DISTINGUISHED SCHOLAR ARTICLE

The kiss of the porcupines: From attributing responsibility to forgiving

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Abstract

How to maintain relatedness in the context of being harmed by others, especially an intimate partner, is a fundamental human challenge. Forgiveness provides a way of meeting this challenge as it removes the barrier to relatedness caused by a transgression. But scientists know very little about forgiveness and its role in close relationships. This article therefore offers a conceptual analysis of forgiveness. The analysis then serves as the foundation for an organizational framework that can be used to study forgiveness in close relationships. Finally, preliminary data are presented that speak to some of the issues introduced in the article.

> Without forgiveness there is no future.
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> *Archbishop Desmond Tutu (1998)*

Imagine two porcupines huddled together in the cold of an Alaskan winter's night, each providing life-sustaining warmth to the other. As they draw ever closer together the painful prick from the other's quills leads them to instinctively withdraw—until the need for warmth draws them together again. This "kiss of the porcupines" is an apt metaphor for the human condition, and it illustrates the two fundamental assumptions upon which this article is based: humans harm each other and humans are social animals. Acceptance of these two assumptions results in the challenge addressed in this article—how to maintain relatedness with fellow humans in the face of being harmed by them.

This challenge is most acute, and most important, in close relationships. In a seeming paradox, fulfillment of our deepest affiliative needs as social animals occurs in close relationships where it appears to be accompanied by injury; it is a rare person who has never felt "wronged," "let down," "betrayed," or "hurt" by a relationship partner. In close relationships we voluntarily make ourselves most vulnerable to another human being by linking the realization of our needs, aspirations, and hopes to the goodwill of a relationship partner. Rendering ourselves vulnerable is a double-edged sword. It makes possible the profound sense of well-being that can be experienced in close relationships. At the same time, the imperfection of any partner means that hurt or injury is inevitable, and when it occurs, the hurt is particularly poignant precisely because we have made ourselves vulnerable. In the face of such injury, negative feelings (e.g., anger, resentment, disappointment) toward the partner are common. Motivation to withdraw or avoid the source of harm, or perhaps even a desire to retaliate or seek revenge, are also typical. Thus, partner injury constitutes a breach or rupture in the relationship that produces estrangement. How do relationships recover following injury of one partner by the other? What brings about reconciliation between partners and facilitates restoration of the relationship? The chal-

lenging nature of these questions is matched by the lack of information available to answer them. In an attempt to provide answers, this article examines the role of forgiveness in close relationships.

Responsibility and Forgiveness: Core Social Constructs

The two assumptions articulated earlier serve as the foundation for the analysis that is to follow. Each points to core constructs that are woven in the fabric of close relationships and of human existence. The inevitability of harm points to the fundamental importance of attributing responsibility for the harm. Responsibility attributions are adaptive because they allow us to predict and potentially avoid future harm. This view is hardly novel and is elaborated eloquently by Heider (1944, 1958). I am simply stating a specific instance, involving human action, of Heider's broader concern with how a perceiver links observables to underlying stable or dispositional properties ("invariances") of the world to give meaning to phenomenal experience. It is little surprise, then, that investigating how partners determine responsibility for relationship events has yielded important insights into relationship functioning and remains a fruitful area of inquiry across a number of different laboratories (for a review, see Fincham, in press-a). But it has become increasingly apparent that attributing responsibility is analogous to the first act in a longer play—it can be said to set the stage for further evolution of the drama.

What follows in the drama is indicated by the second assumption, which concerns our social nature as human beings. We cannot flourish in isolation. So, just as it is adaptive to determine responsibility for harm, it is often equally adaptive to forgive those who harm us, for this is a primary mechanism whereby we reestablish relatedness.[1] But if

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1. Unlike many analyses of forgiveness (e.g., Downie, 1965; Horsbrugh, 1974), I am not arguing for its importance on the grounds that humans are moral agents and we ought to forgive because it is a moral virtue. This is another, but separate, argument for forgiveness.

forgiveness is an essential element of close relationships why, barring some notable exceptions (e.g., Boon & Sulsky, 1997; McCullough, Worthington, & Rachal, 1997; McCullough et al., 1998b), is it not the subject of intensive research in the close relationship literature?

This question serves as a springboard for the analysis offered in the present article and is considered in the next section. The third section goes on to examine whether relationship maintenance and repair strategies that have already been identified embody what is meant by forgiveness even though discussions of these strategies do not use this term. Building on this exercise, the fourth section of the article offers a detailed analysis of forgiveness. This serves as the foundation for considering how forgiveness might function in close relationships.

It remains, in turning to the tasks just outlined, to make explicit a perspective that informs my analysis and permeates much of what is to follow. The earlier comments on attributing responsibility are not intended to relegate prior analysis and research on responsibility attribution to the status of prologue. On the contrary, the construct of responsibility has much to offer an analysis of forgiveness, both directly and indirectly. It is directly relevant insofar as processes that influence responsibility are hypothesized to influence forgiveness. Indirectly, there is also much to be learned as the issues encountered in research on responsibility attribution provide guideposts for the analysis of forgiveness. I consult this map whenever appropriate.[2]

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2. There is precedent for studying forgiveness by drawing on analysis of related phenomena. For example, McCullough et al. (1997, 1998b), drawing on Batson's empathy-altruism hypothesis, found support for viewing forgiveness as an empathy-facilitated set of motivational changes that alter action tendencies regarding conciliatory and avoidance behavior. Similarly, Enright et al. (1989) drew on Kohlberg's structural-developmental theory of justice to derive their analogous stage theory of forgiveness.

Why Is Forgiveness Not a Core Construct in Close Relationship Research?

Addressing this question presupposes that forgiveness has indeed been overlooked in close relationship research. This is easy to document as forgiveness has not, until very recently, featured strongly in *any* area of scientific research. For example, Worthington (1998a) notes that only five studies on forgiveness were conducted prior to 1985 and that 55 appeared in the following 13 years. A search of the Psychinfo database provides a similar picture[3]; as of June 1999 it contained 144 references with *forgiveness* in the title (81 journal articles, 43 dissertation abstracts, 16 book chapters, 3 authored books, and 1 edited book). But use of the term "forgiveness" in any literature search may underestimate attention paid to it, as a variety of related constructs (e.g., guilt, revenge) are relevant for understanding forgiveness. Even though they paid attention to such related constructs, McCullough, Exline, and Baumeister's (1998a) annotated bibliography on forgiveness contains only 46 studies. Perhaps not surprisingly, these authors noted that "scientific understanding of the concept of forgiveness is quite limited" (p. 194).

The relative lack of research on forgiveness has been attributed to its identification with theology (Fitzgibbons, 1986). Certainly it appears that forgiveness is a "goal commonly advocated by all of the world's longstanding religions" (Thoresen, Luskin, & Harris, 1998, p. 164), but it has not thereby engendered hostility or disdain in the social sciences. Rather, it simply appears to have been considered insufficiently important or amenable to scientific study (McCullough et al., 1998a). This is clearly beginning to change (see Enright & North, 1998; Worthington, 1998b), stimulated perhaps

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3. As recently as 1987 it would not have been possible to engage in this exercise as forgiveness and its synonyms were not indexed in *Psychological Abstracts*. It was apparently also absent from the *Comprehensive Textbook of Psychiatry* (see Hope, 1987), providing further evidence of its neglect in psychology and psychiatry.

by increased awareness of, and the need to respond to, acts of violence in the broader culture. Inspection of the available literature shows an increased interest in forgiveness in the latter half of the 1990s. Still, the emphasis remains on facilitating forgiveness in counseling/therapy with little research addressing basic research questions on forgiveness.[4]

So, one answer to the question posed in this section is that close relationship research has simply followed the lead of the broader scientific literature. However, two alternatives would invalidate this answer. First, inspection of close relationship research might reveal that we have been researching forgiveness all along but just calling it something else. A second possibility is that forgiveness is not really that relevant for understanding close relationships. The next section addresses the first of these possibilities.

