *Transgressions Scenarios Measure*, or use a different measure of forgiveness. Furthermore, future research should account for trait forgiveness in order to determine how participants tend to respond to transgressions in general. Due to time constraints, this survey study did not include a trait forgiveness measure, which means we cannot determine to what extent our findings show a unique effect of episodic, rather than trait, forgiveness. Similarly, this study did not include other personality measures but future studies should consider how personality might relate to forgiveness. For example, past research has found positive correlations between grit, self-forgiveness, agreeableness and forgiveness of others (Walker, 2017).

Finally, although the variability in demographics within the present sample adds external validity to our findings, the extreme differences among participants might obscure underlying relationships between the variables. For example, ages ranged between 18 and 73, and the duration of the relationships similarly varied greatly. It is possible that forgiveness processes function differently at different stages of life or in newer versus older relationships. Future research should look at these issues more closely.

Conclusion

Research on forgiveness within romantic relationships indicates it is associated with pro-relationship behaviors, commitment and relationship enhancement (Karremans & Van Lange, 2004; Ysseldyk & Wohl, 2012; Shola 2018). Given that forgiveness does contribute to various aspects of romantic relationships, further studies are called for in order to continue to examine the possible link between forgiveness and relationship closeness.

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Appendix A

Transgression Scenario Measure

For the following section, you will be asked to rate how likely you would forgive your partner based on the scenarios listed below. If you are currently in a relationship, respond as if these scenarios happened between you and your current partner. If you are single, pretend as if you are in a relationship and respond in accordance with how easily you think you would forgive your partner for each scenario.

1. Your partner did not take out the trash even though you asked them to (M).
2. Your partner cheated on you by having sex with another person (S).
3. Your partner cursed at your family member during an argument with them (S).
4. Your partner forgot to pick you up from the airport (M).
5. Your partner revealed a very personal secret of yours to a friend (S).
6. Your partner told you that your outfit does not look good on you (M).
7. Your partner forgot about your birthday, and after you told them about it they didn't seem to care (S).
8. Your partner continually made fun of how you pronounced something even though you had told them that it makes you upset (M).
9. Your partner did not go to your family event because they told you that they did not want to go (M).
10. Your partner aggressively yells at you during an argument (S).
11. You gave your partner a birthday present, and they did not like it and asked you to return it (M).
12. Your partner was flirting with another person at a bar and you saw it happen (S).

The subjects were presented with a four-point likert scale which would indicate their likelihood to forgive. The options were, 1. "Forgive without any negative remaining feelings", 2. "Forgive after some time", 3. "Forgive eventually with residual negative feelings", and 4. "Will not forgive."

Above, each scenario is followed by either a letter 'M' or 'S' to indicate whether they were considered to be minor or severe.

Instead of the words "your partner", the subjects indicated initial of their partner was coded to fit in its place.