

INEQUITY IN FORGIVENESS: IMPLICATIONS FOR PERSONAL AND RELATIONAL WELL-BEING

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In close relationships partners tend to be, simultaneously or alternatively, perpetrators and victims of transgressions. Yet forgiveness has been examined primarily from the perspective of the victim and no research has investigated experienced inequity between receiving and giving forgiveness. Informed by equity and esteem enhancement theories, the present study investigated whether an imbalance between granting and receiving forgiveness in marriage affects subsequent psychological and relational well-being. Among married couples ($n = 129$), spouses agreed that husbands tended to be underbenefited and wives overbenefited in regard to marital forgiveness. For wives inequity in marital forgiveness predicted a decrease in personal and relational subjective well-being over a 6-month period. Interestingly, the prediction was significant even when controlling for underbenefited versus overbenefited status. Inequity predicted cross-partner well-being only indirectly through one's own well-being.

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There has been a dramatic increase in research on forgiveness with most studies focusing on the perspective of the victim of a transgression. Forgiveness has been shown to yield salutary outcomes for victims; it is associated with greater psychological well-being, reduced depressive symptoms, distress, anxiety and enhanced life satisfaction, self-esteem, and positive mood (e.g., Coyle & Enright, 1997; Reed & Enright, 2006; Rye et al., 2005). These beneficial effects appear to be stronger for people in closer and more committed relationships with the offender prior to the transgression (Bono, McCullough, & Root, 2008; Karremans, VanLange, Ouwerkerk, & Kluwer, 2003).

Considerably less is known about the consequences of forgiveness for perpetrators of transgressions. Hall and Fincham (2008) showed that offenders who feel forgiven by their victims become more self-forgiving, that is more compassionate and benevolent toward themselves. Given that self-forgiveness appears to promote mental health (Romero et al., 2006; Wohl, DeShea, & Wahkinney, 2008), this result suggests that forgiveness may have positive effects on transgressors as well. Contrary to this line of reasoning, however, Kelln and Ellard (1999) found some support for the idea that forgiveness may exacerbate rather than ameliorate perpetrators' distress, by increasing their sense of guilt and indebtedness, especially when forgiveness is perceived as an unsolicited gift. Finally, Stillwell and Baumeister (1997) compared perspectives of victims and perpetrators. They found that victims tend to overlook details that facilitate forgiving and embellish their memories with details that make forgiving more difficult, whereas transgressors tend to embellish details, such as extenuating circumstances, that facilitate forgiving.

The disparate attention given to victim and perpetrator perspectives in forgiveness research is particularly critical when there is ongoing contact between the two parties involved. This becomes clear when one considers forgiveness in close relationships, a topic to which we now turn.

FORGIVING IN CLOSE RELATIONSHIPS

A substantial literature is emerging on forgiveness in close relationships (for reviews see Fincham, 2009; Fincham, Hall, & Beach, 2006). Numerous studies show that forgiving in close relationships is re-

lated to improved intimacy, satisfaction, commitment, and relational quality and less ongoing conflict (Coop Gordon, Hughes, Tomick, Dixon, & Litzinger, 2009; Fincham & Beach, 2007; Fincham, Beach, & Davila, 2007; Paleari, Regalia, & Fincham, 2005, 2010; Tsang, McCullough, & Fincham, 2006). These beneficial effects of forgiveness were more likely among spouses who infrequently engaged in negative behaviors, whereas forgiveness appears to be detrimental over time for spouses married to partners who frequently behaved negatively (McNulty, 2008). Such findings have led Worthington, Witvliet, Pietrini, and Miller (2007) to suggest that "forgiveness of strangers or people with whom one does not want nor expect continuing contact is fundamentally different from forgiving a loved one" (p. 292).

The above observation is particularly poignant when we realize that the imperfection of relationship partners necessarily gives rise to a history of hurts in a relationship. It is therefore inevitable in a close relationship that partners will tend to be, simultaneously or alternatively, perpetrators and victims of transgressions which are not only inevitable, but also quite serious and frequent (Leary, Springer, Negel, Ansell, & Evans, 1998; among the most hurtful episodes reported by victims were criticism, betrayal, explicit rejection or abandonment, and being ignored).

In light of such considerations, relationship partners are likely to develop a sense of how frequently they forgive their partner for transgressions and how frequently their partner forgives them. This can lead to feeling underbenefited (I forgive my partner much more than he/she forgives me) or overbenefited (my partner forgives me much more than I forgive him/her) when it comes to forgiveness; conversely individuals who perceive forgiving their partner to the same extent that their partner forgives them are likely to experience equity or reciprocity regarding forgiveness. In this respect, however, a recent study found only weak evidence of reciprocity in marital and parent-child forgiveness (Hoyt, Fincham, McCullough, Maio, & Davila, 2005), suggesting that, at least within these relationships, perceiving imbalance in forgiveness may be a more common experience than perceiving equity. The effects on personal and relational well-being of this lack of reciprocity and, more generally, of the cumulative experiences of forgiving and being forgiven are, however, largely unknown.

The purpose of the present study was to address this issue by investigating the consequences of imbalance between giving and

receiving forgiveness upon psychological and relational well-being in a sample of married couples. Equity theory served as the main theoretical framework for the study.

