


Motivating Change in Relationships: Can Prayer Increase Forgiveness?

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Abstract

The objective of the current studies was to test whether praying for a relationship partner would increase willingness to forgive that partner. In Study 1 ($N = 52$), participants assigned to pray for their romantic partner reported greater willingness to forgive that partner than those who described their partner to an imagined parent. In Study 2 ($N = 67$), participants were assigned to pray for a friend, pray about any topic, or think positive thoughts about a friend every day for 4 weeks. Those who prayed for their friend reported greater forgiveness for their friend than did those in the other two conditions, even when we controlled for baseline forgiveness scores. Participants who prayed for their friend also increased in selfless concern during the 4 weeks, and this variable mediated the relationship between experimental condition and increased forgiveness. Together, these studies provide an enhanced understanding of the relationship benefits of praying for a partner and begin to identify potential mediators of the effect.

Keywords

prayer, friendship, romantic partner, forgiveness, selfless concern

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Religious involvement is prevalent in the United States. Survey research shows that 92% of Americans believe in God (Pew Forum on Religion & Public Life, 2008), and a recent review of clinical trials concluded that religious activities benefit blood pressure, immune function, depression, and mortality rates (Townsend, Kladder, Ayele, & Mulligan, 2002). Prayer is an important aspect of religious worship for most world religions, and approximately 90% of Americans pray at least occasionally (McCullough & Larson, 1999). Although some benefits of prayer may accrue to the person engaging in prayer, there may also be benefits in the realm of relationships. Dudley and Kosinski (1990) have suggested that spiritual activities such as prayer may help couples to “think of the needs of others, be more loving and forgiving, treat each other with respect, and resolve conflict” (p. 82). Prayer also helps some couples handle marital conflict (Lambert & Dollahite, 2006), and higher frequency of praying on behalf of one’s romantic partner has been shown to predict greater subsequent relationship satisfaction, but earlier relationship satisfaction did not predict later prayer (Fincham, Beach, Lambert, Stillman, & Braithwaite, 2008).

Given its prevalence and potential benefits, prayer is underrepresented in the psychological literature. Indeed, it is difficult to imagine another voluntary behavior that is as widespread as prayer that has received less academic attention. The rela-

tive lack of research on prayer is perhaps surprising in light of the emergence of positive psychology, which explicitly embraces the study of religion and human virtues (Peterson, 2006).

Forgiveness is among the virtues that have recently received scholarly attention—particularly in the context of romantic relationships. Given the suggestion that spiritual activity may have multiple prosocial and relational benefits (Dudley & Kosinski, 1990), one area to examine is the possibility that prayer facilitates willingness to forgive. This expectation follows from both cross-sectional and longitudinal research demonstrating that praying for a partner is associated with relationship satisfaction (Fincham et al., 2008). We endeavored to build upon this research in two distinct ways. First, we extended this research to an important specific relational outcome, forgiveness of transgressions. Second, we examined both causality and possible mediating processes to better articulate prayer’s role in promoting forgiveness.

Forgiveness is a vital element in maintaining close relationships. Given that all relationship partners eventually transgress

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(cf. Graham & Clark, 2006) and that initial responses to transgressions are often vindictive (Finkel, Rusbult, Kumashiro, & Hannon, 2002), forgiveness is viewed as necessary for satisfying and lasting relationships (see Fincham, in press). Because forgiveness entails a reduction in motivation to retaliate or withdraw from the transgressor, it is perhaps not surprising that forgiveness has been shown to predict relationship satisfaction and commitment (see Fincham, Hall, & Beach, 2006, for a review). There are also data indicating that forgiveness predicts later marital satisfaction (Fincham, Paleari, & Regalia, 2002) and effective conflict resolution (Fincham, Beach, & Davila, 2007). In light of these findings, the construct of forgiveness merits empirical attention as an important relationship variable.

