



## Forgiveness, Attributions, and Marital Quality in U.S. and Indian Marriages

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### ABSTRACT

We investigated, in two studies, whether forgiveness mediates the relationship between responsibility attributions and marital outcomes among American and Indian couples using the actor-partner interdependence mediation model. In American couples ( $n = 96$ ), husband forgiveness mediated the link between husband attributions and wife closeness in Study 1. The same model was tested with Indian couples ( $n = 101$ ) and husband forgiveness mediated the link between wife attributions and both husband and wife marital quality in Study 2. In some cases, forgiveness mediates the association between attributions and marital quality. Implications for clinical practice and future research are discussed.

### KEYWORDS

Forgiveness; attributions; marital quality; APIMeM

Close relationships provide some of the greatest joys life has to offer but can also be the sources of considerable hurt arising from partner transgressions (McCullough, Worthington, & Rachal, 1997). How are these important relationships maintained in the face of such inevitable hurts? Forgiving a partner transgression is one mechanism that may facilitate relationship maintenance and has received considerable scientific scrutiny recently. Willingness to forgive partner transgressions is related to physical (May, Sanchez-Gonzales, Hawkins, Batchelor, & Fincham, 2014), psychological (Toussaint & Jorgensen, 2008), and relational health (Allemand, Amberg, Zimprich, & Fincham, 2007; Fincham, Paleari, & Regalia, 2002), indicating that forgiveness is influential in individual and relational well-being.

Attributions (i.e., cognitions) about transgressions are similarly influential in the health of relationships (see Davey, Fincham, Beach, & Brody, 2001; Fincham, 2001). The way that individuals organize thinking around transgressions, such as who is to blame, who is responsible, and who caused the incident, plays a role in the way that cognitions influence the quality of the relationship. Forgiveness and attributions have been examined previously as they relate to marital quality (Fincham, 2001), but our understanding of the link between forgiveness and marital outcomes has grown. We know that the association is bidirectional and tends to be strongest from

forgiveness to marital quality (Paleari, Regalia, & Fincham, 2005). Therefore, we proposed a model where attributions were related to forgiveness, and forgiveness to marital outcomes. We examined this model with samples of married individuals from two countries.

## Defining Forgiveness

Forgiveness has been conceptualized as a motivational transformation where the desire to seek revenge or to avoid the transgressor is lessened. However, is this decrease in avoidance and revenge sufficient, especially in the context of ongoing relationships? It is a logical error to infer the presence of the positive (e.g., health, forgiveness) from the absence of the negative (e.g., illness, avoidance, revenge). Therefore, what is equally fundamental to forgiveness, particularly for continuing a relationship, is a benevolent or positive response (e.g., compassion, affection, approach behavior) to the offender (see Fincham, Hall, & Beach, 2006; Gordon et al., 2009; McCullough, Fincham, & Tsang, 2003; Sandage & Worthington, 2010). However, this benevolence response should not be confused with *reconciliation*, a dyadic process that requires destructive behaviors and intentions to cease, trust, and a decision to keep the peace, all of which can occur regardless of forgiveness (for a review see Freedman, 1998). Neither is forgiveness *condoning* (Enright & Coyle, 1998; Kolnai, 1973, 1974), *excusing* or *forgetting* the offense. In short, relationship reconciliation can occur without forgiveness, but the benevolence component of forgiveness can facilitate reconciliation following a transgression (Fincham, 2000).

## Forgiveness, Attributions, and Marital Quality

Forgiveness has been linked to several constructs that impact intimate relationships, including attributions (Friesen, Fletcher, & Overall, 2005), commitment (Tsang, McCullough, & Fincham, 2006), conflict (Fincham, Beach, & Davila, 2004), and relationship satisfaction (Fincham & Beach, 2007; Paleari et al., 2005). Attributions and marital quality are two extensively researched constructs related to forgiveness. Next, we describe the relationships among the three variables and lay a foundation for our conceptual model.