EQUITY THEORY AND MARITAL RELATIONSHIPS

Equity theory, an extension of social exchange theory, maintains that considerations of fairness, or equity, are relevant in *any* relationship in which exchanges take place (Adams, 1965; Walster, Walster, & Berscheid, 1978). Equity exists for people whenever they perceive that their contributions to the relationship are proportional to their rewards. On the other hand, when people feel they are getting too much or too little, relative to what they are contributing to the relationship, they perceive inequity. Equity theorists also argue that individuals try to balance their contributions and rewards in interpersonal relationships; those who feel more successful in this respect have greater psychological well-being and better health than do those who are underbenefited or overbenefited (e.g., Buunk & Schaufeli, 1999; Davey & Eggebeen, 1998).

Notwithstanding support for the equity approach, its universality has been questioned by Clark and Mills (1979, 1993; Mills & Clark, 1982) who argue that equity principles apply only to exchange relationships such as business relationships and relationships between casual acquaintances or strangers. In contrast, people in communal relationships, such as those between spouses, are more responsive to the partner's needs, and are less concerned with ongoing evaluation and maintenance of equity. In other words, equity considerations should not be really relevant to marital relationships because the good of one's partner and of the couple as a whole is ideally preferred to individual gains. Consequently, equity considerations should not be really relevant to the quality of long-term intimate relationships and to the well-being of partners involved in them.

Contrary to this line of reasoning, however, several studies show that partners in romantic relationships are indeed both aware of and evaluate whether they are getting an adequate return on their contributions (e.g., Buunk & Van Yperen, 1991; Kuijer, Buunk, & Ybema, 2001; Longmore & DeMaris, 1997). In particular, there is evidence that perceived inequity is a common experience for most couples, both because each partner's contribution in a given domain (e.g., housework, child rearing, financial incomes, emotional support)

is not likely to be the same, thereby leading to a sense of imbalance at least in that domain, and because imbalance in one area is not always compensated by imbalance of the opposite kind in another area (DeMaris, 2007; Sprecher, 2001). The relevance of equity considerations to romantic relationships is also documented by a growing number of studies showing that perceived inequity, either global or domain-specific, is predictive of negative psychological and relational outcomes (e.g., Gleason, Iida, Bolger, & Shrout, 2003; Grote & Clark, 2001; Stafford & Canary, 2006; Van Yperen & Buunk, 1990).

EQUITY THEORY, ESTEEM ENHANCEMENT THEORY, AND WELL-BEING

According to equity theory and research, individuals who perceive inequity between their own and their partner's contributions and outcomes have a lower level of personal well-being and are less satisfied with the relationship than individuals who experience equity (e.g., Adams, 1965; Austin & Walster, 1974; Buunk & Mutsaers, 1999; McCulloch, 1990; Wright & Aquilino, 1998). This is the case for both the underbenefited, who are commonly disappointed, angry, or hurt, because they feel others are taking advantage of them by giving less than they do, and the overbenefited, who feel guilty, uneasy, indebted, sad, or inferior because receiving more than giving violates the norm of reciprocity, damages one's self-esteem, and may lead to a state of dependency (e.g., Guerrero, La Valley, & Farinelli, 2008; Hassebrauck, 1986; Peters, 2005).

Equity theory and research suggest that stronger adverse effects are typically expected for the underbenefited than for the overbenefited (Adams, 1965; Walster et al., 1978). However, a number of studies have found that being overbenefited may in some circumstances be even more distressing than being underbenefited (e.g., Kleiboer, Kuijer, Hox, Schreurs, & Bensing, 2006; Väänänen, Buunk, Kivimäki, Pentti, & Vahtera, 2005). These mixed findings can be partly explained by methodological considerations such as the level of specificity at which inequity was evaluated. When inequity was assessed through general perception of overall imbalance in the relationship (i.e., how equitable is your relationship?) as well as through perception of one's partner's and one's own overall contributions to the relationship (i.e., how much do you give to/receive

from your relationship?), equity research shows that those who feel underbenefited experience more distress than those who feel overbenefited (e.g., Kuijer et al., 2001; Sprecher, 2001; Ybema Kuijer, Hagedoorn, & Buunk, 2002). In contrast, when inequity was assessed within a specific relationship domain (for example support, Gleason et al., 2003; Kleiboer et al., 2006; Liang, Krause, & Bennett, 2001; Väänänen et al., 2005), being overbenefited was found to be more detrimental than being underbenefited.

This last finding conflicts with equity theory but is consistent with esteem enhancement theory (Batson, 1998). According to the latter theory, receiving repeatedly from others, especially close others, may be threatening to one's self-concept because it provides evidence that one has failed, is inferior, or is dependent (Fisher, Nadler, & Whitcher-Alagna, 1982; Kleiboer et al., 2006; Nadler, Fisher, & Ben-Itzhak, 1983; Newsom & Schulz, 1998; Stephens, 1990). Similarly, feeling overbenefited is assumed to be particularly distressing because it often implies a lack of the competence, knowledge, or other valuable resources to cope, thus causing damage to one's self-esteem.

THE PRESENT STUDY

Informed by the above theoretical perspectives, the present study had four main goals. The first was to examine the effects of imbalance between the granting and receiving of marital forgiveness on indicators of subsequent personal and relational well-being. Prior research has shown that feeling underbenefited or overbenefited is associated with higher depressive symptomatology, and lower life satisfaction, marital adjustment, and relationship quality (e.g., Antonucci, Fuhrer, & Jackson, 1990; Buunk & Mutsaers, 1999; Davidson, 1984; Liang et al., 2001; Longmore & DeMaris, 1997). There is also evidence that equity considerations are more important to women than to men and have a stronger impact on their marital quality and subjective well-being (e.g., Acitelli & Antonucci, 1994; Baxter, 1986; Frisco & Williams, 2003), probably because of women's greater relationship orientation (Buunk & Van Yperen, 1991; Sprecher, 2001). We therefore hypothesized that spouses who perceive inequity in marital forgiveness experience poorer relational and

personal subjective well-being over a six month period (Hypothesis 1a). We also hypothesized that experienced inequity in marital forgiveness would be a stronger predictor of subjective well-being for wives than for husbands (Hypothesis 1b).