Is Forgiveness a Relationship Maintenance/Repair Strategy by Any Other Name?

To distinguish forgiving from related relationship maintenance and repair strategies, a preliminary description of forgiveness is needed.

Preliminary analysis of forgiveness

What does it mean to forgive? This question is addressed more fully later. In the present context it suffices to describe only some necessary conditions for forgiveness to occur. For p to forgive o logically requires p to be conscious of being injured/wronged by o. Without injury there is nothing to forgive. However, following Downie (1971), it is also necessary for p to

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4. A notable exception is the impressive program of research by Enright and colleagues (e.g., Enright and the Human Development Study Group, 1991). Their contribution includes the development of a structural developmental model of forgiveness (e.g., Enright et al. 1989) and a process model of forgiveness that is used to inform forgiveness interventions (e.g., Enright & Coyle, 1998).

believe that the injury was intentionally or, at a minimum, negligently inflicted although the level of responsibility for the injury will vary according to which of these two criteria is met (see Heider's, 1958, levels of responsibility). In other words, criteria used in social institutions (e.g., law; see Hart & Honoré, 1959), in everyday life (see Fincham & Jaspars, 1980), and in logical analysis (see Shaver, 1985) to infer responsibility must be met. When injury could not be foreseen and was not intended there is again nothing to forgive. Thus, forgiveness occurs in full knowledge that the transgressor is responsible for the injury, that he or she thereby forfeits any right to the victim's sympathy, affection or trust, and that the victim has a right to feel resentful.

Relevant relationship maintenance and repair strategies

Relationship researchers clearly recognize that the less than ideal behavior of intimates toward each other poses a challenge for relationships. One response has been a fruitful line of work on motivated, cognitive biases (e.g., Buunk & Van Yperen, 1991; Johnson & Rusbult, 1989; Murray, Holmes, & Griffin, 1996; Simpson, Gangestad, & Lerma, 1990; Van Lange & Rusbult, 1995). These biases shape mental representations of the partner, allowing him or her to be seen in the most positive light, and recent work documents how such motivated cognition is sustained by integrated cognitive structures in which partner virtues are embellished and faults minimized (e.g., Murray & Holmes, in press). It can be argued that this line of research documents a relationship maintenance strategy that obviates the need for forgiveness; perception of negativity in the partner is avoided or, if it is perceived, is downplayed.

Notwithstanding such motivated cognition, intimates often do see significant fault in their partners, and relationship problems have historically been the most common reason for seeking psychotherapy (Veroff, Kulka, & Douvan, 1981). Not surprisingly, there is a substantial literature on couple

therapy (see Halford & Markman, 1997). A new research-based couple therapy incorporates the concept of *acceptance* that may appear similar to forgiveness (Jacobson & Christensen, 1996). The core feature of acceptance-based interventions is that the context that makes behavior problematic, rather than the behavior itself, is the target of change. At first blush this appears similar to forgiveness as both philosophers and psychotherapists note that forgiveness is facilitated by viewing injurious partner behavior in a new light (e.g., North, 1998; Worthington, 1998c). But when acceptance occurs, what "was offensive or blameworthy is seen as understandable, tolerable, or even a valuable, though at times unpleasant, difference" (Koerner, Jacobson, & Christensen, 1994). This is perhaps closer to condoning (viewing the behavior as justified) or excusing (there is a defensible reason for the behavior) partner behavior than it is to forgiving it. Condoning or excusing the behavior results in there no longer being a culpable offense, and hence the question of forgiveness does not logically arise. Moreover, as will soon be apparent, the partner's commitment to behavioral change, either explicitly or implicitly through apology, facilitates forgiveness. In contrast, acceptance implies that "change on the part of the perpetrator is no longer necessary" (Christensen, Jacobson, & Babcock, 1995). In short, acceptance can be applied to circumstances that do not meet the necessary conditions that make forgiveness relevant.

Perhaps the closest construct to forgiveness in the close relationship literature is *accommodation* or the willingness to respond to potentially destructive partner behavior by inhibiting "tendencies to react destructively" and instead to "engage in constructive reactions" (Rusbult et al., 1991, p. 53). Considerable progress has been made in understanding the determinants and dynamics of this interaction pattern (e.g., Rusbult et al., 1996; Rusbult, Bissonnette, Arriage, & Cox, 1998). For example, relationship commitment predicts accommodation, and its effect is mediated by a meaning analysis in which partners "discern the reasons for an event" (Rusbult et al., 1996, p. 79). However, demonstrating that "reasons for the event" (operationalized as benign attributions and positive emotional reactions) are the proximal determinant of accommodation is valuable but does not speak directly to the issue of forgiveness.

For instance, accommodation might occur because potentially destructive partner behavior is construed in such a way that its destructive nature is ignored, overlooked, or downplayed or, when fully recognized, is condoned or excused. Under these circumstances, forgiveness is not a relevant concern. Although Fletcher, Thomas, and Durrant (in press) have demonstrated the utility of distinguishing cognitive accommodation (benign cognitions and emotions) from behavioral accommodation (absence of negative emotion or cognition in subsequent responses), this does not alter the status of accommodation vis-à-vis forgiveness. In sum, as with acceptance, accommodation cannot be equated with forgiveness because it can occur when the necessary conditions for forgiveness are not met as well as when they are met.

The brief analysis offered above does not exhaust the variety of maintenance and repair strategies in close relationship research, but it suffices to demonstrate that forgiveness has not played a central role in such research. This, however, does not negate its centrality for understanding close relationships and social life more broadly. Rather, forgiveness is like attribution, woven into the fabric of human existence but rarely recognized as such. This has important implications both for the logical analysis of forgiveness and for its psychological investigation, which are considered in the following two sections, respectively.

Toward a More Complete Understanding of Forgiveness

Linking forgiveness to attribution is instructive because it alerts us to an important danger that can be illustrated in refer-

ence to attribution of responsibility. As in the case of responsibility, the danger lies in the very familiarity of the construct. This has three important consequences. First, everyone is a lay expert on forgiveness and can potentially gather data on one's (expert) analysis of forgiveness. Second, our lay expertise often allows us to communicate about forgiveness without being aware that we may have different referents for the term or even an unclear referent. Third, unarticulated assumptions that we share about forgiveness may obscure understanding and hinder research.

In the case of responsibility attribution, it is such consequences that appear to account for Fischhoff's (1976) early observation that "The incredible confusion in the attribution of responsibility literature ... might serve as an illustrative example of how psychologists' vagueness about their basic concepts can strip their work of its value" (p. 440). With the recent proliferation of publications on forgiveness, there is the real danger that Fischhoff's observation might soon apply to the forgiveness literature. This is because forgiveness is often confused with related constructs (Freedman, 1998) and is used to refer to, among other things, actions, processes, states, and dispositions. Not surprisingly, leading scholars have expressed concern about the need for conceptual/definitional clarity (e.g., Enright, Freedman, & Rique, 1998; Worthington, 1998d).

The confusion in the responsibility attribution literature was addressed initially by conceptual analysis of responsibility (e.g., Fincham & Jaspars, 1980; Hamilton, 1978; Shaver, 1985), a process that remains ongoing (Schlenker, Britt, Pennington, Murphy, & Doherty, 1994; Weiner, 1995). Informed by legal and philosophical writings, as well as relevant sources in sociology and psychology, these analyses provided a foundation for progress, but they did not, ipso facto, constitute a psychological account of responsibility attribution. In a similar vein, it is helpful to distinguish logical from psychological accounts of forgiveness. Although people in everyday life may not make some of the logical distinctions of-

fered by scholars, logical analysis nonetheless provides a useful foundation for psychological research.

A more complete analysis of forgiveness

Some necessary conditions for forgiveness to occur have already been outlined, and it has been distinguished from condoning or excusing injury. As we move toward a more complete analysis for forgiveness, it is important to be clear about the referent for the analysis and to distinguish forgiveness from additional related constructs. Each is addressed in turn before describing some core features of forgiveness.