Partner-Directed Prayer, Selfless Concern, and Forgiveness

“God is love” is a common phrase among people who pray regularly and has a long philosophical history. Indeed, a recent prototype study of God indicated that “love” or “loving” was the most frequently cited feature when participants were asked to write what comes to mind when they hear the word *God* (Graham, Gorman, Lambert, & Fincham, 2009). One might anticipate that praying to a being identified with unselfish love would prime the motive of unselfish love. This likelihood should increase to the extent that instructions focus the prayer activity on the needs and well-being of another individual—other-focused prayer.

Forgiveness requires one to abandon inclinations toward retaliation (Fincham et al., 2006) and to adopt a more positive motivational stance toward the transgressor. Empathy for the transgressor is one of the most robust correlates of forgiveness, and it is widely used in intervention studies to facilitate forgiveness (e.g., McCullough, Worthington, & Rachal, 1997; Wade, Worthington, & Meyer, 2005). It is perhaps not surprising, therefore, that laypersons see forgiveness as involving a display of love; in a recent prototype analysis of forgiveness, “an act of love” was the third most frequent response participants gave when asked to write down features of forgiveness (Kearns & Fincham, 2004). Praying specifically for the needs and well-being of a relationship partner should prime “unselfish love and concern,” and hence forgiveness, toward the partner. Accordingly, we expected that selfless concern for other people would be increased by prayer for a partner and would, in turn, mediate the relationship between prayer for the well-being of a relationship partner and forgiveness of that partner.

We examined the contribution of prayer to forgiveness in two studies. In Study 1, we examined whether participants assigned to pray for a romantic partner would report greater willingness to forgive that partner than individuals who spoke to an imagined parent about their romantic partner. In Study 2, we used an experimental, longitudinal design to determine if praying for a friend every day for 4 weeks would increase forgiveness of that friend. We also tested whether increases in the motive of selfless concern mediated this relationship.

Study 1

In Study 1, we used an experimental design to test whether praying for a romantic partner would enhance willingness to forgive the partner’s transgressions. Specifically, we wanted to determine whether participants who prayed for their partner would receive higher forgiveness scores than those who thought about their partner’s physical attributes and reported them to an imagined parent, thus simulating some aspects of prayer (i.e., talking to a parental or authority figure about the partner). In addition, as forgiveness and gratitude are related (e.g., Neto, 2008), we included a measure of gratitude to rule out a potential third-variable explanation for any effect of prayer on forgiveness.

Method

Participants. The study included 52 psychology undergraduates (36 female, 16 male), who received extra credit for their participation and reported being in a romantic relationship.

Measures. The six-item Gratitude Questionnaire (McCullough, Emmons, & Tsang, 2002) was used to measure *gratitude*. Example items include “I have so much in life to be thankful for” ($\alpha = .76$).

Prayer frequency was assessed with a four-item measure (e.g., “How often do you pray privately in places other than at religious services”) adapted from King and Hunt (1975; $\alpha = .89$).

As is the case in most forgiveness research (see Fincham et al., 2006), we operationalized forgiveness in terms of decreased motivation to retaliate following a partner’s transgression. *Forgiveness* was assessed with three items (e.g., “When my partner wrongs or hurts me, I find a way to make her/him regret it”; $\alpha = .75$).

We assessed *religiosity* with a question asking for level of agreement with the following statement: “I consider myself a religious person.”

Procedure. One participant reported not praying when instructed to. Accordingly, data from this participant were excluded from analyses. After completing the measures of gratitude, prayer frequency, and religiosity, as well as some unrelated measures, participants were randomly assigned to condition.

Twenty-six participants were assigned to the prayer-for-partner condition. They were directed into a private room where they would be alone and were instructed to say a prayer for the well-being of their romantic partner. The other 26 participants were assigned to the control condition, which was designed to ensure that prayer, rather than the peripheral aspects of prayer, was responsible for any movement in forgiveness ratings. Participants in the control condition were directed into a private room where they would be alone and were instructed to speak into a recording device while

describing their romantic partner's physical attributes, as if they were describing him or her to a parent. Following the manipulation, participants in both conditions completed the forgiveness measure.