A second goal was to investigate the relative importance of giving forgiveness, receiving forgiveness, and the imbalance between them. As a consequence we examined their relative power in predicting well-being. Specifically, we hypothesized that experienced inequity in marital forgiveness would explain a significant portion of variance in personal and relational well-being over and beyond that explained by the total amount of forgiveness given and total amount of forgiveness received (Hypothesis 2).

A third goal was to explore whether inequity in marital forgiveness perceived by each spouse predicts the partner's personal and relational well-being. According to equity theory, inequity is a subjective experience which primarily exists in the eye of the beholder (e.g., Walster, Berscheid, & Walster, 1973) and therefore affects his/her well-being more directly and deeply than his/her partner's well-being. Relying upon this assumption, previous research has rarely investigated cross-partner effects of marital inequity (for an exception see Ybema, Kuijer, Buunk, DeJong, & Sanderman, 2001). Consistent with the idea that spouses are primarily sensitive to the degree of inequity they themselves perceived as well as with evidence showing reciprocal influence of spouses well-being (e.g., Levenson & Gottman, 1985), we expected that each spouse's inequity affects the partner's well-being only indirectly through the spouse's own well-being (Hypothesis 3).

The last goal of the study was to determine whether inequity in marital forgiveness predicts spouses' outcomes beyond their overbenefited and underbenefited status. Consistent with research evaluating inequity within a specific relationship domain as well as with esteem enhancement theory, we hypothesized that spouses who felt overbenefited in marital forgiveness would experience less relational and personal well-being than those who felt underbenefited (Hypothesis 4).

METHOD

PARTICIPANTS

Participants were 129 married couples living in Northern Italy. On average spouses were in their mid forties (husbands: M age = 46.2, SD = 6.7; wives: M age = 43.8, SD = 6.2), had been married for almost 19 years (M = 18.9; SD = 6.6) and had 2 children (range = 1-4). Most of them identified as Roman Catholics (husbands: 94.6%; wives: 95.3%) and considered religion at least somewhat important in their life (husbands: 82.1%; wives: 86.6%).¹

PROCEDURE

Spouses were recruited by inviting students from intact families who attended secondary schools or undergraduate courses to ask both their parents to participate in a study on marital relationships at two time points (T1 and T2) separated by a 6-month interval.

At each wave of data collection, couples who volunteered to participate received two packets, one for the husband and one for the wife, containing a questionnaire, return envelopes, and a cover letter instructing them on their task. The importance of independent completion of the materials was emphasized in the letter and the couple were asked to mail back the questionnaires to the researcher within one week and not to talk about the study until they had placed the materials in the mail.

Of the eligible couples, 74% returned completed questionnaires at T1 and 66% at both waves. The couples who returned completed questionnaires at both waves did not differ from the ones who participated only in the first data collection with respect to any of the variables investigated. Couples did not receive any compensation for their participation in the study.

1. A recent meta-analysis on forgiveness (Fehr, Gelfand, & Nag, 2010) documented only weak and inconsistent associations between religious involvement and forgiveness (mean r = .19). In our sample religiosity was also weakly to moderately related to each of the variables investigated (r 's < |.27|) and not uniquely significantly related to any of them (r 's < |.15| ns, after controlling for the remaining variables). As a result, we omitted religiosity from our analyses. There is, however, some evidence that specific aspects of religious experience, not assessed here, are robustly related to forgiveness (e.g., intercessory prayer appears to induce forgiveness, Lambert, Fincham, Stillman, Graham, & Beach, 2010).

MEASURES

At each time point, spouses completed measures of marital quality, depression, and life satisfaction which were used as indicators of personal and relational well-being.

Personal and Relational Well-Being. Marital quality was evaluated using the Quality of Marriage Index (QMI; Norton, 1983). This inventory assesses marital quality with broadly worded, global items (e.g., We have a good marriage). Respondents showed their degree of agreement with each of five items on a 7-point Likert-type scale (1 = very strong disagreement, 7 = very strong agreement) and with one item on a 10-point Likert-type scale (1 = very strong disagreement, 10 = very strong agreement). Because the data were positively skewed, the following transformation recommended by Norton (1983) was used: $QMI^* = .001(z_i + v)^3$ where QMI^* = transformed QMI, z_i = standardized score, v = variance across intervals obtained by stratifying the distribution of the QMI into 5% intervals. Coefficient alphas were .95 for husbands and .96 for wives. Higher scores indicate a higher marital quality.

The CES-D Scale was used to measure depression (Radloff, 1977). The scale consists of 20 items describing a variety of depressive symptoms (e.g., I felt that I could not shake off the blues even with the help from my family or friends, I felt that everything I did was an effort). Participants reported on 4-point Likert-type scales (0 = Rarely or none of the time, 3 = Most or all of the time) the frequency with which they had experienced each of the symptoms during the previous week. Coefficient alphas were .85 for husbands and .90 for wives. Scores were summed across items so that higher scores indicate a higher depression.