Forgiveness is an interpersonal construct.

Forgiveness is inherently interpersonal; in the paradigmatic case, p forgives o for the harm o did to p. The interpersonal nature of forgiveness is well captured by North's (1998) statements that it is "outward-looking and other-directed" (p. 19) and that forgiveness annuls "not the crime itself but the distorting effect that this wrong has upon one's relations with the wrongdoer and perhaps with others" (North, 1987, p. 500). In common usage, however, forgiveness is also used in reference to the self. Here the forgiver and forgiven are one, the self has often not been the victim of injurious behavior, and we most often talk about *not* forgiving, rather than forgiving, oneself (Horsbrugh, 1974). Although they share some features in common, it is not clear whether self-forgiveness and the forgiveness of others can be explained using the same theoretical elements. In any event, self-forgiveness is not a referent of the current analysis. Similarly, forgiving on behalf of a third party who suffered harm, particularly as a group member who did not personally experience harm inflicted on the group, is also not addressed even though it is important at philosophical (e.g., Benn, 1996) and practical levels (e.g., in relation to the Holocaust, post-apartheid South Africa). In short, the referent for the current analysis of forgiveness is the paradigmatic

case in which *p* forgives *o* for harm inflicted by *o* on *p.*

Forgiveness is distinct from reconciliation and reunion. Although forgiveness has relationship-restorative potential, it is distinct from reconciliation or relationship reunion. Reconciliation involves the restoration of violated trust and requires the goodwill of both partners. Thus, reconciliation entails forgiveness, but forgiveness does not necessarily entail reconciliation. Similarly, where harm-doing has resulted in the breakup of a relationship, forgiveness may, though it need not, lead to reunion, but reunion, unlike reconciliation, does not necessarily entail forgiveness. Partners might reunite for a variety of reasons (e.g., loneliness, financial hardship), and reunion may be facilitated by processes that appear similar to forgiveness (e.g., the dissipation over time of negative feelings generated by the harm-doing) but which do not constitute forgiveness. In sum, forgiveness removes the barrier to relatedness, but other factors (e.g., likelihood of further harm, the harm-doer's reaction to the victim's forgiveness) determine whether a relationship ensues and what specific form the relationship takes. With the referent specified and the relation to reconciliation and reunion clarified, we are now in a position to consider some core characteristics of forgiveness.

Forgiveness is something that individuals do. The distinctions drawn in the last paragraph are possible because reconciliation and reunion are characteristics of dyads or groups, whereas individuals manifest forgiveness. Even though forgiveness is inherently interpersonal and has effects that may extend far beyond the forgiver, it is a property of the individual. Moreover, forgiveness does not depend on anything external to the individual, though it may be facilitated by external factors (e.g., the harm-doer's repentance or apology; see Darby & Schlenker, 1982; Enright, Santos, & Al-Mabuk, 1989; McCullough et al., 1997; North, 1987; Weiner et al., 1991). There is the philosophical question of whether some

harmful acts are so heinous that forgiveness is impossible, but this question is predicated on moral assumptions. In principle, a victim can choose to forgive any harm. Whether it is a wise decision, or a morally appropriate one, is another matter.

Forgiveness is intentional, unconditional, and supererogatory. Forgiving is intentional. Because forgiving is intentional, the spontaneous dissipation of resentment and ill-will over time that is occasioned by injury does not constitute forgiveness. Rather, forgiveness occurs with *p*'s full knowledge that he or she has a right to feel negatively toward *o* and that *o* has no right to expect *p*'s sympathy. In choosing to forgive, *p* gives up the right to anger and resentment and steps down from a position of moral superiority vis-à-vis *o* brought about by *o*'s action. However, *p* does *not* give up the right to protect himself or herself from future occurrences of the injurious behavior; whether *p* wishes to continue an existing relationship with *o,* and what form that relationship might take, may be predicated on judgments about future harm. This observation is inconsistent with the view that forgiveness restores a relationship to its state prior to the injury, which, if it were logically possible, would merely re-create the exact conditions that led to the injury and therefore facilitate its reoccurrence. Forgiving is not equivalent to denial, forgetting, or foolishness. If it were, forgiveness would not be adaptive and would presumably have been selected out of the repertoire of human behavior (Luebbert, 1999). There is therefore nothing inconsistent in choosing to forgive a spouse and, at the same time, choosing to end the marriage.

Forgiving is also unconditional. Conditions that influence forgiveness (e.g., transgressor confession, apology) are not necessary conditions for it to occur even though they may facilitate forgiveness. However, these conditions may be particularly important for reconciliation and the subsequent course of the relationship. To forgive is also supererogatory, at least in secular Western culture where there is no requirement that

a victim forgive a transgressor. Indeed, failure to forgive may be seen as quite understandable even though, at the same time, the ability to forgive may be admired. This feature of forgiveness is not found in some religious and cultural traditions where there is a duty to forgive, one that is often governed by specific (religious) laws and/or cultural rituals (see Dorff, 1998). In any event, it is the intentional, unconditional, and supererogatory nature of forgiveness that underpins its characterization as a gift or altruistic act (e.g., Enright & Coyle, 1998; North, 1987; Worthington, 1998c).

Forgiveness involves negative and positive dimensions. Forgiveness is not achieved simply by relinquishing a negative motivational state vis-à-vis the harm-doer. Overcoming the resentment, anger, retaliatory impulses, and so on of unforgiveness reflects only one of two dimensions of forgiveness. As Holmgren (1993) notes, "In reaching a state of genuine forgiveness the victim extends an attitude of real goodwill towards the offender as a person" (p. 347). Downie (1971) characterizes the positive dimension of forgiveness as "the attitude of respect which should always characterize interpersonal behavior" (p. 149). Forgiveness thus entails a positive motivational state towards the harm-doer.

One can conceptualize the negative dimension of forgiveness as overcoming an avoidance goal and thereby removing the barrier caused by the injury. But lack of an avoidance goal is not equivalent to having an approach goal. The positive dimension of forgiveness provides the motivational foundation for approach behavior. Perhaps because avoidance goals have an inherent primacy, measurement of forgiveness has focused on its negative dimension (e.g., McCullough et al., 1998b) and a great deal of what has been learned about forgiveness rests on inferences made from the absence of a negative motivational orientation toward the harm-doer.

Distinguishing positive and negative dimensions of forgiveness is important for at least two reasons. First, the tendency to im-

pose a bipolar structure on constructs in social science is also evident in the forgiveness literature. But forgiveness cannot be understood completely by studying unforgiveness, just as marital quality cannot be fully understood by the study of marital distress or optimism by the study of learned helplessness (Fincham, in press-b). Second, negative and positive dimensions of forgiveness may have different determinants, correlates, and consequences. For example, it can be hypothesized that negative and positive dimensions predict avoidance/revenge and conciliatory behaviors, respectively.

Forgiveness is manifest in affect, cognition, and overt behavior. As Enright has consistently pointed out (e.g., Enright and the Human Development Study Group, 1991; Enright et al., 1998), forgiveness involves affective, cognitive, and behavioral systems. Differential emphasis is given to the three systems across different accounts of forgiveness, perhaps reflecting different emphases across religious and cultural views of forgiveness. For example, Jewish tradition focuses on the behaviors involved in forgiveness and "harbors the hope that the feelings . . . will ultimately follow along" (Dorff, 1998), whereas a Christian perspective accords changed feelings a more central role (see Marty, 1998). Does according behavior a central role preclude forgiving harm-doers to whom we do not have access, such as a dead parent? No. Our changed behavior might be manifest in a variety of specific acts (e.g., visiting the grave of the parent, displaying a photograph of them in the home), in the way we talk about the absent person, and so on.