## Forgiveness and Attributions

Research indicates that attributions predict forgiveness in romantic relationships (Fincham et al., 2002; Friesen et al., 2005; Hall & Fincham, 2006). Attributions can serve to explain an event (causal attributions) or assign accountability for an event (responsibility attributions; Fincham, 2001). In a sample of married Italian couples, forgiveness was directly and indirectly related to responsibility attributions via affective reactions and empathy (Fincham et al., 2002). Among New Zealand couples, greater perceptions of partner responsibility for transgressions were related to less forgiveness, and less-blaming male partners had more-forgiving female partners

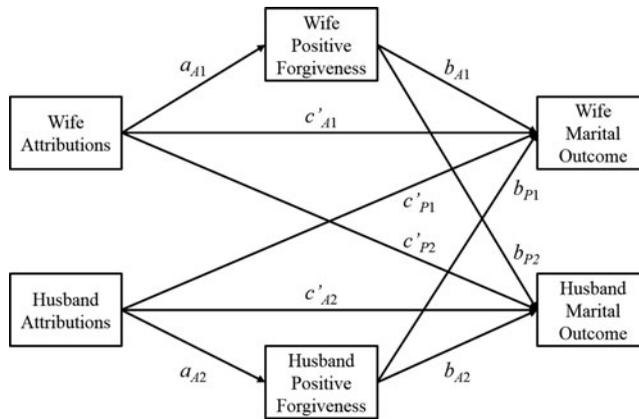
(Friesen et al., 2005). We sought to replicate and expand findings that more benign attributions are related to individual and partner willingness to forgive.

## **Forgiveness and Marital Quality**

Several studies have linked forgiveness and marital quality (e.g., Braithwaite, Selby, & Fincham, 2011; Fincham et al., 2004; McCullough et al., 1998; McNulty, 2007; Paleari et al., 2005; Stafford, David, & McPherson, 2014). Among married couples, forgiveness was positively associated with positive marital quality (PMQ) and negatively associated with negative marital quality (NMQ), and partner avoidance and revenge were negatively associated with PMQ and positively with NMQ (Stafford et al., 2014). Also, forgiveness and marital quality appear to have a bidirectional link, although it is stronger from forgiveness to marital quality (Fincham & Beach, 2007; Paleari et al., 2005). Marital quality was related to forgiveness via responsibility attributions in a sample of Italian husbands and wives (Fincham et al., 2002). Across cultures, the closer an individual felt to someone (e.g., a romantic partner), the more likely he or she was to forgive that person (Karremans et al., 2011). Interestingly, the strength of the relationship was higher in individualistic cultures – United States (.45) and Italy (.64) – as compared to collectivistic cultures – China (.19) and Japan (.30). Therefore, we sought to replicate and expand understanding of these constructs by examining the relationships between willingness to forgive and individual and partner marital outcomes.

## **Attributions and Marital Quality**

A robust literature documents an attributions–marital quality association (for review see Fincham, 2001). In our studies we examined responsibility attributions because they tend to be more important to marital relationships than causal attributions (Davey et al., 2001). Longitudinal research indicates that attributions predict later marital quality. Durtschi, Fincham, Cui, Lorenz, and Conger (2011) found spousal behaviors mediated the relationship between earlier attributions and later marital quality. They found partner effects for husband’s marital quality such that a wife’s responsibility attributions predicted husband’s marital quality when mediated by both wife and husband behavior. When a wife had more negative responsibility attributions, she acted less warm and more hostile, which in turn impacted the husband to act the same, leading to decreased relationship satisfaction and vice versa. The attribution–marital satisfaction association has also been documented among non-U.S. samples, in the People’s Republic of China (Stander, Hsiung, & MacDermid, 2001), and among French Canadian couples, where each spouse’s attributions predicted the other’s marital satisfaction (Sabourin, Lussier, & Wright, 1991). The attribution–marital quality association appears to be bidirectional. Given these connections we sought to replicate and expand current knowledge of attributions and marital outcomes by examining how individual attributions are related to personal and partner marital outcomes.



**Figure 1.** Hypothesized actor–interdependence mediation model.

## The Present Study

Current literature indicates that the forgiveness–marital quality and attributions–marital quality associations are bidirectional; however, the attribution–forgiveness link appears unidirectional, meaning, attributions predict forgiveness. Logically, it can be argued that attributions for a transgression occur first and shape further responses such as forgiveness-related behaviors (i.e., revenge, avoidance, compassion) toward the partner, and these behaviors in turn influence the quality of the relationship, a proposition that has received considerable support in the marital literature (see Bradbury & Fincham, 1990). Considering the unidirectional relationship between attributions and forgiveness, that attributions about a partner’s actions influence one’s willingness to forgive that partner, and the stronger association that forgiving one’s partner influences marital quality (Paleari et al., 2005), we proposed a model where forgiveness mediates the relationship between attributions and marital quality (see Figure 1).

