Forgiveness in marriage: The role of relationship quality, attributions, and empathy

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Abstract

Italian husbands ($n = 79$) and wives ($n = 92$) from long-term marriages provided data on the role of marital quality, affective reactions, and attributions for hypothetical partner transgressions in promoting forgiveness. Structural equation modeling revealed that, as hypothesized, positive marital quality was predictive of more benign attributions that, in turn, facilitated forgiveness both directly and indirectly via affective reactions and emotional empathy. Unexpectedly, marital quality did not account for unique variance in forgiveness. Compared to husbands, wives' responsibility attributions were more predictive of forgiveness, whereas empathy was a better predictor of forgiveness in husbands than in wives. The findings are discussed in terms of their implications for the burgeoning therapeutic literature on forgiveness.

Intimate relationships satisfy our deepest affiliative needs and are also the source of some of our most poignant hurts. When the hurt occurs, negative feelings (e.g., anger, resentment) are common, creating a potential disruption in the relationship. One means of meeting this challenge is through forgiveness, a concept that has received remarkably little attention in science despite its pervasiveness across cultures and major religions (Worthington & Wade, 1999). Although it is a complex construct without a consensual definition, at the center of various approaches to forgiveness is the idea of a transformation in which motivation to seek revenge and to avoid contact with the transgressor is lessened and prosocial motivation toward the transgressor is increased. According to the psychotherapy literature, forgiveness helps to restore relationships, release bitterness and anger, and heal inner emotional wounds (e.g., DiBlasio & Proctor, 1993). Partners themselves acknowledge that the capacity to seek and grant forgiveness is one of the most important factors contributing to marital longevity and satisfaction (Fenell, 1993). Studies of forgiveness have recently mushroomed (for a bibliography see McCullough, Exline, & Baumeister, 1998), but little is known about forgiveness in marriage (but see Fenell, 1993; Fincham, 2000). The present manuscript draws on the growing body of forgiveness research to inform marital research on the topic.

Forgiveness in social psychological research

Several social psychological studies demonstrate that forgiveness is shaped by social events, and by social-cognitive processes, following an offense. Specifically, confessions and apologies accompanied by visible signs of contrition foster forgiveness (Darby & Schlenker, 1982; McCullough, Worthington, & Rachal, 1997; Ohbuchi, Kameda, & Agarie, 1989; Weiner, Graham, Peter, & Zmuidinas, 1991). In the case of unintentional transgressions, mitigating accounts by the offender, particularly partial acceptance of responsibility, have positive effects on the victim's evaluative judgments and responses to the transgression (Gonzales, Haugen, & Manning, 1994). Attributing the transgression to external

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circumstances and judging it as mild, unintentional, and unavoidable strengthen the willingness to forgive the offender (Bies & Tripp, 1996; Boon & Sulsky, 1997; Fincham, 2000), whereas experiencing "hot" cognitions (anger, bitterness, disorientation) and ruminating about the offense (and the perpetrator's negative motives and characteristics) magnify the willingness to seek revenge (Bies & Tripp, 1996; Worthington & Wade, 1999). Feeling empathy for the offender also seems to have a crucial role in promoting forgiveness (McCullough et al., 1997).

In light of such research, McCullough, Rachal, et al. (1998) developed a social-psychological model of determinants and consequences of interpersonal forgiveness. According to the model, social-cognitive variables related to the way the victim thinks and feels about the offender and the offense (e.g., attributions, ruminative thoughts, empathic emotions) are the most proximal determinants of forgiving. A victim's willingness to forgive is primarily affected by his or her empathy toward the offender and, less proximally, by the victim's attributions and rumination about the offense. Compared with social-cognitive variables, features of the transgression, such as the perceived severity of the offense and the extent to which the offender apologizes and seeks forgiveness for the offense, are viewed as less proximal determinants of forgiveness and thus shape forgiveness, at least indirectly, via social-cognitive variables. Even more distal than the social-cognitive and transgression-related determinants of forgiveness are qualities of the relationship in which the offense takes place, such as level of intimacy, closeness, satisfaction, and commitment.