The behavioral element of forgiveness bears emphasis because of recent groundbreaking empirical and theoretical research. At the empirical level, forgiveness has been studied as a "set of motivational changes" (McCullough et al., 1997, p. 321; see also McCullough et al., 1998b). However, motivational changes (for decreased estrangement and increased conciliation) cannot constitute forgiveness in the absence

of concomitant behavioral change; it would be peculiar, indeed, to assert that p had forgiven o if p continued to treat o adversely or, even in the absence of negative behavior toward o, reacted positively to o's misfortune. This is implicitly recognized in the measure of forgiveness to emerge from McCullough and colleagues' research in that at least 5 of the 12 items are reports of behavior (e.g., "I avoid him/her," see McCullough et al., 1998b). At the theoretical level, Baumeister, Exline, and Sommer (1998) offer an interesting analysis of forgiveness that distinguishes "intrapsychic state" (defined as the cessation of anger and resentment) from "interpersonal act" and define combinations of these two elements as giving rise to particular forms of forgiveness. Thus, "silent forgiveness" involves overcoming resentment and anger but no interpersonal act, whereas "hollow forgiveness" involves behavior but no transformation in the negative motivational orientation to the partner. The analysis is a useful one but, as should be apparent, involves usage of the term "forgiveness" in a way that is inconsistent with its historical roots and with contemporary philosophical analysis.

Forgiveness behavior does not have a specific topography. As already noted, extant research on forgiveness focuses heavily on unforgiveness, particularly in regard to measurement. The emphasis on the negative dimension in the measurement of forgiveness is understandable; identifying avoidant, retaliatory, and vengeful behaviors (unforgiveness) is far more manageable than trying to identify behaviors reflecting the positive dimension of forgiveness. This is because such behavior has no unique topography as it is the respectful, interpersonal behavior expected in everyday life that, in the context of injury, assumes the mantle of forgiveness (Downie, 1971). The measurement issue is complicated further by the next core element of forgiveness.

Forgiveness is not an act but a process. Given the above account of forgiveness behavior, there is the temptation to identify such be-

havior with a specific statement of forgiveness or an overt act of forgiveness (e.g., Hargave & Sells, 1997; Baumeister et al., 1998). This temptation should be avoided as it is likely to produce confusion. Here is why. The verb "to forgive" is not performative. So, for example, to say "I promise" is to make a promise even in the absence of any intention to do what is promised. But to say "I forgive you" does not thereby constitute forgiveness even if one fully intends to forgive the person addressed. As Horsbrugh (1974) points out, the phrase "I'll try to forgive you" is sufficient evidence to support this argument as "to try" cannot be used in conjunction with any performative verb (e.g., "I'll try to promise"). By extension, a specific act does not constitute forgiveness though it might well be the first sign that p has made a decision to forgive o.

This analysis is not simply an exercise in semantics because it uncovers something important about forgiveness—forgiveness is not achieved immediately. Rather, the decision to forgive starts a difficult process that involves conquering negative feelings and acting with goodwill toward someone who has done us harm. It is this process, set in motion by a decision to forgive, that makes statements like "I'm trying to forgive you" meaningful.

Conclusions. As evidenced by this brief analysis, forgiveness is a complex construct. It is firmly rooted in historic traditions, religious teachings, and cultural values that shape our existence. The unique configurations of these specific elements that each reader brings to bear on the foregoing analysis will no doubt lead to potential disagreement with it. This is to be welcomed. The intent has not been to offer a definitive or complete analysis of forgiveness. Nor have I attempted to describe lay conceptions of forgiveness, a worthwhile task but one that is perhaps best addressed through empirical research. Rather, I have tried to identify, describe, and distinguish logically among some elements of forgiveness and specify how forgiveness differs from related

constructs with the intent of offering a sufficiently clear analysis to inform future research. The analysis may be erroneous, but that is less consequential than its clarity, for science is advanced more by error than by confusion. Attempting to capture completely the essence of a construct as rich as "forgiveness" is a humbling experience. Fortunately, its successful accomplishment may not be necessary, for, as Smedes (1998) so insightfully observes, "reality is always more prickly and awkward than our definitions of it" (p. 350). It is therefore time to turn to the "reality" of forgiveness in close relationships.

Forgiveness in Close Relationships

The importance of forgiveness in close relationships is illustrated in Figure 1, which shows three potential means of relationship repair following estrangement that can result from a partner transgression (e.g., *p* forgets *o*'s birthday, an omission that has a cumulative impact on *o* as the day wears on so that by evening the atmosphere in the relationship is "frosty"). One means involves removing the basis for estrangement by nullifying the transgression. This might occur by no longer seeing the partner behavior as a transgression (e.g., new information becomes available; *o* discovers that *p* said nothing in the service of springing a surprise birthday party) or by deciding to excuse, condone, or overlook the transgression. A second means, labeled "habituation/dissipation," involves the reduction of negativity as the transgression becomes less salient with, for example, the passage of time or redeployment of attention (e.g., other distracting events). This does not preclude reexperiencing negativity, and possible reinstitution of estrangement, when the transgression becomes highly salient or accessible (e.g., on subsequent birthdays). The third means of ending estrangement is through forgiveness. Forgiveness is likely over the longer term to be the less costly (to the individual and the relationship) means of ending estrangement when nullifying the transgression is not a viable option.

In this section I offer a preliminary framework for understanding forgiveness in close relationships. As in the preceding section, the framework considers only the perspective of the injured partner and is therefore necessarily incomplete. Also as before, a useful starting point is the responsibility attribution literature. This is because attributed responsibility has direct implications for forgiveness.

Responsibility attribution influences forgiveness

Using a married couple as an example, in both responsibility attribution and forgiving one is concerned with the link between spouse and partner injury. Unlike the forgiveness literature, which appears to assume that such a link exists and pays minimal attention to the nature of the link, the responsibility attribution literature is replete with philosophical, legal, and psycho-
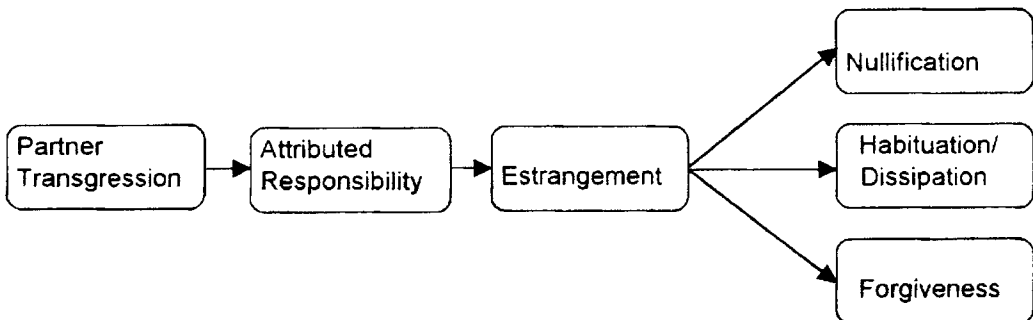

Figure 1. Three means of ending estrangement following a partner transgression.

logical analyses of how such a link is estab-
lished. Thus, for example, criminal responsi-
bility requires a mental element (guilty
mind or *mens rea*), and a physical element,
an act or omission (*actus reus*), which links
the act to the injury. This alerts us to the
obvious, and seemingly trivial, fact that the
spouse → partner injury link is not direct
but occurs through an act or omission.
Hence, what is at issue is the sequence,
Spouse → Act/Omission → Partner injury.

Already this highlights a crucial element
in forgiveness (e.g., North, 1987; Smedes,
1998), distinguishing the spouse from his or
her act (cf. St. Augustine's dictum, "Hate the
sin, love the sinner"). As the injured partner
sees beyond the transgression, and appreci-
ates the person behind the act (the person's
inherent worth, positive qualities, and
flawed humanness), forgiveness is accord-
ingly facilitated. Not surprisingly, this dis-
tinction is particularly emphasized in clini-
cal writings on forgiveness (e.g., Enright et
al., 1998; Worthington, 1998c). Here the
process seems to parallel that which under-
lies motivated cognition in the more general
case of dealing with negative partner char-
acteristics (Murray & Holmes, in press).