Results

An unanticipated difference between groups arose at baseline: Participants in the prayer-for-partner condition reported significantly lower gratitude scores ($M = 6.30$, $SD = 0.56$) than did those in the control condition ($M = 6.65$, $SD = 0.37$), $F(1, 53) = 7.86$, $p < .01$. Accordingly, we controlled for gratitude in subsequent analysis. In addition, we controlled for the planned control variables, level of religiosity and prayer frequency, to ensure that neither religiosity nor naturally occurring prayer frequency was a confound. Finally, given the imbalance between men and women in the study, we also controlled for sex.

As hypothesized, an analysis of covariance (ANCOVA) controlling for gratitude, religiosity, prayer frequency, and sex revealed that participants in the prayer-for-partner condition had higher forgiveness scores ($M = 5.15$, $SD = 0.84$) than those in the control condition ($M = 4.85$, $SD = 0.88$), $F(1, 47) = 4.00$, $p = .05$, $\eta_p^2 = .08$.

Discussion

Consistent with our hypothesis, the results demonstrated that prayer can increase one's willingness to forgive a romantic partner. By instructing control participants to simulate a conversation with a parent about their romantic partner, we attempted to approximate many aspects of the prayer condition, such as thinking about one's partner and communicating with a nonvisible authority figure. The results indicate that prayer caused an increase in forgiveness above and beyond any change that might have been induced by an imagined discussion with a parental figure about the partner's characteristics. The results are particularly notable, given that only a single prayer produced this effect.

However, this study is limited in that it does not rule out the alternative hypothesis that thinking positive thoughts about the partner during the prayer, rather than prayer itself, is what affected reports of forgiveness. Another limitation of this study is that it does not clarify whether there is something unique about praying directly for a partner, or whether any prayer would produce the same effect on forgiveness. Finally, this study does not provide an explanation for why praying for one's partner would have an effect on forgiveness. We conducted Study 2 to address these limitations.

Study 2

The first objective of Study 2 was to rule out some alternative hypotheses not addressed in Study 1 by introducing more rigorous control conditions: an undirected-prayer condition and a

positive-thoughts condition in which participants reflected on a friendship. Finding that forgiveness was higher in the prayer-for-partner condition than in the positive-thoughts condition would rule out the hypothesis that prayer for a relationship partner promotes forgiveness simply by priming a more generally positive set of thoughts about the partner. The undirected-prayer condition provided a test of whether any contemplation of a divine being is sufficient to prompt increased forgiveness, or whether a specific prayer focus on the partner results in different or unique benefits with regard to forgiveness. We hypothesized that praying specifically for the well-being of one's friend would uniquely contribute to willingness to forgive above and beyond any contributions of undirected prayer.

In Study 1, we showed an effect of prayer on romantic relationships; in Study 2, we targeted friendships to see if there would be a similar effect of prayer on a different relationship type. We tested the effect of other-focused prayer over the course of 4 weeks to see if such prayer would increase willingness to forgive transgressions by the friend and whether this association would persist when we controlled for initial levels of forgiveness.

Another important objective of this study was to examine a mechanism that might help explain the expected relationship between selfless prayer and forgiveness. In particular, we hypothesized that praying for benefits for a specific individual would increase participants' general sense of selfless concern for others, and that this increase in selfless concern would mediate the effect of condition on increased forgiveness. Praying specifically for the well-being of a friend should prime concern for others more effectively than general undirected prayer or general positive thoughts.

Method

Participants. Of the 92 undergraduates who began the study, 67 (48 female, 19 male) completed the follow-up measures and were included in the analysis. These individuals participated in the study for extra credit and ranged in age from 18 to 37 years (median age = 19). Only participants who reported being comfortable with prayer were invited to participate; all others were informed of an alternative extra-credit opportunity. Given this criterion for participation, it seemed less necessary to control for religiosity or prior prayer frequency in this study than in Study 1. However, including them as control variables did not alter the results.

Measures. Forgiveness was assessed with six items, at both baseline and follow-up. Participants were instructed to choose a close friend about whom to answer all questions. The forgiveness measure in Study 1 focused on retaliation. We expanded the measure for Study 2 to include not only retaliation, but also avoidance, which has been shown to be an important element of forgiveness (Fincham, Beach, & Davila, 2004). For example, the forgiveness measure in Study 2

included the item, "If I am treated unfairly by my friend, I give him/her the cold shoulder" ($\alpha = .84$ at baseline and $.85$ at follow-up).