Participants reported their overall satisfaction with life by indicating the extent to which they agreed or disagreed with the 5 items of the Satisfaction with Life Scale (or SWLS; Diener, Emmons, Larsen, & Griffin, 1985), on a scale ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 7 (strongly agree). The SWLS measures the cognitive component of subjective well-being (e.g., In most ways my life is close to ideal). Coefficient alphas were .86 for husbands and .88 for wives. Scores were averaged across items so that higher scores indicate a higher life satisfaction.

The hypothesis that marital quality, depression, and satisfaction with life composites measured at each time point loaded on two

related well-being factors (well-being at T1 predicting well-being at T2) was tested separately on husbands and wives through CFA models in which factor loadings for well-being were constrained to be time-invariant and error variances for each indicator of well-being were allowed to correlate across waves (Bijleveld & van der Kamp, 1998). The CFA models showed an excellent fit in both husbands (S-B $\chi^2(5) = 3.850$, $p = .571$, R-CFI = 1.000, R-RMSEA = .000) and wives (S-B $\chi^2(5) = 5.661$, $p = .341$, R-CFI = 0.998, R-RMSEA = .032); all factor loadings were significant and greater than $|.45|$. Factor scores generated by these models were used as indicators of well-being.

At the first time point spouses also filled out measures assessing forgiveness given to the partner and received from him/her.

Forgiveness Given. The tendency to forgive the partner when hurt or wronged by him/her was assessed using a modified version of the Marital Offence-Specific Forgiveness Scale (MOFS; Paleari, Regalia, & Fincham, 2009). The MOFS is a 10-item psychometrically robust measure assessing marital forgiveness for a specific offense. In order to make the scale consistent with our goal of assessing dispositional marital forgiveness, items were modified so that they referred to marital transgressions in general rather than to a single transgression (for example, "Since my wife/husband behaved this way, I have been less willing to talk to her/him" became "When my wife/husband hurts me, I am less willing to talk to her/him for quite a while" and "Although she/he hurt me, I definitely put what happened aside so that we could resume our relationship" became "When my wife/husband hurts me, I quickly put it aside so that we can resume our relationship"). One item could not be adapted for present purposes leaving 9 items, each of which was rated on a 6-point Likert-type scale (1 = very strong disagreement, 6 = very strong agreement). An exploratory factor analysis (factor extraction method: Principal Factors Analysis; rotation method: Direct Oblimin) identified the existence of one factor which explained 50.3% and 53.4% of variance in husbands' and wives' data respectively. All the items had factor loadings greater than $|.40|$ and were averaged to form a Forgiveness Given index. Coefficient alphas were .90 for husbands and .91 for wives.

Forgiveness Received. Spouses rated the extent to which their partner tended to forgive them for hurts or wrongs they caused him/her by using the 9-item scale just described and rewording it so as

to assess received forgiveness instead of forgiveness granted (for example, "When my wife/husband hurts me, I am less willing to talk to her/him for quite a while" was turned into "When I hurt my wife/husband me, she/he is less willing to talk to me for quite a while"). As regards forgiveness received, all 9 items loaded on one factor which explained 51.3% and 51.9% of variance in husbands' and wives' data, respectively. All the items had factor loadings greater than $|.50|$ and were averaged in a Forgiveness Received index. Coefficient alphas were .89 for husbands and .90 for wives.

Inequity in Forgiveness. We calculated each spouse's degree of experienced inequity between forgiveness given and received by using difference scores (i.e., the algebraic difference between the Forgiveness Given and the Forgiveness Received indexes) as well as discrepancy scores (i.e., the sum of absolute differences between scores of forgiveness given items and forgiveness received, divided by the number of items). Difference scores capture departure from equity in the direction of overbenefit (negative scores) and underbenefit (positive scores), whereas discrepancy scores depict deviation from equity in either direction. Higher difference or discrepancy scores indicate a higher level of inequity.

DATA ANALYTIC STRATEGY

To take into account the interdependent nature of the data, we tested our hypotheses by estimating a series of Actor-Partner Interdependence (APIM) and competing mutual influence models (Kenny, Kashy, & Cook, 2006). Whereas the APIM assumes that each spouse influences the partner's outcome (i.e., personal and relational well-being) directly, the mutual influence model posits that each spouse affects the partner's outcome variable only indirectly through the spouse's own outcome.

In particular, we first estimated an APIM in which each partner's well-being at T2 was predicted by both his/her own and his/her partner's absolute level of inequity (i.e., inequity discrepancy scores), forgiveness given, forgiveness received, and well-being at T1. Besides partner effects the interdependence of dyad members was modelled in the APIM by allowing inequity, forgiveness given, forgiveness receive and well-being at T1 as well as disturbances of well-being at T2 to covary between partners.

We then estimated a corresponding mutual influence model in which each partner's well-being at T2 was predicted by his/her own absolute level of inequity (i.e., inequity discrepancy scores), forgiveness given, forgiveness received, and well-being at T1 as well as by his/her partner's well-being at T2; in this model the interdependence of dyad members was modelled not only by reciprocal causation of well-being at T2 but also by allowing inequity, forgiveness given, forgiveness received, and well-being at T1 to correlate between partners. We considered our first three hypotheses supported as long as paths linking inequity to well-being at T2 were significant and stronger in wives than in husbands (hypotheses 1 and 2) and no partner effect was significant in the APIM resulting in a worse fit for the APIM than for the corresponding mutual influence model (Hypothesis 3). In order to test our fourth hypothesis we followed a procedure suggested by Kuijer, Buunk, Ybema, & Wobbes (2002) and entered the linear terms for over/underbenefit (i.e., inequity difference scores) as further predictors in previous models while leaving out their components, that is forgiveness given, and forgiveness received. These components had to be excluded from the models because, as Edwards (1994) argued, algebraic difference indexes can not explain variance beyond that associated with their components considered jointly.² Our fourth hypothesis was considered supported as long as the linear terms for over/underbenefit were positively and significantly related to well-being at T2.