We therefore hypothesized that attributions for a partner transgression would influence forgiveness, an intrapersonal process manifest in overt behavior, which would in turn influence relationship quality. Understanding the link among these three constructs can guide researchers and clinicians as they enhance and improve intervention methods to improve marital functioning. With a few notable exceptions, data involving associations among attributions, forgiveness and relational outcomes come from Western samples (Karremans et al., 2011; Stander et al., 2001). This raises the question of whether the bivariate associations reported earlier are found reliably in non-Western samples. The conceptualization of and propensity to forgive in India university samples have been found similar to those of U.S. samples (Suchday, Friedberg, & Almeida, 2006; Tripathi & Mullet, 2010). Therefore, we sought to expand previous work by testing the hypothesized model in married samples from both the United States and India.

In sum, we examined whether forgiveness mediates the relationship between responsibility attributions and a subjective evaluation of the marriage, perceived

closeness (U.S.) and marital quality (India), to determine whether similar relationships exist in Western and non-Western samples. We tested four hypotheses using the actor–partner interdependence mediation model (APIMeM) in two studies. The actor–partner interdependence mediation model (APIMeM) tests whether an individual's predictor variable (e.g., attributions) is associated with an individual's outcome variable, known as the actor effect (e.g., see Figure 1  $a_{A1}$ ); and simultaneously whether an individual's predictor is associated with their partner's outcome variable, known as the partner effect (e.g., see Figure 1  $b_{P1}$ ). A mediating variable (e.g., forgiveness) can be added as an extension of the model creating a combined actor–partner effect (see Figure 1  $a_{A2}b_{P1}$ ; Ledermann, Macho, & Kenny, 2011). Our hypotheses are described below:

*Hypothesis 1:* Individual attributions ( $c'_{A1}$  and  $c'_{A2}$ ) and forgiveness ( $b_{A1}$  and  $b_{A2}$ ) will be related to individual marital outcomes (i.e., closeness, marital quality; see Figure 1).

*Hypothesis 2:* Individual attributions ( $c'_{P1}$  and  $c'_{P2}$ ) and forgiveness ( $b_{P1}$  and  $b_{P2}$ ) will be associated with spouse marital outcomes.

*Hypothesis 3:* Individual forgiveness will mediate individual attributions and individual marital outcomes to yield an indirect actor–actor effect ( $a_{A1}b_{P1}$  and  $a_{A2}b_{P2}$ ).

*Hypothesis 4:* Individual forgiveness will mediate individual attributions and spouse marital outcomes to yield an indirect actor–partner effect ( $a_{A1}b_{P2}$  and  $a_{A2}b_{P1}$ ).

## Study 1

### Method

#### Participants and Procedures

Two-parent families ( $n = 94$ ) from the Northeastern United States, with a daughter in the eighth grade, were recruited to participate in a family survey through their schools and through advertisements placed in local media outlets (e.g., newspapers, TV) as part of a larger study. Data from parents ( $n = 94$ ) were used in this study. Husbands were 43.1 years old on average ( $SD = 4.46$ ), moderately educated (high school graduate = 45%, college or postgraduate education = 51%). Mothers were 41.12 years old on average ( $SD = 4.74$ ) and educated similarly to husbands (high school graduate = 42%, college or postgraduate education = 57%). The median yearly family income was \$51,000 to \$60,000, and participants were predominantly Caucasian (97%), and also included African Americans (1%), Latino/as (1%), and Other (1%).

### Measures

*Attributions.* Responsibility attributions were assessed using the Relationship Attribution Measure (RAM; Fincham & Bradbury, 1992). Participants responded to four hypothetical events and indicated for each event their agreement with three

statements assessing responsibility attributions (e.g., “My spouse was cool and distant on purpose rather than unintentionally”) using a 6-point scale (1 = *disagree strongly* to 6 = *agree strongly*). Using hypothetical situations instead of actual events has been argued to require less participant abstraction and focus judgment on causes, not the event itself (Fincham & Bradbury, 1992). Lower scores represented more benign attributions. Good reliability was found for husbands ( $\alpha = .86$ ) and wives ( $\alpha = .87$ ).

*Forgiveness.* Forgiveness was measured using the nine-item Relationship Forgiveness Scale (RFS; Fincham et al., 2004). Participants were asked to recall an event from the past 12 months in which they felt most hurt by their partner. They then wrote a brief description of the event and rated it on a number of items. Because of the critical role of the benevolence dimension of forgiveness in close relationships the study focused on the three items that assessed this dimension. Thus, participants reported their agreement on a 6-point scale (1 = *strongly disagree* to 6 = *strongly agree*) with each item (i.e., “I soon forgave my partner,” “It was easy to feel warmly again toward my partner,” “I am able to act as positively toward my partner now as I was before it happened”). Cronbach’s  $\alpha$  for the three benevolence items was satisfactory for both husbands ( $\alpha = .79$ ) and wives ( $\alpha = .77$ ).