But analysis of responsibility goes fur-
ther by reminding us that both the link be-
tween spouse and act and act and injury can
vary in strength and hence each will impact
the link between spouse and partner injury.
Recognition of levels or degrees of respon-
sibility are embodied in social institutions
(e.g., the law) as well as psychological the-
ory (e.g., Heider's levels of responsibility).
Hence, the spouse → partner injury link for
which forgiveness occurs may vary in
strength from very weak to very strong. Ac-
cordingly, it can be hypothesized that the
degree of responsibility will influence for-
giving; all else being equal, forgiving will be
easier as degree of responsibility decreases.
Thus, for example, it will be easier to forgive
injury that was foreseeable but unintended
than injury that was intended.

It follows that many of the factors influ-
encing responsibility attribution will be
relevant for understanding forgiveness. This
is not to imply that such factors have the

same effects on responsibility and forgive-
ness. For example, Boon and Sulsky (1997)
have already shown that, in romantic rela-
tionships, intentionality is weighted heavily
for both judgments of blame and forgive-
ness, whereas avoidability of a trust viola-
tion seems relatively more important for
blame but severity of the violation seems
relatively more important for forgiveness.
Nonetheless, identification of factors influ-
encing responsibility attributions as impor-
tant for forgiving opens up an area of in-
quiry that is likely to be especially important
for clinical intervention. Al-Mabuk, De-
drick, and Vanderah (1998) recognize this
and have already explored the value of attri-
bution retraining in forgiveness therapy.
Unfortunately their analysis is grounded in
basic research on causal attribution and
pays little attention to attributions in close
relationships. To the extent that further
work focuses on attribution processes in
close relationships and on responsibility at-
tribution, rather than casual attribution
(which may or may not lead to responsibil-
ity), it should prove increasingly fruitful.

Although many factors influence attrib-
uted responsibility, the degree of harm pro-
duced by an action is so fundamental that
its implications for forgiveness require at-
tention.[5] These are examined in the next
section before identifying several broad
classes of variables that are likely to influ-
ence forgiveness.

The perceived nature of injury

Consider, for example, *p* who interrupts his
or her partner, *o*, during a dinner party con-

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5. Whether degree of harm is a continuous dimension
   or results in qualitatively distinct categories has im-
   portant implications. It is already clear that the
   forgiveness literature can be categorized in terms of
   broad versus narrow views of forgiveness based
   largely on degree of harm. Thus, for example, Gor-
   don, Baucom, and Snyder (in press) argue that
   forgiveness is relevant only in relation to interper-
   sonally traumatic events. This narrow view of for-
   giveness contrasts with the broader view of forgive-
   ness considered in this article where everyday
   transgressions occurring in a couple's life may be
   relevant material for forgiveness.

versation with friends. In one scenario, *o* may experience momentary annoyance at being embarrassed in front of friends but simply "let it go." Trivial harm is not the proper subject of forgiveness; *p* may be held responsible for producing the harm but *o* may choose simply to forget or overlook such harm precisely because it is trivial. In an imperfect world we all experience minor harms, and even though they result from culpable behavior, viewing them as requiring forgiveness is likely to be seen as being overly reactive. Rather, the harm must matter.

Now consider two scenarios where the same interruption does matter. In the first scenario its execution includes a subtle putdown (e.g., "Wait, I've had lots of experience here and I can give examples to show you are right"). Two levels of outcome can occur—the immediate humiliation in front of friends and injury to *o*'s self-image.

Injury to self-image. It can be hypothesized that where *o* perceives harm to his or her self-image, forgiveness will be more difficult than when no such harm is perceived. It has long been argued that a major function of revenge and vengeance is restoration of self-esteem (see Kim, 1999). Early on, for example, Westermarck (1912) noted that retaliation serves "to enhance the 'self-feeling' which has been lowered or degraded by the injury suffered" (p. 23). Where *o*'s self-image has been injured, forgoing this mechanism of restoring self-esteem makes forgiveness relatively harder. The implications of perceived injury for forgiveness can also be hypothesized to vary as a function of *o*'s self-esteem. At low levels of self-esteem, the injury might be less consequential for forgiveness because the harm may be seen as consistent with *o*'s view of what she or he deserves and hence any request for forgiveness may be more easily honored. Conversely, at high levels of self-esteem, forgiveness may also be relatively easier because *o* is less likely to experience such injury even though he or she recognizes the implications of *p*'s behavior for the self-image. At intermediate levels of

self-esteem, where self-image may be most fragile, forgiveness may be hardest because injury is most keenly felt.

Moral injury. In a second scenario where harm matters, an added dimension to the injury is again apparent. This time the interruption is accompanied by explicit derogation and name-calling (e.g., "Wait, this is the voice of ignorance. Typical, you stupid ass! I have lots of experience to show you are wrong"). It is not difficult to imagine *o* responding to *p*'s behavior with righteous indignation and powerful urges to retaliate, making forgiveness correspondingly harder. Is this simply a function of more intense injury? Although more intense harm no doubt makes forgiveness harder, it is the perceived injustice of the harm that gives life and staying power to unforgiveness. Indeed, Heider (1958) argues that indignation occurs because "the objective order has been slighted" and the harm "ought not have happened and is against objective requiredness" (p. 264). As a result, we care a great deal about moral injury (Murphy & Hampton, 1988). It can therefore be hypothesized that injury perceived in moral terms will be relatively harder to forgive than injury that is not perceived in such terms.

Determinants of injury. A challenge for understanding forgiveness in close relationships is that the determinants of perceived injury may not be immediately apparent. Consider the original scenario where *p* simply interrupted *o*, a seemingly trivial offense, but this time *o* is deeply hurt. Is this an inappropriate response? It might be if this was an isolated incident. But the hurt becomes quite understandable when we learn that, in the context of a prior similar incident, *p* had undertaken to refrain from such behavior. Or similarly, it would be understandable if this interruption turns out to be the last in a series of such incidents. It is also understandable without a history of prior interruptions. We do not need prior behaviors that are topographically similar to understand the hurt because the interruption is also symbolic; it communicates

p's view of *o* as someone who counts less than *p*. Thus, any functionally similar, prior behavior lends greater significance to the interruption.

Four important implications follow. First, and perhaps most important, forgiveness may not pertain to a particular transgression even when it appears to do so. Rather, the specific act forgiven may (knowingly or unknowingly) represent the accumulated hurts of numerous, functionally equivalent, prior acts. Second, the symbolic status of a given behavior is likely to be idiosyncratic to the partner/couple and supports the need for idiographic research in any complete analysis of forgiveness in close relationships. Third, *p* may be frequently reminded of the harm resulting from a specific act (e.g., an adulterous one-night stand) by *o*'s behavior (e.g., his or her comment on the appearance of an opposite sex friend/stranger) because it can be viewed symbolically. As a consequence, ease of forgiving is likely to be influenced by the extent to which a broad range of behaviors can be interpreted as symbolic of the transgression, by *p*'s proclivity to interpret *o*'s behavior as symbolic of the transgression, and by *o*'s attempts to avoid behaving in ways that lend themselves to such interpretation. Finally, the partner's injurious behavior may be experienced as extremely hurtful when it is functionally or symbolically similar to hurts experienced in other close relationships (e.g., at the hands of parents, a past partner). Often the victim will be unaware of this source of the hurt, and may even be puzzled by his or her response.

Forgiveness in context

The goal of this section is to consider forgiveness in context by briefly outlining several broad classes of variables that may influence its occurrence. This is done via discussion of selected exemplars of person, relationship, harm-doing event, and post-event classes of variables that have received either little or no prior attention.