APIM and mutual influence models were estimated by conducting structural equation modeling analyses via EQS 6 (Bentler, 2005). We used single indicators to represent latent variables and fixed the path from the latent variable to the indicator at the square root of the reliability and the error variance at the scale variance multiplied by one minus the scale reliability (Hair, Anderson, Tatham, & Black, 1995; Williams & Hazer, 1986). This disattenuation strategy was followed to take into account the biasing effect of the measurement error in these indicators on the parameters of structural models.

Inspection of Mardia's (1970) coefficients suggested significant deviations from multivariate normality. To reduce the impact of

2. If we consider the following regression equations, $Z = b_0 + b_1(X-Y) + e$ and $Z = b_0 + b_1X + b_2Y + e$, the first using the algebraic difference between X and Y as a single predictor of Z and the second simply using X and Y as separate predictor, they are identical except that the former constrains the coefficients on X and Y to be equal in magnitude but opposite in sign (i.e., $b_1 = -b_2$). Like any constraint, this cannot increase explained variance and, in most cases, will decrease it (see Edwards, 1994).

nonnormality we therefore relied on Satorra and Bentler (2001) scaled estimates in rescaling the standard errors and the chi-square statistics into the Satorra–Bentler scaled chi-square (S–B χ^2) statistic. Fit indexes like the comparative fit index (CFI; Bentler, 1990) and the root-mean-square error of approximation (RMSEA; Bentler, 2005) were also adjusted for nonnormality by incorporating the S–B χ^2 into their calculations. We refer to them as robust estimates (i.e., R-CFI, R-RMSEA).

To evaluate goodness of fit, we examined the S–B χ^2 , the R-CFI, and the R-RMSEA. A significant chi-square statistic may indicate that the hypothesized model does not fit the observed data. However, because chi-square is oversensitive to sample size, alternative fit indexes like the R-CFI and R-RMSEA are generally used. An R-CFI above .90 and an R-RMSEA of .08 or lower indicate an adequate fit, whereas an R-CFI above .95 and an R-RMSEA of .05 or lower indicate a good fit (Kline, 2005; Raykov & Marcoulides, 2000; Ullman, 2001). S–B χ^2 difference test adjusted for scaling correction and the Akaike Information Criterion adjusted for scaling and finite sample correction (AIC_c) were used to compare the fit of competing nested and non-nested models, respectively (Satorra & Bentler, 2001; Akaike, 1978; Burnham & Anderson, 2002). The model with the smallest AIC_c value was the best between the models tested.

RESULTS

DESCRIPTIVE STATISTICS AND PRELIMINARY ANALYSES

On average husbands felt underbenefited in marital forgiveness, reporting that their wives forgave them less than they forgave their wives (forgiveness given: $M = 4.43$, $SD = 0.95$; forgiveness received: $M = 4.20$, $SD = 1.00$; $t(128) = 2.884$, $p = .005$). Conversely, wives felt overbenefited, in that they reported that their husbands forgave them more than they forgave their husbands (forgiveness given: $M = 4.09$, $SD = 0.99$; forgiveness received: $M = 4.34$, $SD = 0.95$; $t(128) = -2.713$, $p = .008$). Tables 1 and 2 show the descriptive statistics and bivariate correlations for all variables in the study.

There was substantial agreement between spouses regarding the degree of forgiveness given and received. In fact, husbands' reports of forgiveness given and wives' reports of forgiveness received were significantly correlated ($r = .56$, $p < .001$) and did not significantly

TABLE 1. Means, Standard Deviations, and Within Partner Correlations for Variables Under Study

| | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | 6 | M | SD |
|--|---------|---------|---------|---------|--------|--------|------|------|
| Forgiveness given | - | .43*** | -.53*** | .56*** | .51*** | .48*** | 4.09 | .99 |
| Forgiveness received | .57*** | - | -.13 | -.50*** | .46*** | .38** | 4.34 | .95 |
| Inequity in forgiveness (discrepancy scores) | -.36*** | -.59*** | - | -.39** | -.20* | -.42** | 1.03 | .67 |
| Inequity in forgiveness (difference scores) | .44*** | -.50*** | .27** | - | .07 | .12 | -.25 | 1.04 |
| Well-being T1 | .52*** | .44*** | -.14 | .06 | - | .76*** | .00 | .96 |
| Well-being T2 | .42*** | .36** | -.10 | .05 | .78*** | - | .00 | .95 |
| M | 4.43 | 4.20 | .92 | .24 | .00 | .00 | | |
| SD | .95 | 1.00 | .61 | .91 | .99 | 1.07 | | |

Note. Data for husbands and wives appear below and above the diagonal respectively. T1 = Time 1; T2 = Time 2. * $p < .05$; ** $p < .01$; *** $p < .001$.