*Closeness.* The Inclusion of Other in the Self scale (IOS; Aron, Aron, & Smollan, 1992) is a pictorial-item measure of closeness consisting of seven pictures of two circles progressively overlapping from no overlap to almost complete overlap. Higher scores represent greater closeness. Participants circle the picture best depicting their relationship with their spouse. This measure was used because of its availability in the dataset and because it has been found to correlate highly with conventional measures of relationship satisfaction (see Aron et al., 1992).

### **Analytic Plan**

An omnibus test of distinguishability was conducted to determine whether data from husbands and wives were empirically distinguishable, as well as conceptually distinguishable prior to running the APIMeM analysis (Kenny, Kashy, & Cook, 2006). Equality constraints were placed on the variances, and covariances across husbands and wives. The model did not fit the data,  $\chi^2(13) = 39.308, p < .001$ , indicating empirical distinguishability between husbands and wives. Path analysis for distinguishable dyads was used to conduct the APIMeM in Mplus 7.2 (Muthén & Muthén, 2014). This enables the estimation of population parameter values to maximize the likelihood of their occurrence in the data (Enders, 2010). For the APIMeM, 5,000 biased-corrected bootstrap samples, based on 95% confidence intervals, were used to estimate the eight direct and four indirect effects from attributions of both partners through individual forgiveness toward their own and their spouses rating of closeness.

**Table 1.** Correlations, Means, and Standard Deviations for Study 1 ( $n = 96$  dyads) Variables.

Study Variables	1	2	3	4	5	6
1. Wife Responsibility Attributions	—					
2. Wife Positive Forgiveness	− 0.20	—				
3. Wife Closeness	− 0.38***	0.40***	—			
4. Husband Responsibility Attributions	0.24*	− 0.10	− 0.21*	—		
5. Husband Positive Forgiveness	− 0.13	0.07	0.35***	− 0.39***	—	
6. Husband Closeness	− 0.07	0.12	0.29**	− 0.47***	0.32**	—
<i>M</i>	7.90	15.49	5.08	7.49	15.53	5.21
<i>SD</i>	3.02	2.86	1.53	2.65	2.89	1.48

Note. \* $p < .05$ , \*\* $p < .01$ , \*\*\* $p < .001$

**Results**

Missing values (< 2.1%) were handled in Mplus using full information maximum likelihood estimation. Descriptive statistics and bivariate correlations for Study 1 are shown in Table 1. Our first hypothesis that attributions and forgiveness would directly relate to closeness was partially supported. Husband and wife reports of attributions were significantly and negatively associated with their own reports of closeness (see Table 2). Thus, husband and wife reports of more benign attributions were related to greater reports of closeness to each other. Only wife forgiveness was significantly related to her own closeness, indicating that wives who were more likely to forgive felt closer to their husbands. This was not the case for their husbands. Hypothesis 2, that husband and wife attributions and forgiveness would influence one another’s closeness was in part supported. Wife attributions had no

**Table 2.** APIMeM Analysis of Dyad Members for Study 1 ( $n = 96$ ) and Study 2 ( $n = 101$ ).

Parameter Estimate	U.S.			India		
	<i>B</i>	$\beta$	95% CI	<i>B</i>	$\beta$	95% CI
<i>Direct Actor Effects</i>						
H1: Husband RA → Husband MO	− .244	− .437	[−.375, −.114]	− .080	− .143	[−.240, .040]
H1: Wife RA → Wife MO	− .133	− .263	[−.221, −.044]	− .219	− .346	[−.361, −.050]
H1: Husband F → Husband MO	.059	.114	[−.067, .195]	.523	.305	[.114, .969]
H1: Wife F → Wife MO	.167	.311	[.072, .263]	.474	.252	[.162, .859]
<i>Direct Partner Effects</i>						
H2: Husband RA → Wife MO	− .012	− .021	[−.131, .096]	.063	.103	[−.071, .206]
H2: Wife RA → Husband MO	.026	.053	[−.058, .131]	− .043	− .072	[−.177, .110]
H2: Husband F → Wife MO	.153	.288	[.044, .252]	.371	.200	[−.055, .764]
H2: Wife F → Husband MO	.043	.084	[−.049, .120]	.336	.193	[.009, .655]
<i>Indirect Actor and Partner Effects</i>						
H3: Husband RA → Husband F → Husband MO	− .024	− .043	[−.098, .026]	− .006	− .011	[−.055, .041]
H3: Wife RA → Wife F → Wife MO	− .029	− .058	[−.086, .003]	− .052	− .082	[−.149, −.006]
H4: Husband RA → Husband F → Wife MO	− .063	− .107	[−.235, −.030]	− .004	− .007	[−.055, .022]
H4: Wife RA → Wife F → Husband MO	− .008	− .016	[−.033, .005]	− .037	− .063	[−.112, .000]