Person. Various person variables have been identified as relevant for forgiveness (e.g., Worthington, 1998c). For example, empathy mediates the well-established apology–forgiveness relation, and an empathy-promoting intervention increases forgiving (McCullough et al., 1997, 1998b). Similarly, rumination predicts revenge (McCullough et al., 1997), whereas a favorable attitude toward revenge is associated with retaliatory behavior (Caprara, 1986; Stuckless & Goranson, 1992). In view of the strong link between forgiveness and religion, one might expect that being religious is associated with greater forgiveness. Religious affiliation has been found to relate to beliefs about forgiveness (e.g., Gorsuch & Hao, 1993; Subkoviak et al., 1995), but such findings do not link religion to actual forgiving. Formal religious affiliation is unlikely to predict forgiving as it is the centrality of religious beliefs and the attempt to live according to those beliefs that most likely predict forgiveness. Meek, Albright, and Mc Minn (1995) provide some indirect evidence to support this view in that intrinsic religiousness (religiousness reflecting faith as a "master motive" in one's life) was associated with willingness to confess as a perpetrator. Surprisingly, where the person stands vis-à-vis religion and how this relates to forgiveness awaits more thorough documentation.

Perhaps the most obvious person variable for understanding forgiveness is a possible disposition to forgive. Philosophical and theological discussions of forgiveness often make reference to forgiveness as an enduring attitude or "a forgiving disposition" (Downie, 1971, p. 149), yet there appears to have been only one attempt to measure forgiveness as a trait (Mauger et al., 1992). Interestingly, forgiveness of others and forgiveness of self were only moderately correlated ($r = .37$), forgiveness of others was relatively more stable across a 2-week interval (.94 vs. .67), and the two objects of forgiveness, self and other, had different factor loadings on subscales. Although these data are limited by a focus on unforgiveness, they nonetheless provide

some data consistent with the view that for-giveness of others and of the self may re-flect different processes. Other psychomet-ric efforts in the field no doubt capture elements of a disposition to forgive, but the tendency to construct measures in relation to a respondent-selected past injury means that responses may also reflect features of the incident selected. The importance of de-veloping an individual difference measure of forgiveness is emphasized by the obser-vation that along with theory development "the slow development of psychometric in-struments to measure forgiving has also been a major barrier to scientific progress" (McCullough et al., 1998b, p. 1601).

A final person variable considered is one that has not previously been mentioned in relation to forgiveness. It concerns the per-son's implicit theory of forgiveness, particu-larly the extent to which forgiveness is viewed as a fixed or malleable quality. Build-ing on her earlier work on helplessness and mastery orientation in children, Dweck (1999) has marshaled a large body of evi-dence to illustrate that such behavioral pat-terns reflect different goal structures (per-formance vs. learning goals), which, in turn, arise from implicit theories of intelligence (entity/fixed vs. incremental/fluid). In the present context, one can hypothesize that viewing forgiveness as a fixed versus malle-able quality will influence motivation to for-give, assuming that the person sees forgive-ness as a positive attribute. Faced with the task of forgiving an important partner trans-gression that challenges the person's capac-ity to forgive, it can be hypothesized that the incremental theorist is more likely to try to forgive than the entity theorist. Dweck (1999), in discussing the extension of her analysis to social traits and to judgments about others, reports unpublished data to suggest that implicit theories of social traits are related to motivational orientation; en-tity theorists were more likely to have nega-tive and aggressive feelings toward wrong-doers whereas incremental theorists were more oriented to educating and helping wrongdoers and, by implication, to forgiving them. An important task therefore is to ex-amine the relative importance of theories of forgiveness and of social traits in predicting forgiveness.

It remains to note that some charac-teristics of persons can be examined as gen-eral traits and as characteristics of the per-son in relation to the partner. For example, one can distinguish a general disposition to forgive from a disposition to forgive the partner. It is a safe bet to assume that these two levels of forgiveness are related empiri-cally. But as the association is unlikely to be perfect, one can hypothesize that charac-teristics of the person in relation to the partner are likely to be more powerful de-terminants of forgiving in the relationship.

Relationship. Relationship characteristics have also been identified as important for forgiving. Usually the characteristics are described in terms of relationship quality. McCullough et al. (1998b) offer an impres-sive list of seven ways in which relationship quality is likely to be linked to forgiveness: (1) greater motivation to preserve relation-ships in which resources are invested and which provide resources; (2) a long-term orientation induced by high relationship quality; (3) a collectivist rather than indi-vidualistic orientation in high-quality rela-tionships; (4) greater merging of partner and self-interests in good relationships; (5) greater access to partner's inner thoughts/feelings, which provide resources for increased empathy; (6) greater ease, in the context of a high-quality relationship, in interpreting partner injurious behavior as having a positive motivational element; and (7) the greater likelihood of confession and apology in committed relationships.

Empirical evidence is consistent with the hypothesized link between relationship quality and forgiveness, but, unlike the more specific linkages outlined above, is usually limited to global indices of relation-ship quality (e.g., McCullough et al., 1998b). Although the sparse evidence and use of omnibus measures of relationship quality is problematic (see Fincham & Bradbury, 1987), the robust association between rela-tionship quality and attributions, combined

with the strong link hypothesized between attributions and forgiving, suggests that the relationship quality–forgiveness association is likely to be robust and relatively strong. However, it is clearly the case that the more important empirical task is to identify the specific features of relationship quality that are important for forgiveness. McCullough et al. (1998b) are to be commended for their efforts in this regard, but, in view of long-standing problems in the conceptualization and measurement of relationship quality, the assumptions they make about relationship quality are open to question. This is not the context in which to analyze these assumptions about relationship quality (for an analysis, see Fincham, Beach, and Kemp-Fincham, 1997; for a variety of different views, see ISSPR Bulletin, 1999). However, it is worth noting that a science of forgiveness in close relationships is being built on an important assumption, namely that relationship quality functions similarly across relationship type (e.g., employer–employee, friend, relative, spouse). In fact, data pertaining to forgiveness have been aggregated across a variety of relationships (e.g., McCullough et al., 1997, 1998b, Studies 1, 2 and 4), a practice that may or may not prove to be empirically justified.

It remains to mention a relationship characteristic that is likely to prove important for understanding forgiveness but that has not yet received attention in the forgiveness literature. The degree to which power is unequally distributed in the relationship is important because power differences are likely to influence forgiveness indirectly, through attributed responsibility (e.g., the acts of more powerful persons are more likely to be seen as expressions of their will and hence more culpable; Heider, 1958), and also directly. Indeed, one can conceptualize the context in which forgiving arises in terms of power; by definition, when *p* harms *o*, *p* exerts power over *o*. Retaliation and revenge can thus be seen as a means whereby *o* reasserts his or her power and status, and abstention from retaliation/revenge can be seen as an acknow-ledgment of *p*'s superior power in inflicting the harm. From this perspective one can hypothesize that where a clear power imbalance exists in a relationship, the more powerful partner is likely to find it harder to forgive.[6] Forgiving is made more difficult for such individuals because their power makes revenge particularly viable, and forgoing its use requires relinquishing, at least temporarily, their superior power.

Conversely, less powerful partners are likely to find it easier to forgive. Because of their limited power, revenge for them is less viable (and defeated revenge would only affirm their lower power) and the power implications of forgiving do not require adoption of a power role, however fleetingly, that is inconsistent with their usual power/status in the relationship. If this analysis is correct, and we assume marriages in Western culture still accord men greater power than women, one would expect wives to be more forgiving of their husbands than vice versa. Stated differently, one might predict husband forgiveness as being more consequential for the relationship.

Harm-doing event. As a cursory perusal of case law shows, humans appear to have discovered an astonishing array of ways to harm each other, and this is no less true in close relationships. The task then for understanding how the harm-doing event may influence forgiveness is to identify forgiveness-relevant characteristics of such events. As already noted, distinguishing among person, harmful act, and injury, and specifying the linkages among them, is a fruitful starting point. In discussing the nature of the injury, I made a start in building on this foundation. Further elaboration is possible. For example, one could elaborate on the underlying view in that discussion that the degree of injury will influence forgiveness.