McCullough, Rachal, et al. (1998) tested a mediational model in which pre-offense relational closeness influenced forgiving by (a) making apologies and ruminative thoughts more and less likely, respectively; and (b) facilitating, via apologies and ruminative thoughts, offender-focused empathy. They found evidence consistent with the hypothesized "pre-offense relational closeness→apology→ empathy→ forgiveness" (p. 1597) sequence. However, contrary to prediction, rumination about the offense was unrelated to empathy toward the offender, hence no evidence was obtained to support the hypothesized "pre-offense relational closeness→ rumination→ empathy→ forgiveness" (p. 1597) sequence. Thus, the role of empathy as a facilitator of forgiveness processes seemed to hold in relation to transgression-level and relationship-level variables such as apology and pre-offense closeness, but not with respect to social-cognitive variables such as rumination.

Forgiveness in married couples

Although the McCullough, Rachal, et al. (1998) study forms an important bridge between two areas of inquiry—the social-psychological mechanisms that control forgiveness and the role of forgiveness in close relationships—that have been frequently separated in analyses of interpersonal forgiveness, it has two important limitations. First, the model of forgiveness was tested independent of gender. As men and women tend to differ in their responses to transgression (relative to men, women reports greater levels of anger, relationship damage, and difficulty of forgiveness; Gonzales et al., 1994), and men tend to exhibit smaller effect sizes as a result of participating in forgiveness intervention studies (Worthington, Sandage, & Berry, 2000), exploring gender differences in forgiving is called for. Second, McCullough, Exline, et al. (1998) did not distinguish among different kinds of relationships. As most participants in their study reported incidents involving romantic partners, the finding may be specific to dating relationships but even this is uncertain.

The present study therefore examines gender differences in forgiveness within a specific relationship, long-term marriage. Although some studies examine forgiveness within romantic relationships (e.g., Boon & Sulsky, 1997) and clinical or disrupted couples (e.g., Coyle & Enright, 1997; Dobash & Dobash, 1984; Mazor, Batiste-Harel, & Gampel, 1998), only Fenell (1993) and Fincham (2000) have investigated forgiveness in married, community couples. By asking couples from the community, married for over 20 years, to indicate what they view as the 10

most important factors contributing to their own long-term marriage, Fenell (1993) found that willingness to forgive and to be forgiven was rated by the couples as one such factor. More recently, Fincham (2000) demonstrated that forgiveness fully mediated the well-documented relation between responsibility attributions and reported behavior (Bradbury & Fincham, 1992). To complement these initial findings, the present study investigates the role that relationship-level variables (such as marital quality) and social-cognitive variables (such as causal and responsibility attributions, affective reactions, and emotional empathy[1]) have in promoting forgiveness in long-term married couples.

Linking relationship quality, attributions, affective reactions, and emotional empathy to forgiveness

To date no study has investigated the extent to which both relationship-level variables (e.g., marital quality) and social-cognitive variables (e.g., attributions, affective reactions, and emotional empathy) predict forgiveness in married couples. In view of this lack, and consistent with the social-psychological model of forgiving previously described (McCullough, Exline, et al., 1998), we hypothesized that the associations among relationship quality, causal and responsibility attributions, affective reactions, emotional empathy, and forgiveness could be conceptualized through the theoretical model shown in Figure 1.

According to the model, positive marital quality promotes less conflict-promoting and more benign responsibility attributions both directly (path *c*) and indirectly, via causal attributions (path *a-b*). The hypothesized links between marital quality and attributions are supported by existing longitudinal (e.g., Fincham & Bradbury, 1993) and cross-sectional data (e.g., Fincham & Bradbury, 1992, Study 3; Karney, Bradbury, Fincham, & Sullivan, 1994). The causal attributions–responsibility attributions pathway is consistent with prior research testing a linear or entailment model of the relations among different types of attributions (Fincham & Bradbury, 1987; Lussier, Sabourin, & Wright, 1993).

The model assumes that benign responsibility attributions promote forgiveness both directly (path *f*) and indirectly, through the mediation of affective reactions (path *d-h*) and emotional empathy (path *e-i*). The direct link is supported by basic research (Boon & Sulsky, 1997; Darby & Schlenker, 1982; Fincham, 2000; Weiner et al., 1991) as well as the literature on therapeutic interventions (Al-Mabuk, Dedrick, & Vanderah, 1998). In both domains, willingness to forgive an offender is enhanced by more benign responsibility attributions (e.g., viewing the offense as less intentional and avoidable). The hypothesized indirect links from benign responsibility attributions to forgiveness are primarily based on Weiner's (1995) theory. According to Weiner, "perceptions of responsibility and nonresponsibility for events and states have respective linkages to emotions of anger and sympathy" and "these emotions, rather than 'cold' cognitions, determine how to react to others who have engaged in moral transgressions" (Weiner, 1995; pp. 21, 17). There are data corroborating Weiner's theory (e.g., Betancourt, 1990; Betancourt & Blair, 1992; Schimdt & Weiner, 1988; Zucker & Weiner, 1993).[2] We therefore hypothesize that benign responsibility attributions for negative spouse behaviors facilitate willingness to forgive by reducing negative affective reactions and by enhancing spouse-focused emotional empathy. The amounts of negative affect and emotional empathy experienced by married couples in reaction to negative spouse behaviors are hypothesized to be inversely associated (link *g*).