TABLE 2. Cross Partner Correlations for Variables under Study

| Husbands | Wives | | | | | |
|---|--------|--------|--------|---------|--------|--------|
| | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | 6 |
| 1. Forgiveness given | .23** | .56*** | .32*** | -.29 | .35*** | .31*** |
| 2. Forgiveness received | .45*** | .37*** | -.07 | .09 | .41*** | .34** |
| 3. Inequity in forgiveness (discrepancy scores) | -.13 | .14 | -.18* | -.05 | -.17 | -.20* |
| 4. Inequity in forgiveness (difference scores) | -.24** | .19* | .05 | -.40*** | -.08 | -.05 |
| 5. Well-being T1 | .25** | .39*** | -.12 | -.12 | .58*** | .53*** |
| 6. Well-being T2 | .35*** | .36*** | -.19* | .01 | .56*** | .63*** |

Note. Data for husbands appear in lines and above the diagonal and wives respectively T1 = Time 1; T2 = Time 2. * $p < .05$; ** $p < .01$; *** $p < .001$.

differ in magnitude on average ($M = 4.43$, $M = 4.34$, $t(128) = 1.193$, ns). Similarly, wives' reports of forgiveness given and husbands' reports of forgiveness received were significantly correlated ($r = .45$, $p < .001$) and did not significantly differ in magnitude on average, $M = 4.09$, $M = 4.20$, $t(128) = -1.21$ (ns).

The average absolute level of inequity between forgiveness given and received (discrepancy scores) was 0.92 ($SD = 0.61$) for husbands and 1.03 ($SD = 0.67$) for wives. Although not high, the average absolute level of inequity was significantly different from zero for both husbands, $t(128) = 17.13$, $p = .000$, and wives, $t(128) = 17.46$, $p = .000$. Moreover, as indicated by the Spearman-Brown reliability estimates ($= .80$ for husbands and $.84$ for wives), inequity discrepancy scores were heterogeneous enough to use as predictors in the following analyses (see Kenny et al., 2006).

APIM AND MUTUAL INFLUENCE MODELS

The APIM in which each partner's well-being at T2 was predicted by both his/her own and his/her partner's absolute level of inequity (i.e., inequity discrepancy scores), forgiveness given, forgiveness received, and well-being at T1 yielded an inadequate fit (S-B χ^2 (8) = 16.73, $p = .033$, R-CFI = 0.983, R-RMSEA = .093, $AIC_C = 56.43$); in this model no significant partner effect of inequity emerged for either wives or husbands. Conversely, the mutual influence model in which each partner's well-being at T2 was predicted by his/her own absolute level of inequity (i.e., inequity discrepancy scores), forgiveness given, forgiveness received, and well-being at T1 as well as by his/her partner's well-being at T2 provided a better fit, S-B χ^2 (13) = 23.38, $p = .038$, R-CFI = 0.980, R-RMSEA = .079, $AIC_C = 39.38$. Consistent with Hypothesis 3 assuming that inequity perceived by each spouse predicts the partner's personal and relational well-being primarily indirectly through the spouse's own well-being, consideration of AIC_C values indicated that the mutual influence model has to be preferred to the APIM.

In order to verify whether the predictive paths linking inequity, forgiveness given and forgiveness received to well-being were significantly different between and within gender (see Hypotheses 1b and 2), as well as to obtain a more parsimonious model, we constrained them to be equal within the mutual influence model. Be-

cause data were nonnormally distributed the S-B χ^2 difference test adjusted for scaling correction was used to evaluate the effect of the imposed constraints. In the context of nonnormal data the joint use of the Langrange multiplier (LM) test and S-B χ^2 difference test adjusted for scaling correction provide evidence for the constraints specified that they are true for the populations involved (Ullman, 2006). Both these tests revealed that no constraint had to be released except for ones imposing equality between wives' and husbands' inequity paths and between wives' inequity and their own forgiveness given or forgiveness received paths. By releasing these constraints, we obtained a more parsimonious and better fitting model, S-B χ^2 (16) = 25.24, $p = .066$, R-CFI = 0.982, R-RMSEA = .068, AIC_C = 28.30.

As far as within partner effects were considered, this partially constrained model indicated that, after controlling for levels of forgiveness given, forgiveness received, and well-being at T1, inequity in marital forgiveness significantly predicted a decreased well-being at T2 ($b^3 = -.52, p < .001$) in wives, but not in husbands ($b = -.08, ns$; see Figure 1). As indicated by the Langrange multiplier (LM) test and S-B χ^2 difference test, women experiencing an imbalance in marital forgiveness reported a significantly poorer personal and relational well-being over a 6-month period than men. Conversely, for both wives and husbands, neither forgiveness granted nor forgiveness received predicted changes in well-being over time after controlling for inequity in forgiveness ($bs = -.08$ and $-.07, ns$). As indicated by the Langrange multiplier (LM) test and S-B χ^2 difference test, for wives inequity in marital forgiveness was more predictive of well-being than the total amount of forgiveness given and forgiveness received. Thus, Hypotheses 1a and 2, positing that experienced inequity in marital forgiveness would predict a significant decrease in personal and relational well-being over and beyond that explained by the total amount of forgiveness given and forgiveness received, was supported in wives but not in husbands. Thus, at least for wives, inequity in marital forgiveness was not only equally predictive but even more predictive of well-being than the total amount of forgiveness given and forgiveness received. These findings were also consistent with Hypothesis 1b that the predicted changes in personal and relational would be stronger for wives than for husbands.

³ Unstandardized coefficients were reported so as to compare coefficients across husbands and wives (see Kenny et al., 2006).