Selfless concern was measured at both baseline and follow-up using the item, "I feel a selfless caring for others." Level of engagement in the study was assessed at the follow-up by asking participants, "How often did you engage in your assigned daily activity?" We also measured prayer frequency and religiosity using the same measures from Study 1, but did not include them in the analyses given that we preselected religiously inclined individuals. These items were measured at baseline and at follow-up.

Procedure. All participants completed baseline measures of forgiveness, selfless concern, religiosity, and prayer frequency and then were randomly assigned to one of three conditions. They were instructed that they would need to complete their assigned activity every day and keep a log of how many minutes they engaged in that activity each day. Participants were also required to use an on-line journal twice a week to report their log and to provide written descriptions about their assigned activity. At the conclusion of the 4-week period, participants completed a battery of follow-up measures that included forgiveness, selfless concern for others, and level of engagement in the study.

Prayer-for-friend condition. This was the experimental condition. The 34 participants assigned to this condition were given the following instructions:

Over the next 4 weeks, we would like you to set aside at least one time each day to pray for the well-being of your friend. Keep track of how much time you spend doing this as we will ask you to report it for each day.

To help participants understand the type of prayer we intended, we provided them with an example prayer and requested that they generate their own prayer and report what they prayed about during each on-line session.

Undirected-prayer condition. There were 30 participants assigned to this condition, the purpose of which was to help rule out the competing hypothesis that any posttest differences in forgiveness were due simply to increasing participants' frequency of prayer, priming a secure attachment figure, or merely priming an external audience (God) and thereby increasing prosocial behavior. Those assigned to this condition were given the following instructions:

Over the next 4 weeks, please set aside at least one time each day to pray. Keep track of how much time you spend doing this as we will ask you to report it for each day.

During each on-line session, we asked participants in this condition to "please generate your own prayer in your own words

on anything you'd like to pray about." They were then asked to describe their prayer in a paragraph.

Positive-thoughts condition. Given that we requested participants in the prayer-for-friend condition to pray for positive things for their friends, the goal of this control condition was to help rule out the alternative hypothesis that positive thoughts toward a friend, rather than specifically prayer for a friend, will increase forgiveness toward that friend (cf. Tesser, Martin, & Mendolia, 1995). The 28 participants assigned to this condition were given the following instructions:

Over the next 4 weeks, please set aside at least one time each day to think positive thoughts about your friend. Keep track of how much time you spend doing this as we will ask you to report it for each day.

Results

Attrition. Eight of the original 34 participants dropped out of the prayer-for-friend condition, 6 of the original 30 participants dropped out of the undirected-prayer condition, and 10 of the original 28 participants dropped out of the positive-thoughts condition. Thus, the final sample comprised 26 participants in the prayer-for-friend condition, 24 in the undirected-prayer condition, and 18 in the positive-thoughts condition. Given the relatively even dropout across conditions, we did not anticipate any meaningful effect due to attrition. However, to be sure, we compared baseline forgiveness scores of participants who dropped out with those of participants who remained in the study and found no differences between the groups, $F(1, 90) = 0.05, p = .83$.

Effect of prayer on forgiveness. We first tested our hypothesis that praying for a friend every day for 4 weeks would affect participants' forgiveness of that friend even when we controlled for baseline forgiveness scores, sex, and level of engagement in the assigned activity. Our hypothesis was supported by a significant main effect for condition, $F(2, 61) = 5.58, p < .01$. Planned comparisons revealed higher reported forgiveness among participants in the prayer-for-friend condition ($M = 6.21, SD = 0.72$) than among those in the positive-thoughts condition ($M = 5.26, SD = 1.39$), $F(1, 60) = 4.55, p < .05, d = 0.90$, or the undirected-prayer condition ($M = 5.54, SD = 1.02$), $F(1, 61) = 10.76, p < .01, d = 0.83$. There was no significant difference between the undirected-prayer and the positive-thoughts conditions, $p > .05$. All means reported were adjusted for covariates.