Moreover, marital quality is linked directly to negative affective reactions (path *j*) and

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1. Emotional empathy can be defined as a vicarious emotion that is congruent with but not necessarily identical to the emotion of another person (Batson & Shaw, 1991). Empathy includes concepts such as sympathy, compassion, tenderness, caring (Batson, 1991; Batson & Shaw, 1991).

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2. Fincham and Bradbury (1992) also provide empirical evidence supporting the causal attributions→responsibility attributions→affective reactions sequence.
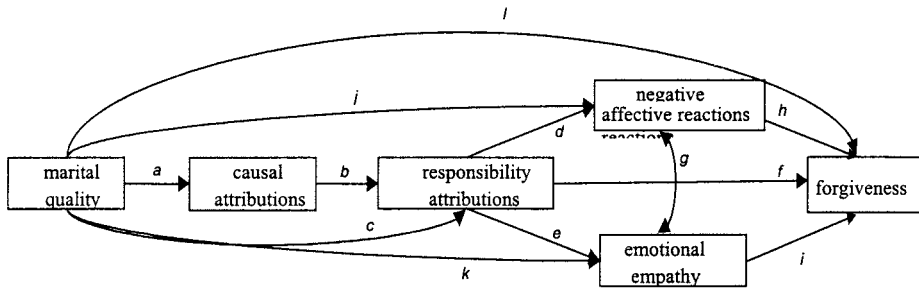
Figure 1. Hypothesized model of relations among marital quality, attributions, affect, and forgiveness.

emotional empathy (path *k*) and indirectly through the mediation of attribution processes. These assumptions rest on empirical data showing that spouses in close and satisfying relationships, relative to spouses in dissatisfying marriages, are more likely to react to negative partner behaviors by feeling empathy and experiencing few negative emotions (Carstensen, Gottman, & Levenson, 1995; Levenson, Carstensen, & Gottman, 1994; McCullough, Exline, et al., 1998). Finally, consistent with theoretical writings that link relationship valence to forgiveness (e.g., Worthington & Wade, 1999), presumably because the reconciliation promoted by forgiveness is necessary for a satisfying relationship, the model predicts that marital quality is connected directly to forgiveness (path *i*). However, in light of McCullough, Exline, et al.'s (1998) work, indirect links, via attributions, affective reactions, and emotional empathy, are also posited.

Method

Participants

One hundred and twenty-eight Italian married couples with an adolescent child attending the last three years of secondary school were contacted through the child's school as a part of a larger project. They were sent letters introducing the study as a survey on family relations and inviting them to participate. Of the eligible couples, 72% agreed to participate; 92 wives and 79 husbands returned completed questionnaires.

Participants were predominantly in their first marriages (98% of the husbands and 97% of the wives), with mean age in the late 40s ($M = 48.7$ years, $SD = 5.4$ for the husbands and $M = 45.7$, $SD = 5.1$ for the wives), and generally some high school education ($M = 11.2$ years, $SD = 3.1$, and $M = 11.3$, $SD = 2.8$). Couples averaged 21.2 years of marriage ($SD = 4.3$).

Procedure

Marital quality, attributions, affective reactions, emotional empathy, and forgiveness were assessed with questionnaires sent home with the adolescent child. Couples received the materials together with two separate envelopes and a cover letter thanking them for their participation in the study and instructing them on their task. The importance of independent completion of the materials was emphasized in the letter, and couples were asked to seal the completed materials in separate envelopes before talking about the study.

Materials

Participants filled out two sets of materials: a relationship quality questionnaire and a relationship events questionnaire.