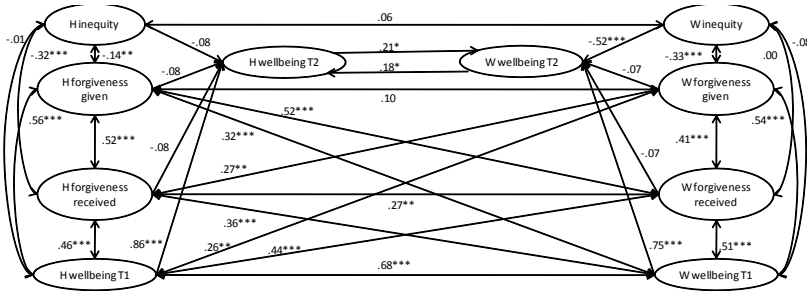


FIGURE 1. Parameter Estimates (Unstandardized Betas) For the Mutual Influence Model
 ** $p < .01$, *** $p < .001$

When between partner effects were considered, wives' inequity significantly predicted husbands' well-being at T2 via wives' well-being at T2 ($b = -.09, p < .05$)⁴; the indirect cross-partner effect of wives' inequity appeared to be weaker than the within-partner corresponding one ($b = -.52, p < .001$; see Figure 1). Conversely, no significant indirect effect over wives' well-being at T2 emerged for husbands' inequity ($b = .00$). By imposing equality constraints we could verify that the path from inequity to well-being at T2 was significantly stronger in wives than in husbands whereas mutual influence paths of well-being at T2 were not significantly different for husbands and wives ($b = .21, p < .05$ and $.18, p < .01$). Thus, partially consistent with Hypothesis 3, wives' inequity predicted cross-partner well-being only indirectly, through their own well-being.

In order to test Hypothesis 4 which assumes that spouses feeling overbenefited in marital forgiveness experience less personal and relational well-being than those who felt underbenefited, the linear terms for over/underbenefit (i.e., inequity difference scores) were entered as further predictors in the previous model while leaving out their components. The new model provided a good fit, S-B $\chi^2(13) = 15.06, p = .303$, S-B CFI = .992, S-B RMSEA = .036. However, whereas the absolute level of inequity (i.e., inequity discrepancy scores) again significantly predicted well-being at T2 in wives ($b = -.51, p < .001$) but not in husbands ($b = .10, ns$), the linear terms for over/underbenefit (i.e., inequity difference scores) were not significantly related to well-being at T2 either in wives ($b = -.04, ns$) or in husbands ($b = .02, ns$). The findings indicate that inequity in forgiveness was equally

4. Unstandardized indirect effects and tests of significance for them were computed by EQS relying on Sobel's works (1982, 1986).

(un)related to well-being at T2 for underbenefited and overbenefited husbands and wives. Consequently, Hypothesis 4, assuming that longitudinal relations between inequity in forgiveness and personal and relational well-being were moderated by spouses' overbenefited and underbenefited status, did not receive support.

DISCUSSION

Drawing on equity and esteem enhancement theories and research (e.g., Batson, 1998; Buunk & Mutsaers, 1999; Grote & Clark, 2001; McCulloch, 1990; Wright, & Aquilino, 1998), the present study was among the first to recognize that spouses tend to be both perpetrators and victims of relationship transgressions. Accordingly, it investigated inequity in marital forgiveness and its links with personal and relational subjective well-being over time.

Our findings indicate that husbands tend to feel underbenefited and wives overbenefited in regard to marital forgiveness. In other words, replicating previous studies on Italian couples (e.g., Fincham, Paleari & Regalia, 2002; Paleari, Donato, Iafrate, & Regalia, 2009) but in contrast to a recent meta-analysis showing that women are usually more benevolent and forgiving than men (Miller, Worthington, & McDaniel, 2008), the husbands in our study were on average more forgiving than their wives. Interestingly, this finding does not appear to be an artifact of the self-report methods employed, given that there was substantial agreement between spouses about their underbenefited or overbenefited status. Moreover, as we argued earlier, in the context of close relationships such as marriage forgiveness may function differently compared to when it occurs between strangers or acquaintances. For example, we know that husbands are less likely to confront conflictual situations than their wives are (e.g., Christensen & Heavy, 1990), so that offenses by the spouse might be more easily forgiven by husbands than by wives in order to move on from conflictual circumstances that men find particularly aversive.

Although not large in absolute terms, experienced inequity in marital forgiveness was related to later personal and relational well-being. Specifically, consistent with previous research showing that the equality of exchanges is more important to marital satisfaction and well-being for wives than husbands (e.g., Acitelli & Antonucci, 1994; Baxter, 1986; Frisco & Williams, 2003), we found that experi-

enced inequity in marital forgiveness predicted decreased personal and relational well-being over a 6-month period for wives, but not for husbands. The nonsignificant links between husbands' inequity and their subsequent relational and personal well-being might be explained by the intervening effects of moderating variables not considered in the present study. For example, Chen, Chen, and Portnoy (2009) suggested that people assign greater significance to their social exchanges as a function of dispositional variables differentiating them in the extent to which they value their social relationships. Specifically, individuals with an interdependent-self construal (i.e., seeing themselves as a part of an encompassing social relationship, Markus & Kitayama, 1991) are generally more sensitive to perceived inequity and more likely to be negatively affected by it than individuals with an independent self-construal (i.e., perceiving themselves as independent, self-contained, and autonomous entities whose behaviors are made primarily as a consequence their own internal preferences and attributes). Given that in Western cultures men are more likely than women to develop an independent self-construal, whereas women are more likely to develop an interdependent or relational self-construal (Cross & Madson, 1997; Guimond et al., 2007), this personal disposition difference might partly explain the lack of consequences of husbands' inequity on their well-being.