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6. Of course, forgiveness can also be utilized to demonstrate power ("I am so powerful that the harm you influenced is inconsequential. I am in control here. I forgive you"). Strategic use of "forgiveness" does not meet the criteria for forgiveness outlined in this article and hence is not discussed.

Alternatively, one could distinguish further among the nonmoral bases (e.g., the victim's general relationship beliefs; nonconscious, conscious but noncommunicated beliefs, conscious and communicated beliefs; beliefs vs. standards; shared vs. divergent beliefs/standards of partners) that undergird the victim's perception of wrongdoing. In a similar vein, various features of the act could be identified such as whether it was an omission or a commission. This may be significant in view of the feature-positive bias in which inferred attitude toward a stimulus is influenced more by the presence of behavior than its absence (Fazio, Sherman, & Herr, 1982) and the fact that people are generally held more responsible for commissions than for omissions (Fincham & Jaspars, 1980).

Proceeding along these lines is complicated by the fact that the injury is always inflicted in a particular context. Thus, the task can be seen to include identification of relevant situation characteristics and their functional significance for specific actions. Although the idea of identifying relevant characteristics of the harm-doing event for understanding forgiveness is a reasonable one, that task soon becomes complex and unwieldy, and one can anticipate the identification of a large number of such characteristics. It is conceivable that many characteristics might simply be proxies for each other. Our ability to examine the relative importance of only a limited number at any one time suggests that this approach is likely to end up being less than optimal.

Because so many properties of act and situation might influence forgiveness, an important question is whether it is possible to capture these effects in terms of a few common underlying dimensions. Two such dimensions are proposed. First, Heider (1958, p. 267) argued that what is critical in retaliation is the need to address "the sources of o's actions . . . that most typically have reference to the way o looks upon p." In a similar manner, it can be hypothesized that the extent to which the partner's injurious act is not seen, or is no longer seen, to reflect the way the partner

feels about the injured party (and numerous different factors could influence this judgment, including not only characteristics of the act and context in which it occurred, but also actions by the partner following the injury such as apology or conciliatory behavior), forgiveness is likely to be facilitated.

Second, returning to a signpost from the responsibility attribution literature, the subjective probability of any partner in a relationship performing the injurious act given the situation, $p(\text{act/situation})$, can be hypothesized to influence forgiveness; the higher this estimate, the easier it will be to forgive. In a subjective probability model of responsibility attribution, Fincham and Jaspars (1983) identified this subjective probability as an important underlying dimension affecting people's reactions to harm-doing, and they suggested that it is analogous to the "reasonable person" standard found in many legal systems.

Post-harm-doing factors. What follows the harm-doing event is particularly important for forgiveness in close relationships as the partners typically, though not always, maintain some form of interdependence. Subsequent events can thus easily reinforce inferences drawn from the harm-doing event. This is perhaps starkest when the harm-doer inflicts the same injury or even a different injury. In either case, the task of forgiveness is potentially rendered more difficult as it may now pertain to forgiving multiple harm-doing events and, in the extreme case, to a hurtful relationship, rather than an event or set of events. The context in which repeated harm occurs is also likely to influence forgiveness. Thus, for instance, forgiving subsequent harm following p's attempt to ensure o is aware of the injury, or the extent of the injury, can be hypothesized to be less likely than in the absence of such attempts.

Discussion of the harmful event between partners might reveal differences in the meaning of the event. At the most fundamental level, the harm-doer may deny that his or her action is culpable and view o's

hurt as an unreasonable or an overly reactive response. All else being equal, forgiveness will be harder in this instance compared to the situation in which *p* allows that *o*'s hurt is a reasonable response. Certainly if *p*'s acknowledgment is accompanied by apology and/or a request for forgiveness, forgiveness will be correspondingly easier, possibly because it is a clear indication that the view of *o* communicated by the harmdoing did not (or no longer) characterizes *p*'s view of *o*.

The significance of post-harm-doing factors is emphasized by the fact that forgiveness is a process that occurs over time. This creates particular challenges when *o* offers a verbal statement of forgiveness. As indicated earlier, such a statement is not performative and more likely indicates the decision to try to forgive the partner. Even when worded as such (though in the normal course of events one expects "I forgive you" to occur more commonly than "I want to try to forgive you"), the harm-doer is likely to experience the statement as performative and be puzzled, annoyed, or angry when incompletely resolved feelings of resentment about the harm-doing intrude upon subsequent discourse or behavior in the relationship. Statements of forgiveness are also important for another reason; they can be bungled. Setting aside the strategic use of such statements, genuinely motivated attempts to tell the partner that he or she is forgiven can easily be seen as a put-down, a form of retaliation, and so on if unskillfully executed. Thus, they can lead to conflict and might themselves end up being a source of hurt.

To date, it is the harm-doer's behavior following the injurious event that has gained most attention. However, as should now be apparent, the victim's behavior following the event will also influence the ease with which, or even whether, forgiveness is accomplished. This leads to at least two important observations. First, because forgiveness is a process that the victim engages, it makes sense to talk about degrees of forgiveness where the referent is the accomplishment of forgiveness. Second, the particular manner in which the victim experiences the process of forgiveness may influence his or her behavior and thereby the accomplishment of forgiveness. For example, the extent of vacillation between, and duration of occupying, positions in the space defined by crossing positive and negative dimensions of forgiveness is likely to influence the victim's behavior. In short, how the victim responds to recurrent feelings of hurt, the subsequent inevitable hurts that result from a relationship with an imperfect partner, and so forth are likely to be just as important for understanding forgiveness as the harm-doer's behavior following the injurious event.

Given the significance of both perpetrator and victim behavior following harmdoing, it behooves us to take note of Baumeister's intriguing conceptual and empirical work on the difference in perspectives between perpetrator and victim of harmdoing (e.g., Baumeister et al., 1998; Baumeister, Stillwell, & Wotman, 1990; Stillwell & Baumeister, 1997). Baumeister has shown that perpetrator and victim encode and recall harm-doing events in self-serving ways. Victims tend to overlook details that facilitate forgiving (e.g., mitigating circumstances) and embellish their memories with details that make forgiving more difficult (e.g., recall greater suffering). These victim biases are accompanied by complementary transgressor advantaging distortions (e.g., embellishing mitigating circumstances). Such distortions by both victim and transgressor make the accomplishment of forgiveness in a close relationship particularly challenging.

Coda. Identifying major classes of variables likely to influence forgiving does not constitute a theory of forgiveness. Without an analysis of self-forgiving and of forgiveness from the perspective of the perpetrator, a theory of forgiveness in close relationships is premature. Accordingly, the goal has been more modest—to offer an organizational framework that, together with the analyses identified in the previous section, might provide a foundation upon which to

build a theory of forgiveness in close rela-
tionships. Although necessarily incomplete,
the analysis offered is intended to provide
sufficient material to inform research in this
early stage of the scientific study of forgive-
ness. Indeed, the value of the analysis rests
ultimately on its empirical utility. Before
concluding the article, I therefore offer
some preliminary evidence that speaks to
the theme around which it is built, namely
the relation between responsibility and for-
giveness.

Some Preliminary Evidence

A basic premise outlined early on is that
responsibility attribution sets the stage for
a drama in which forgiveness plays a lead-
ing role. One implication of this view is that
responsibility attribution alone yields lim-
ited insight into relationship behavior. Thus,
for example, the failure to consider forgive-
ness in the attribution-behavior association
means that this association might have
been underestimated, as conflict-promoting
attributions for marital events should be as-
sociated with negative behavior only to the
extent that forgiveness has not occurred.
Stated differently, forgiveness should medi-
ate the well-documented association be-
tween attributions and behavior (see Fin-
cham, in press-a). Hence, one would expect
to find data consistent with the sequence,
attributed responsibility → degree of for-
giveness → negative behavior.