Marital quality. Marital quality was assessed using the Quality of Marriage Index (QMI, Norton, 1983). The QMI is a six-item inventory that assesses marital quality using broadly worded, global items (e.g., "We have a good marriage"). The respondent shows the degree of agreement with each of five items on a scale ranging from 1 (*very strong disagreement*) to 7

(*very strong agreement)* and with one item on a scale ranging from 1 (*very strong disagreement*) to 10 (*very strong agreement*). In the present study, the QMI had high internal consistency (alpha coefficients = .96 for both husbands and wives).

Relationship events questionnaire. This booklet contained four negative spouse behaviors (e.g., you and your spouse had arranged to spend the evening together, but when the evening came, your spouse told you that he/she had arranged to do something else by himself/herself) and instructed respondents to vividly imagine his or her spouse performing the behavior. After each event description, participants answered questions about attributions, emotions, and forgiveness. The order of the questions was counterbalanced across participants. Responses to corresponding questions for the four events were averaged in subsequent analyses.

Marital attributions were assessed using items from the *Relationship Attribution Measure* (RAM) of Fincham and Bradbury (1992). Spouses were asked to rate on 6-point scales the extent to which they agreed with six attribution statements made about each negative partner behavior. Three statements pertained to causal attributions and three focused on responsibility attributions. We formed causal and responsibility attribution indices by summing across individual dimensions. Higher causal attribution scores reflect less damaging or more benign causal attributions: causes that are less likely to be located in the partner, more unstable or changing and specific or affecting few areas of the marriage (more benign causal attributions). Higher responsibility attribution scores show that the partner behavior is seen as less intentional, selfishly motivated, and blameworthy (more benign responsibility attributions). Coefficient alphas for causal and responsibility indices were .82 and .78, respectively, for the husbands, and .85 and .84, respectively, for wives.

Emotions were assessed by asking participants to imagine how they would feel if the negative partner behavior occurred that day. They then rated the extent to which they believed they would experience each of five emotions on a 7-point scale (1 = *not at all* to 7 = *very much*). Principal-components analyses with oblique rotation were conducted to reduce these items to a smaller set of underlying components. Two factors emerged: (a) negative affective reactions (angry, sad, nervous) and (b) emotional empathy (sympathetic, softhearted). In both husbands and wives, the negative affective reactions factor possessed an eigenvalue of greater than 2.63 and explained more than 52% of the variance, and the emotional empathy factor possessed an eigenvalue of greater than 1.29 and explained more than 25% of the variance. Coefficient alphas for negative affective reactions and emotional empathy composites were .76 and .91, respectively, for the husbands and .86 and .85, respectively, for the wives.

Forgiveness was assessed using four items from a five-item measure of forgiving used by McCullough et al. (1997). The four items were "I would disapprove of my spouse," "I would think favorably of my spouse," "I would condemn my spouse," and "I would forgive my spouse." The fifth item, "I wish him/her well," was omitted because it did not lend itself to assessing forgiveness in marriage. Spouses responded to each item using a 5-point scale (1 = *not at all* to 5 = *completely*) and the first and third items reported above were reverse scored. Principal-components analyses with oblique rotation yielded a single principal component for husbands (eigenvalue = 2.84, percentage of variance = 71) and wives (eigenvalue = 2.62, percentage of variance = 65.5). Coefficient alphas were .85 and .83, respectively.

The QMI, the RAM, and the forgiveness items were translated into Italian by the second author. In order to check the translation, the Italian version of materials was back-translated into English by a bilingual English-Italian speaker.

Results

Descriptive statistics and correlations

Tables 1 and 2 show the means and standard deviations for the variables investigated and the correlations among them, respectively.

Table 1. *Means and standard deviations for marital quality, causal and responsibility attributions, negative affective reactions, emotional empathy, and forgiveness for husbands and wives*

Variables	Husbands		Wives	
	M	SD	M	SS
Marital quality	36.82	8.25	34.83	8.55
Causal attributions	42.04	11.95	39.83	12.92
Responsibility attributions	56.60	11.83	57.67	11.35
Negative affective reactions	40.61	15.32	47.33	15.38
Emotional empathy	31.90	10.77	25.30	8.26
Forgiveness	56.73	13.07	53.29	11.95

Modeling strategy

To test whether the relations among marital quality, causal and responsibility attributions, negative affective reactions, emotional empathy, and forgiveness were consistent with the model described in Figure 1, we examined a series of structural equation models using EQS Version 5 (Bentler, 1995). The analyses were carried out using a multiple groups modeling strategy that simultaneously estimated parameters for husbands and wives. We began by constraining corresponding paths for husbands and for wives to be equal. When the Lagrange Multipler (LM) test indicated that a path was not equivalent across husbands and wives, the equality constraint was released and the model was reestimated in order to improve the model fit (Byrne, 1994).