Interestingly, wives' experienced inequity in marital forgiveness was a stronger predictor of their personal and relational well-being than wives' total levels of forgiveness given and of forgiveness received. This result suggests that evaluating the perceived discrepancy between the two may be more important for future research than merely considering the total levels of forgiveness given and of forgiveness received when predicting the effects of marital forgiveness upon women's relational and personal outcomes.

In contrast, neither husbands' experienced inequity nor the total amount of forgiveness given or forgiveness received were predictive of their level of marital quality, depression, and life satisfaction. Although robustly related at the cross-sectional level, the lack of a longitudinal relationship between forgiveness and later well-being among husbands is consistent with previous longitudinal research investigating gender differences in forgiveness outcomes (e.g., Fincham & Beach, 2007; Toussaint, Williams, Musick, & Everson-Rose, 2008).

Our findings also speak to the issue of being underbenefited versus overbenefited. The current data indicated that experienced

inequity in marital forgiveness was equally detrimental for overbenefited and underbenefited wives. Drawing on previous writings (e.g., Guerrero et al., 2008; Hasebrauck, 1986; Hegtvedt, 1990; Sprecher, 1986, 1992), it can be argued that underbenefited wives are likely to experience feelings of anger and resentment, which lead them to be dissatisfied with their marriage and to become further distressed. However, receiving forgiveness more than giving it is also negative because it probably increases wives' feelings of guilt, indebtedness, and incompetence thereby resulting in higher stress and relational anxiety. The present findings point to the importance of future research on inequity to shed more light on the affective and cognitive experiences associated with feeling underbenefited and overbenefited in marital forgiveness.

Finally, our findings partially support the equity theory assumption according to which inequity primarily exists in the eye of the beholder (e.g., Waltser et al., 1973) and predicts his/her well-being more directly and deeply than his/her partner's well-being. In fact, at least for wives inequity turned out to be a stronger and a more direct predictor of their own well-being than of their partner's well-being. Thus, the choice reflected in much inequity research to focus on within partner effects of inequity appeared to be empirically grounded.

LIMITATIONS AND CONCLUSIONS

The current findings need to be interpreted in light of several limitations which may affect their generalizability and temper the conclusions of the study. For example, the use of Italian white, middle-class, educated individuals, involved in longer-term and well-adjusted marriages, in this study suggests caution about generalizing its findings across countries, ethnicity, culture, socioeconomic status, or different stages of marital relationships. Hatfield, Rapson, and Aumer-Ryan (2008) argued that equity becomes more or less important at different stages in the marital life cycle. Specifically, they claimed that although dating is a "marriage marketplace," in which considerations of reward, fairness, and equity emerge prominently, once couples have committed themselves to an enduring intimate relationship, they become less concerned about day-to-day equity (Pillemer, Hatfield, & Sprecher, 2008). Stressful life events, such as the arrival of children, a serious illness or a relative's death,

can, however, bring imbalances to light. Also, when relationships begin to deteriorate, troubled partners once again begin to worry about what they give and what they get. Consequently, experienced inequity is likely to vary and to have different effects during the course of a romantic relationship.

The findings should also be viewed with caution in the absence of a multiwave longitudinal study that replicates them and provides more conclusive evidence regarding the direction of effects between the variables investigated. In this respect Sprecher (2001) and Grote and Clark (2001) have questioned the typical assumption that inequity causes relationship distress and found empirical support for a reverse process in which the experience of marital distress increased a sense of unfairness. Thus, the possibility of a reverse directional link from personal and relational well-being to experienced inequity in marital forgiveness, should be addressed by future research. Ideally, such research would also examine possible moderators of the process leading from inequity in marital forgiveness to personal and relational distress, such as interdependent and independent self-construal, as well as subjective experiences associated with the feeling of inequity. As the number, severity, and type of transgressions suffered by each spouse were not evaluated in the present study, we could not also determine whether our results are independent of the nature or frequency of the offense suffered. For example, we could not rule out the possibility that overbenefited spouses reported lower well-being because they engaged in more transgressions than their partner and, as a consequence, they were forgiven less.⁵ More research is therefore needed to address these points, and to provide a clearer and more comprehensive picture of the link between inequity in marital forgiveness and well-being.

Notwithstanding these concerns, our study helps to advance understanding of marital forgiveness and its well-being correlates in several ways. To our knowledge, it is the first to recognize that in close relationships partners tend to be both victims and transgressors and therefore explored inequity in forgiveness among married couples examining its consequences for personal and relational well-being. Using two waves of data, the study lends preliminary support to the hypothesis that, especially for wives, effects of forgiveness may depend on the experienced imbalance between giving and receiving forgiveness in one's relationship, more than on

5. We are grateful to anonymous reviewers for highlighting this interesting alternative perspective on the study results.

the total amount of forgiveness given or forgiveness received. These findings have implications for forgiveness-promoting marital interventions as they highlight the importance of paying attention not only to partners' propensity to grant forgiveness or to accept it, but also to their perceptions of fairness and equity of forgiveness given to, and received from, the partner. In summary, our findings are consistent with the observation that forgiveness between intimates is different from that between acquaintances and strangers (Worthington et al., 2007) and provides some empirical foundation for the recent emergence of a forgiveness literature focused on close relationships (see Fincham, 2009; Fincham et al., 2006).

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