*Does the tendency to forgive mediate the
attribution-behavior relationship?*

To investigate this question, data were col-
lected from 71 British couples participating
in a longitudinal study of early marriage
during their third year of marriage. Each
spouse completed the *Relationship Attribu-
tion Measure* (Fincham & Bradbury, 1992),
and the extent to which spouses endorsed
responsibility attributions that were con-
flict-promoting (saw negative spouse be-
havior as intentional, selfishly motivated,
and blameworthy) was calculated. Spouses
also answered eight questions designed to

assess the extent to which they tended to
forgive hurts caused by their partner. Four
items assessed the negative dimension of
forgiveness (e.g., "When my partner hurts
me, I want to see them hurt and miserable."
"I think about how to even the score when
my partner hurts me") and four items as-
sessed the positive dimension (e.g., "When
my partner hurts me I just try to accept their
humanness, flaws and failures." "I am quick
to forgive my partner"). The scale was
scored so that higher scores reflect greater
forgiveness (alpha, husbands = .83; wives =
.88). Finally, spouses completed the 7-item
Constructive Communication subscale of
the *Communication Patterns Questionnaire.*
The subscale score is the sum of responses
to three positive items minus the sum of
four negative items and thus represents an
index of positive interaction in the relation-
ship. This measure was chosen as an index of
behavior because it correlates highly (.70
for husbands, .62 for wives) with observed
problem-solving behavior (Heavey, Larson,
Zumtobel, & Christensen, 1996).

As expected, responsibility attributions
and forgiveness correlated significantly (p
< .05) with each other (husbands = −.38;
wives = −.34), and reported communica-
tion behavior correlated significantly with
both responsibility attributions (husbands
= −.39; wives = −.29) and forgiveness
(husbands = .67; wives = .54). Thus, the first
three criteria for establishing mediation
were met (Baron & Kenny, 1986). The final
test to establish forgiveness as a mediating
variable requires the association between
attributions and behavior to become non-
significant (complete mediation) or to be
significantly reduced (partial mediation)
when forgiveness is taken into account. Ta-
ble 1 shows that forgiveness fully mediated
the relation between responsibility attribu-
tions and reported behavior for both hus-
bands and wives. But, in view of the hy-
pothesized relation between forgiveness
and relationship quality, one could argue
that these findings simply reflect level of
marital quality. Forgiveness and marital
quality (measured using the *Quality Mar-
riage Index,* Norton, 1983) were indeed re-

lated ($r = .53$ for both husbands and wives), but when marital quality was entered into the regression equation, forgiveness remained an independent predictor of reported behavior (see Table 1).

Does the tendency to forgive predict responses to actual transgressions?

The findings reported so far pertain only to the reported tendency to generally forgive partner behavior. One might therefore reasonably ask if this measure of forgiveness predicts responses to actual harm-doing. To examine this question, spouses also reported on the incident in their relationship when they "felt most wronged or hurt by your partner." The events reported had occurred an average of 10 ($SD = 16.2$) and 11.9 ($SD = 19.2$) months previously for husbands and wives, respectively. On a 9-point scale ranging from "very little hurt" to "most hurt ever felt," husbands averaged 5.6 ($SD = 2.1$) and wives averaged 6.5 (SD = 2.4). Spouses also indicated the extent to which they, in response to the event, "retaliated or did something to get my own back" and "took steps towards reconciliation with my partner (e.g., expressed love, showed concern)." As these two items were only moderately correlated (husbands = $-.33$; wives = $-.32$), each served as the dependent variable in a regression equation that used as predictor variables the general tendency to forgive the partner, as described above, and marital quality. Table 2 shows that for both spouses forgiveness predicted reported retaliatory and conciliatory behavior independently of marital quality. This finding did not change when both the degree of hurt and time since harm-doing were entered as predictor variables into the equation.

Is forgiveness two-dimensional?

Finally, to examine whether forgiveness comprises positive and negative elements, the eight items comprising the measure of forgiveness were subject to principal components analyses. These analyses yielded two clear components for husbands' and wives' responses to the forgiveness questions (eigenvalues >1). For husbands, the first component (positive items loading $>.7$ and negative items $<-.3$), accounted for 46% of the variance in the scale score. The second component (negative item loadings $>.6$ and positive item loadings $<-.33$) accounted for an additional 14%. For wives, the first component (positive item loadings $>.69$ and negative items $<-.37$), and second component (negative item loadings $>.6$ and positive item loadings $<-.33$) accounted for 54% and 16% of the variance, respectively. Such findings point to the need to examine whether the current focus on unforgiveness, or the negative dimension of

Table 1. *Multiple regression analyses testing forgiveness as a mediator of the relation between responsibility attributions and reported behavior*

		Reported Behavior			
		Husbands		Wives	
Equation	Variable Entered	Beta	R^2	Beta	R^2
1.	Responsibility	$-.39$**	.15**	$-.29$**	.09*
2.	Responsibility	$-.16$	.47**	$-.13$	.30**
	Forgiveness	.61**		.49**	
3.	Responsibility	$-.10$	.58**	$-.04$	.44**
	Forgiveness	.43**		.28*	
	Marital Quality	.39**		.46**	

*$p < .05$. **$p < .01$.

Table 2. *Forgiveness and marital quality as predictors of retaliatory and conciliatory responses to partner injury*

	Reported Responses to Injury							
	Husbands				Wives			
	Retaliatory		Conciliatory		Retaliatory		Conciliatory	
Predictor	Beta	R^2	Beta	R^2	Beta	R^2	Beta	R^2
Forgiveness	−.36**	.32**	.62**	.42**	−.50**	.21**	.58**	.30**
Marital Quality	−.29*		.05		.10		.07	

*$p < .05$. **$p < .01$.

forgiveness, can provide an adequate account of forgiveness.

Coda. These findings are the first to suggest that forgiveness mediates the well-documented attribution-behavior association and that forgiveness comprises positive and negative dimensions. However, these findings need to be replicated before any firm conclusions can be drawn. Nonetheless, they provide a promising beginning in testing some of the ideas outlined in this article.

Conclusions

The article started by making two assumptions about human existence: Humans harm each other and are social animals. This results in the fundamental challenge of how to retain relatedness with fellow humans in the face of inevitable harm by them. The challenge is particularly acute in close relationships but they can be met here, as in other interactional contexts, through forgiveness. Although often extraordinarily difficult to accomplish, there appears to be widespread understanding of the need for forgiveness. Even young children place "forgiveness above revenge, not out of weakness, but because 'there is no end' to revenge (a boy of 10)" (Piaget, 1932, p. 323). Scholars in the field of close relationships therefore ignore forgiveness at their own peril.

But forgiveness deserves our attention not only because it is fundamental to understanding close relationships but also because it speaks to a need in our field. As we are all keenly aware, the study of relationships is too often characterized by identification of discipline with analysis of relationship type or topic within relationship type and by relative lack of integration across disciplinary efforts, topics within a particular relationship type, and across relationship types. As a core social construct important in all types of relationships, the study of forgiveness has the potential to facilitate a more integrated science of close relationships.

Achieving this goal, however, is likely to require us to acknowledge that the "kiss of the porcupines" also characterizes our behavior, as well as behavior in the relationships we study. Scientists are both human and interdependent; hence, much like the porcupines described at the outset of the article, they desperately need each other but are too often pricked or hurt by each other's actions (e.g., when a colleague does not credit our work as much as we believe he or she should, displays disciplinary myopia, emphasizes different epistemological assumptions for the study of phenomena in our chosen field of research, and so on). Perhaps as we learn more about forgiveness in close relationships we may find ourselves being a little more forgiving in our individual and collective professional lives. The rewards are tantalizing, for "when forgiveness occurs, hope is born" (Smedes, 1998), a hope that might allow us to realize a truly integrated science of close relationships.

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