Goodness of model fit was evaluated in two ways. First, we used the chi-square statistic (Jöreskog & Sörbom, 1984), the Comparative Fit Index (CFI; Bentler, 1990), and the Root Mean Square Error of Approximation (RMSEA; Bentler, 1995) to assess the absolute goodness of fit of each model. Second, where there were nonsignificant path coefficients we used chi-squared difference tests to assess the relative changes in goodness of fit associated with the removal of these paths from the model (Byrne, 1994). The chi-squared difference tests evaluate the significance of the difference in chi-square values for two competing models, the nested model generated by dropping one path from a given model and the given model itself. The model having a significantly better fit is retained as the best description of the

Table 2. *Correlations among marital quality, causal and responsibility attributions, negative affective reactions, emotional empathy, and forgiveness for husbands (above diagonal) and wives (below diagonal)*

Variables	1	2	3	4	5	6
1. Marital quality	–	.25*	.34**	−.20	.36**	.37**
2. Causal attributions	.40***	–	.32**	−.29**	.24*	.31**
3. Responsibility attributions	.31**	.40***	–	−.36**	.48***	.55***
4. Negative affective reactions	.07	−.23*	−.39***	–	−.56***	−.66***
5. Emotional empathy	.09	.19	.34**	−.28**	–	.75***
6. Forgiveness	.25*	.32**	.68***	−.52***	.53***	–

* $p < .05$. ** $p < .01$. *** $p < .001$.

observed data. If models are not significantly different, parsimony dictates that the nested model (the one with fewer paths) is a better description of relations among the constructs.

Structural relations

The hypothesized model (see Figure 1) provided a good fit to the data, $\chi^2 = 23.837$ ($df = 21$, $p = .30$), CFI = .990, and RMSEA = .029, but LM χ^2 statistics and related probability values suggested that the equality constraints related to paths f (from benign attributions to forgiveness) and i (from emotional empathy to forgiveness) were not appropriate. When the two constraints were released, the model fit increased significantly, χ^2 (2) = 7.61, $p < .05$ (fit statistics were χ^2 (19) = 16.237, $p = .64$; CFI = 1.000; RMSEA = .000), indicating that beta weights associated with paths from attributions to forgiveness and from emotional empathy to forgiveness are reliably different for husbands and wives. However, because many near-zero paths remained in the reestimated model, we generated a series of nested models by removing one nonsignificant or marginally significant path at a time from it.[3] Compared to the reestimated model, the nested model in which the paths j (from marital quality to negative affective reactions), k (from marital quality to emotional empathy), and l (from marital quality to forgiveness) were progressively dropped proved to be a more parsimonious and equally adequate description of the data ($\chi^2 = 23.216$, $df = 22$, $p = .40$; CFI = .996; RMSEA = .020). Parameter estimates for this final model, which accounted for a large amount of variance in both husbands' ($R^2 = .61$) and wives' ($R^2 = .64$) forgiveness, are presented in Figure 2. The figure shows path estimates for both husbands and wives (the latter in parentheses).

As predicted, marital quality was significantly related to responsibility attributions both directly and indirectly via causal attributions. Specifically, spouses judging their marital relationship positively were more likely to explain their partner's negative

behaviors through more benign causal attributions which, in turn, promote more benign responsibility attributions for the same behaviors. The pathways among marital quality, causal attributions, and responsibility attributions were all equivalent across gender.

Consistent with our hypotheses, responsibility attributions were related to forgiving both directly and indirectly through negative affective reactions and emotional empathy. Specifically, spouses making more benign responsibility attributions were more likely to react to their partner's negative behaviors by being empathic and not experiencing negative affects. Although they covaried, negative affective reactions and emotional empathy predicted forgiveness independently such that spouses were more likely to forgive their partner for negative behaviors when they felt empathy or did not experience negative emotional states. Not all pathways among responsibility attributions, affect reactions, empathy, and forgiveness were equivalent across gender. In particular, responsibility attributions were more strongly related to forgiveness in wives than in husbands, whereas emotional empathy was more strongly associated to forgiveness in husbands than in wives.