Note. *B* = unstandardized coefficients,  $\beta$  = standardized coefficients, CI = confidence interval, H1 = hypothesis 1, H2 = hypothesis 2, H3 = hypothesis 3, H4 = hypothesis 4, RA = responsibility attributions, F = forgiveness, MO = marital outcomes (US = closeness, India = marital quality). Significant results are in bold.

direct effect on husband closeness and vice versa. Wife forgiveness was not linked to husband closeness; however, husband forgiveness did positively and significantly link to wife closeness. More forgiving husbands had wives that felt closer to them. Support for our third hypothesis, that actor forgiveness would mediate the relationship between actor attributions and closeness, was not obtained. Hypothesis 4, that mediating pathways would emerge with actor–partner effects, received partial support. A significant wife actor–partner mediating pathway emerged with husband forgiveness mediating the association between husband attributions and wife closeness (see Table 2), indicating that husband attributions were linked to husband forgiveness which was, in turn, associated with greater wife closeness.

## **Discussion**

This study yielded similar results of prior research (for review, see Fincham, 2001) by demonstrating a significant intrapersonal association between responsibility attributions and forgiveness, and a subjective evaluation of the marriage (i.e., closeness). This study also provides some evidence that husband forgiveness (i.e., benevolence) mediates the association between husband attributions and wife closeness. Limitations to this study are (a) although the IOS has many advantages as a relationship quality index and has been widely used in the close relationships literature, examining the hypothesized relationships with standard indices of marital quality is also important; (b) findings may be idiosyncratic to the measure of forgiveness used; and (c) like the bulk of the literature, these findings pertain to a U.S. sample and may not generalize to non-Western samples. To address these limitations, we conducted Study 2.

## **Study 2**

### **Method**

The focus of Study 2 was to build on findings from Study 1 by using more robust measures of forgiveness and marital quality. Additionally, a non-Western, Indian, sample was used to further understand the association between these three relationship variables using the APIMeM. We also examined the alternate hypotheses from Study 1.

### **Participants and Procedures**

As part of a larger project, couples from 101 two-parent Indian families were recruited to participate in a family survey through visits to schools. These families had a daughter in the eighth grade and lived in Hubli-Dharwad city, the second largest city in the state of Karnataka, India. Parents had been living together for at least 15 years and the daughters' ages ranged from 12 to 14 years old. Interested families were contacted by telephone and invited to visit the laboratory at a time that was convenient to them. Family members arrived at the lab together, but completed questionnaires in separate rooms. Kannada is the commonly spoken

**Table 3.** Correlations, Means and Standard Deviations for Study 2 Variables ( $n = 101$  dyads).

Study Variables	1	2	3	4	5	6
1. Wife Responsibility Attributions	—					
2. Wife Positive Forgiveness	− 0.27**	—				
3. Wife Marital Quality	− 0.36***	0.45***	—			
4. Husband Responsibility Attributions	0.43***	− 0.27**	− 0.24*	—		
5. Husband Positive Forgiveness	− 0.26**	0.48***	0.43***	− 0.27**	—	
6. Husband Marital Quality	− 0.16	0.28**	0.41***	− 0.26**	0.30**	—
<i>M</i>	46.67	16.73	33.96	47.49	17.17	34.60
<i>SD</i>	14.78	4.73	8.91	14.63	4.81	15.65

Note. \* $p < .05$ , \*\* $p < .01$ , \*\*\* $p < .001$ .

language in Hubli, but we collected data from English medium school (English language used for classroom instruction) students whose parents were also fluent in English. The scales were not translated into the Kannada language. After completing these questionnaires, participants were fully debriefed and thanked for their participation. No additional incentives were given for participation. Institutional review board approval was granted prior to any data collection.

### Measures

**Attributions.** Attributions were assessed using the same measure used in Study 1. The RAM had good internal consistency for husbands ( $\alpha = .89$ ) and wives ( $\alpha = .88$ ) in this study.

**Forgiveness.** Forgiveness was measured using the Marital Offense Forgiveness Scale (MOFS; Paleari, Regalia, & Fincham, 2009) for specific marital transgressions. To ensure comparability with Study 1, we used the four-item, benevolence (e.g., “I soon forgave her/him,” “I forgave her/him completely”) subscale of the MOFS. Couples rated their agreement with the items on a 6-point scale (1 = *strongly disagree* to 6 = *strongly agree*). The benevolence subscale had satisfactory internal consistency for husbands ( $\alpha = .76$ ) and wives ( $\alpha = .75$ ).

**Marital quality.** The six-item Quality of Marriage Index (QMI; Norton, 1983) is a widely used measure that provides a subjective evaluation of the marital relationship (e.g., “We have a good relationship”). Participants rated their agreement with items on a 5-point scale (1 = *strongly disagree* to 5 = *strongly agree*), with a sixth item answered on a 10-point scale assessing the overall happiness of the relationship from 1 (*very unhappy*) to 10 (*perfectly happy*). Higher scores indicate greater marital quality. The QMI had good internal consistency for husbands ( $\alpha = .90$ ) and wives ( $\alpha = .89$ ) in this study.

### Results

We employed the same data analytic strategy and rationale from Study 1 in Study 2. An omnibus test for distinguishability revealed poor model fit ( $\chi^2(13) = 50.88, p < .000$ ) indicating empirical distinguishability between husband and wife data. Table 3 provides bivariate correlations and descriptive statistics for Study 2.

As shown in Table 2, results of the APIMeM analysis partially supported hypothesis 1. Wives' attributions significantly related to their own marital quality, while husbands' did not. Thus, less negative attributions were related to greater marital quality for wives. Forgiveness was significantly and positively linked to marital quality for both spouses, suggesting that Indian husbands and wives that tend to forgive have higher marital quality. Hypothesis 2 received marginal support as wife forgiveness was positively and significantly related to husband marital quality. An actor–actor indirect effect for wives provided partial support for hypothesis 3. Wife marital quality was significantly associated with wife attributions via wife forgiveness. Thus, more benign responsibility attributions for wives were related to a greater likelihood for wives to forgive their husbands, and greater forgiveness of husbands was related to greater wife marital quality. Significant effects did not emerge for husband or wife actor–partner effects as predicted in hypothesis 4 (see Table 2).

## Discussion

This study partially replicated and extended Study 1 findings. Wife attributions and forgiveness were significantly and positively associated with marital quality, similar to results from Study 1. Additionally, husband forgiveness was linked to greater personal marital quality. Husbands were likely to report higher marital quality if their wives were more forgiving. Forgiveness mediated the responsibility attributions–marital quality association only for wives. Specifically, wives reporting more benign attributions were more willing to forgive and more likely to forgive their spouses.

Although the findings from this study extend those from Study 1, some important limitations exist. First, measures were not translated into Kannada, the common language of the region, which may have caused loss of intended meaning on some items for participants where English was a second language. Translating measures into the common language used in the region of India investigated may capture subtle nuances not understood in English versions of measures. Second, because this is the first study to assess an Indian sample on these three constructs, the findings need to be replicated before generalizing to the larger Indian population, particularly in regions where a patriarchal system is more dominant. Despite these limitations, the data does provide preliminary evidence for the relationships outlined earlier.

## General Discussion

Married couples from the United States and India were assessed on responsibility attributions for hypothetical transgressions, willingness to forgive each other, and marital outcomes (i.e., U.S. = closeness, India = marital quality). Our findings indicate responsibility attributions and forgiveness are linked to marital outcomes, and

that, in specific situations, forgiveness mediates the relationship between attributions and subjective marital outcomes.

### **Limitations**

Prior to further discussion of our findings, we address some limitations to situate them within the context of our studies. First, both studies provide cross-sectional data, thereby limiting our ability to make causal inferences. However, they provide guidance on potential causal pathways of interests for future longitudinal studies which are needed to better understand how these variables interact over time. Second, the sample size for both studies restricted the ability to detect smaller effects. According to Kline (2011), increasingly complex models necessitate increasingly larger sample sizes. The APIMeM used in this study was complex; thus, results should be viewed with this precaution in mind. Third, the type of offense and resulting amount of hurt were not assessed in conjunction with willingness to forgive the partner. These have been found to influence forgiveness (Fincham, Jackson, & Beach, 2005) and should be considered in future research. Fourth, it would have been optimal to use the same forgiveness and marital quality measures for each study to strengthen comparisons. Despite the minor differences of the forgiveness measure, both were aimed to assess the positive aspect of forgiveness. Additionally, although the two marital outcome measures are related, they are not the same construct. In addition, the QMI may have been more sensitive to the subtle nuances of the relationship than the single item measure of closeness used in the American sample. Caution should be taken when comparing these similar, yet distinct subjective measures of marital satisfaction. Fifth, although we had two diverse samples, to understand the nuances of differences within each of these countries, various cultural/racial/ethnic groups are needed in future research. Sixth, the couples in these studies had daughters who were in eighth grade. Although, it was not assessed whether they had other children, the presence of children has been negatively related to marital quality (VanLaningham, Johnson, & Amato, 2001). Having a child may have influenced the quality of the marriages as well as attributions and forgiveness. Future research needs to examine couples with and without children. Finally, the community samples used contain a limited number of couples who would qualify as clinically distressed; therefore, examining the same hypotheses with a clinical sample of couples will enhance the field's ability to develop and sequence effective treatment.