Finally, contrary to predictions, marital quality was not directly linked to forgiveness, to affective reactions, or to emotional empathy. It related to these variables only indirectly through a causal chain in which responsibility attributions proved to play a pivotal role.

Discussion

Interpersonal forgiveness has received growing attention in the scientific literature, and research is emerging that examines forgiveness in close relationships. Social psychological studies provide evidence that relationship-related variables, such as pre-offense closeness (McCullough, Exline, et al., 1998), and social-cognitive variables, such as offender-focused attributions (Boon & Sulsky, 1997; Fincham, 2000) and emotional empathy (McCullough et al., 1997; McCullough, Exline, et al.,1998), play an important role in promoting forgiveness. Although McCullough, Exline, et al.'s (1998) interesting

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3. The resulting trimmed models should be interpreted with caution as the sample size in this study favors trimming paths that might be significant with a larger sample.
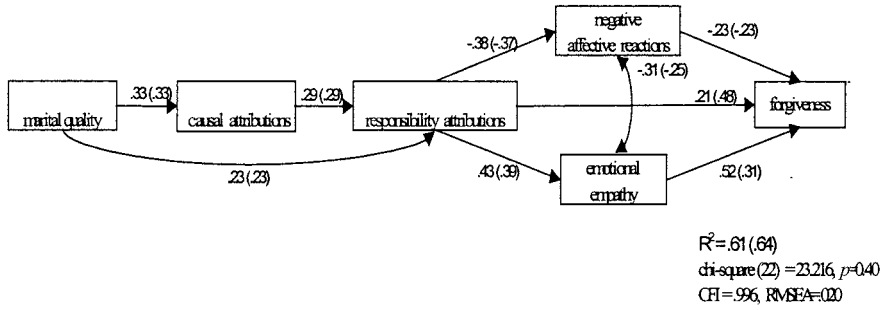
Figure 2. Model of obtained relations among marital quality, attributions, affect, and forgiveness. Parameters for wives are in parentheses; for all paths $p < .05$, one-tailed.

theoretical model proposed that the quality of the close relationship in which the offense takes place affects forgiveness through both attributions and empathy, no published study has simultaneously investigated these variables within married couples.

The present study was designed to explore the role that relationship quality, attributions, affective reactions, and emotional empathy play in facilitating interpersonal forgiveness within long-term married couples. Consistent with the McCullough, Exline, et al. (1998) model, we hypothesized that marital quality would be a more distal determinant of forgiveness than affective-cognitive variables. In light of Weiner's (1995) attributional theory of helping behavior, we also specified that, compared to affective reactions and emotional empathy, attribution processes would operate more distally in the causal chain leading to forgiveness.

For both husbands and wives, results were consistent with these hypotheses: Support was obtained for a model where forgiveness was the result of a causal sequence in which positive relationship quality determined causal and responsibility attributions, which, in turn, promoted forgiveness both directly and indirectly via affective reactions and emotional empathy. However, contrary to prediction, no evidence was obtained to support the hypothesized direct effect of marital quality on forgiveness, after controlling for the affective-cognitive variables investigated. The fact that the marital quality–forgiveness link is mediated completely, rather than partially, by

affective-cognitive variables contrasts with McCullough, Exline, et al.'s (1998) previous findings. We suspect that this inconsistency may reflect the different kind of social psychological constructs investigated by the two studies (relationship quality, attributions, and negative affect reactions versus closeness, apology, and rumination) as well as the different samples in which data were collected (Italian married couples versus U.S. college students in introductory psychology courses).

Overall, the present findings demonstrate that both attributions and emotional reactions that long-term spouses develop in response to their partner's negative behaviors are crucial in understanding their willingness to forgive the partner. This result is consonant with research indicating that partners' attributions and emotions shape their reactions to problematic marital situations (Boon & Sulsky, 1997; Bradbury & Fincham, 1992; Fincham, 2000; Geist & Gilbert, 1996; Miller & Bradbury, 1995). Indirect, marital quality also plays a role. By regulating emotional expressions and interactions between spouses, it provides the climate in which affective-cognitive processes influencing forgiveness are occasioned. As McCullough, Exline, et al. (1998) argued, spouses involved in satisfactory and close marriages typically experience a sense of well-being and comfort in the relationship that enhances their ability to positively reinterpret marital transgressions, to emotionally identify with the offender partner, and, ultimately, to forgive him or her.