### ***Are Individual Responsibility Attributions and Forgiveness Related to Marital Outcomes?***

Our findings replicated and expanded previous research on attributions, forgiveness, and marital outcomes (Braithwaite et al., 2011; Durtschi et al., 2011; Fincham & Bradbury, 1987, 1993; Fincham, Harold, & Gano-Phillips, 2000; Sabourin et al.,

1991; Stafford et al., 2014). The more benign attributions U.S. and Indian wives had for their husbands' transgressions, and U.S. husbands had for their wives' transgressions, the more positive marital outcomes each reported. Interestingly, attributions and marital quality were not significantly related for Indian husbands. Little is known about attributions in Indian samples. Although not included in this study<sup>1</sup>, we did find Indian wives responsibility attributions significantly and positively related to their forgiveness. For U.S. and Indian wives, and Indian husbands, forgiveness was related to their marital outcomes. Taken together, U.S. and Indian wives both reported greater marital quality if they ascribed more benign attributions and were more forgiving. These wives may view humans as fallible, and themselves as fallible and desiring forgiveness also. This may aid them to view their husbands as fallible and deserving forgiveness as well (Bell & Fincham, 2017). In addition, it is common place to seek forgiveness whether sincere or out of learned behavior in India (Sandilya & Shahnawaz, 2014). These social pressures may push Indian husbands and wives to extend forgiveness. Future research with U.S. and Indian couples will need to identify cultural and individual factors that influence one's tendency to ascribe more benign attributions and forgive transgressions.

### ***Do Spousal Responsibility Attributions and Forgiveness Relate to Marital Outcomes?***

Hypothesis 2 received only marginal support in each study. Significant partner effects were found for U.S. wives and Indian husbands. U.S. wives reported a higher marital outcome when their husbands were more forgiving. Likewise, Indian husbands had higher reported marital outcomes if their spouses were more forgiving. Individual attributions were not directly related to partner marital outcomes for any of the couples, unlike previous research in U.S. and non-U.S. samples (Sabourin et al., 1991; Stander et al., 2001). Sample size may have influenced these findings because partner effects can be more difficult to detect than actor effects (Ackerman, Donnellan, & Kashy, 2011). It is unclear how attributions are communicated between Indian spouses, whereby they may be unaware of the one another's attributions, which lessens the potential to influence each other (Fincham, 1992). Future research should obtain a larger sample of couples, and assess whether and how responsibility attributions are communicated.

### ***Does Forgiveness Mediate Personal Responsibility Attributions and Marital Outcomes?***

Results from these two studies provided only marginal support for hypothesis 3. Only for Indian wives does the data suggest positive aspects of forgiveness (i.e., benevolence) may function as a mechanism that mediates the relationship

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<sup>1</sup> An analysis of interactions among all study variables can be found in the supplemental table.

between individual marital attributions and marital outcomes. Paleari, Regalia, and Fincham (2003) findings that forgiveness (i.e., benevolence) mediates the relationship between attributions and conflict avoidance in parent–child relationships were extended by demonstrating that forgiveness acted as a mediator between attributions and marital outcomes in Indian couples. Forgiveness may be represented in behavior towards the partner. Durtschi et al. (2011) found that spousal behaviors mediated the association between attributions and marital outcomes. As noted, forgiveness can be conceptualized as a spousal behavior (e.g., compassion, affection, approach behavior), that tends to improve marital outcomes (e.g., closeness, marital quality). However, this association was not found among U.S. spouses or Indian husbands. The lack of significant findings for U.S. spouses may have been influenced by the assessment of closeness. Attributions appears to be a factor that influences closeness for both husbands and wives, but forgiveness may not be as important in determining how close U.S. spouses feel to one another. Indian husbands need to be examined more fully to understand whether and how forgiveness influences their marital quality. This is the first study to assess attributions among Indian married couples. Blame, responsibility, and causal attributions may function differently for Indian married couples than U.S. couples. Future research will need to assess each attribution type to determine how they relate to marital outcomes.

### ***Are Personal Marital Outcomes Related to Spousal Attributions via Spousal Forgiveness?***

We found only marginal support for hypothesis 4 in our two studies. American husbands attributed less responsibility to their wives for transgressions and were more likely to forgive them, and these wives were more likely to feel close to their husbands. It may be that feeling close to one's spouse is an important component of extending forgiveness for American husbands. Future research should examine these associations with a closeness and a marital quality measure similar to the one used in Study 2.

It is common place to seek forgiveness in India whether sincere or out of learned behavior (Sandilya & Shahnawaz, 2014). This may help explain why forgiveness acted as a mediator for Indian wives. Kishore and Gupta (2009) noted that Indian women are expected to adjust to the lifestyle of their husband and his family. Thus, wives with more benign attributions toward their husband's transgressions may forgive their husbands more out of a sense of obligation to maintain harmony in their marriages. Attributions and forgiveness may function differently for distressed Indian couples. Future research should examine reasons Indian wives forgive their husbands among samples of distressed and nondistressed Indian couples.

Building upon previous explanations and combining all of the results from these two studies may help us understand how attributions and forgiveness influence marital outcomes. Spouses that view humans as fallible may be more likely to assign benign attributions and forgive their spouses, if they view themselves as fallible and deserving of forgiveness, thus leading to greater marital quality (Bell & Fincham,

2017). Future research on attributions and forgiveness will need to examine how individuals view themselves and their spouses to more fully understand the nuances and link among attributions, forgiveness, and marital outcomes.

### ***Clinical Implications***

These findings should be of particular interest to clinicians. Clinicians working with couples may find that facilitating a change in marital attributions, such that they become more benign, can promote forgiveness, or benevolence toward one's spouse, and increase closeness/marital quality for spouses (Davis & Gold, 2011; Fincham et al., 2002; Friesen et al., 2005; Hall & Fincham, 2006). As an individual begins to see their partner's actions as less intentional, not negatively motivated, and not as a consistent way of acting they become more able to forgive transgressions. Several therapies, such as emotionally focused couple therapy (EFT; Johnson, 2004) and integrative behavioral couple therapy (IBCT; Jacobsen & Christensen, 1996), consider altering cognitions of the situation and the partner as critical to improvement. Step two of EFT focuses on reframing problems as part of a negative cycle to change cognitions about an issue (Johnson, 2004). In addition, clinicians may find it important to assess and challenge negative responsibility attributions. Doing so can help clinicians know when and how to pace interventions. Working toward forgiveness may be frustrated if negative attributions are not altered beforehand. The findings in this study help to further substantiate the focus on this therapeutic practice, particularly for American couples and Indian wives. Future research should examine the sequence of altering attributions and facilitating forgiveness in therapy, for both genders, to determine optimum sequencing for couples.

Marital quality appears to depend, in part, on how willing partners are to forgive one another. Clinicians can improve relational quality by dedicating session time to facilitate forgiveness. Couple and individual interventions exist with this aim in mind (for review, see Wade, Hoyt, Kidwell, & Worthington, 2014). Fife, Weeks, and Stellberg-Filbert (2013) outlined a model for facilitating forgiveness following infidelity based on four unifying factors: empathy, humility, commitment and hope, and apology. Additionally, Greenberg, Warwar, and Malcom (2008) evaluated the effectiveness of EFT in facilitating forgiveness. They found that 75% of couples either completely or partially forgave their partner for an emotional injury (i.e., abandonment, invalidation, betrayal).

Finally and most importantly, these findings emphasize the need for clinician attunement to cultural differences. Responsibility for transgressions and forgiveness may be understood and valued differently based on cultural background and family system. Given the differences that exist, clinicians need to be aware in therapy how attributions are assigned, and be attuned to the role of forgiveness (i.e., expectations, how and when) in the couple's cultural and family system (e.g., racial/ethnic group, spiritual/religious tradition) to facilitate forgiveness effectively.

## Conclusion

In summary, couples inevitably face partner transgressions resulting in hurt and relational distress. Transgression attributions can influence willingness to forgive. Forgiveness has the potential to be one mechanism to help repair relationships, and decrease the impact of negative attributions. These are the first studies to show that, in some instances, forgiveness acts as a mediator in the relationship between attributions and marital quality in Western and non-Western samples. The findings provide partial evidence for the need in couple therapy to alter attributions for spousal transgressions, foster forgiveness to improve marital outcomes, and understand cultural and family system variations regarding the role of forgiveness.

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