As anticipated, however, gender appears to be an important factor for understanding forgiveness. First, the direct effects of responsibility attributions on forgiveness turned out to be stronger for wives than for husbands. This pattern is congruent with literature showing that attributions and behaviors exhibited during problem-solving and support discussions are more strongly related among wives than among husbands (Bradbury, Beach, Fincham, & Nelson, 1996; Bradbury & Fincham, 1992; Miller & Bradbury, 1995), that wives engage in more attributional activity than husbands do (see Holtzworth-Munroe, & Jacobson, 1985), and with speculation that wives are more sensitive to relationship events (see Worell, 1988). Second, the direct effects of emotional empathy on forgiveness are stronger for husbands than for wives. Men display less intimate behavior, including empathic behavior, in relationships than women do (for a review see Prager & Fincham, 2001), and so when men are empathic it may have a greater impact on their relationship functioning, including their willingness to forgive a partner.

The gender-related findings we obtained are best understood in light of the overall (direct and indirect effects) impact of affective-cognitive variables on forgiveness. Specifically, for husbands, emotional empathy is not more predictive of forgiveness than attributions (βs = .52, −.23, and .52 for responsibility attributions, negative affective reactions, and empathy respectively), whereas for wives attributions are clearly the most important predictor of forgiveness (βs = .69, −.23, and .31 for responsibility attributions, affective reactions, and empathy respectively). Thus, forgiveness appears to be driven by cognitive (attributions) and affective (empathy) variables in husbands but is primarily driven by cognitive variables (attributions) in wives.

Before turning to its implications, we highlight a number of limitations to this study. First, because it uses hypothetical scenarios of marital transgressions, the study does not address actual forgiving but only the disposition or willingness to forgive. As a result, the current findings cannot be confidently extended to real forgiveness occurring in the natural course of marital relationships. However, Fincham (2000) shows that proneness to forgive, assessed via hypothetical transgressions, does predict behavioral responses to an actual transgression. Second, the transgressions investigated in this study were relatively minor ones. Because transgression severity influences forgiveness (Boon & Sulsky, 1997), it would be unwise to generalize these findings to severe transgressions. Indeed, a challenge for future research is to determine whether a single process model can explain forgiveness of both minor and severe transgressions. Third, the structural model tested is one of several that could fit the data and models that include different parameters could also account for variance in forgiveness. Finally, although the data are consistent with the tested structural model, these data are correlational and cannot be used to draw conclusions about causality. Thus, longitudinal research would be useful in exploring more fully causal links among the variables investigated.

Notwithstanding these limitations, the present study is the first to explore the simultaneous contributions of relationship and affective-cognitive variables to forgiveness within long-term married couples. Much work, however, remains to be done in illuminating the impact that these same variables have on forgiveness within different samples of couples (e.g., spouses married for a longer/shorter time) as well as in investigating their impact after controlling for other determinants of spouses' forgiveness. As Fincham's (2000) and Worthington's (1998) organizational frameworks point out, several broad classes of variables that have received either little or no prior attention in relation to forgiveness may influence its occurrence. Clearly, much work remains to achieve a more complete understanding of forgiveness in marriage.

Forgiveness is receiving considerable attention in the psychotherapy literature (see Gordon, Baucom, & Snyder, 2000; Worthington, 1998) with a growing number of intervention programs focusing on forgiveness as the major goal of the intervention or as a component of a broader intervention. However, the clinical implementation of forgiveness interventions has far outstripped

empirical data on forgiveness. We are thus in the position of attempting to induce forgiveness without knowing a great deal about how forgiveness operates in everyday life or in close relationships.

The present study speaks to the gap between basic research on forgiveness and the increased role of forgiveness in therapy by offering empirical information on predictors of forgiveness in long-term marriages. In doing so, it provides some empirical support for attempts to foster forgiveness by changing the victim's attributions for the hurtful event and by inducing the victim to feel empathy toward the offender (e.g., Al-Mabuk et al., 1998; Gordon & Baucom, 1998; Worthington, 1998). If replicated, the gender-related pattern of findings for attributions and affective reactions have an important implication; they suggest that relatively more time be given to attributions for inducing forgiveness among wives but that empathy and attributions might be equally effective routes for increasing forgiveness in husbands.

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