Effect of prayer on selfless concern. Our hypothesis concerning an increase in selfless concern in the prayer-for-friend condition was confirmed. An ANCOVA examining selfless concern as a dependent variable revealed a significant main effect for condition, $F(2, 60) = 3.17, p < .05$. Planned comparisons controlling for baseline levels of selfless concern, sex, and level of engagement in the assigned activity revealed

higher reported selfless concern among participants in the prayer-for-friend condition ($M = 4.47$, $SD = 1.07$) than among those in the positive-thoughts condition ($M = 3.92$, $SD = 1.31$), $F(1, 60) = 5.75$, $p < .05$, $d = 0.77$. Reported selfless concern was marginally higher in the prayer-for-friend condition than in the undirected-prayer condition ($M = 3.64$, $SD = 1.28$), $F(1, 60) = 2.98$, $p < .10$, $d = 0.49$. There was no significant difference between the undirected-prayer and the positive-thoughts condition, $p > .05$. All means reported were adjusted for covariates.

Selfless concern as a mediator of the effect of prayer on forgiveness. To test whether selfless concern functioned as a mediator between experimental condition and forgiveness, we conducted a bias-corrected bootstrapping analysis recommended by Preacher and Hayes (2008). Bootstrapping involves the repeated extraction of samples from the data set (in this case, 5,000 samples were taken) and the estimation of the indirect effect in each resampled data set. The totality of all the estimated indirect effects permits the construction of a 95% confidence interval for the effect size of the indirect effect. A confidence interval that includes zero indicates a nonsignificant effect.

Experimental condition was dummy-coded (prayer for friend = 1; the two control conditions = 0) and entered as the independent variable; forgiveness at the follow-up was the dependent variable, and selfless concern at the follow-up was the mediator. The confidence interval (bias corrected) for the indirect path through selfless concern was -2.26 to -0.01 and thus did not include zero. This result indicated that selfless concern was a significant mediator ($p < .05$) of the effect of prayer for a friend on subsequent forgiveness toward that friend.

Discussion

Our hypotheses were supported. Other-directed prayer every day for 4 weeks increased participants' willingness to forgive their friend. Praying for the well-being of a friend had a greater effect on forgiveness than undirected prayer and thinking positive thoughts about the friend. Praying for a friend also increased a general sense of selfless concern for others, which mediated the relationship between praying for a friend and forgiveness.

General Discussion

The results of two studies indicate that praying for a relationship partner is related to greater willingness to forgive that person. In these studies, we sought to determine how both one prayer (Study 1) and multiple prayers over several weeks (Study 2) would affect forgiveness in both romantic relationships (Study 1) and friendships (Study 2). In Study 1, prayer increased participants' willingness to forgive a romantic

partner relative to a control condition involving conversation with an imagined parent about the partner. In Study 2, participants who prayed for a friend every day for 4 weeks reported higher levels of forgiveness for this friend at follow-up compared with participants who thought positive thoughts about their partner every day or those who engaged in undirected prayers. This effect persisted even when we controlled for baseline forgiveness. Praying for a friend also increased selfless concern for others, which mediated the relationship between praying for a friend and forgiveness. These two studies provide evidence that prayer focused on benefits for another person increases willingness to forgive that person and that this relationship is consistent across different types of relationships.

Selfless concern and a goal-theory perspective on prayer

Our finding that selfless concern for others mediated the relationship between prayer for the partner and forgiveness is consistent with a goal-theory perspective. Specifically, Fincham and Beach (1999) argued that motivational processes are particularly consequential when couples are striving to reduce their negative relationship transactions and when they are recovering from negative interactions that have already occurred. Fincham and Beach hypothesized that during destructive interactions, couples commonly switch from the cooperative goals they profess and believe most of the time to emergent goals that are adversarial. Self-focus is at the heart of abandoning cooperative goals in favor of emergent goals such as retribution and resentment. This perspective has recently been applied to prayer. We (Beach, Fincham, Hurt, McNair, & Stanley, 2008) argued that prayer for the partner primes empathy, compassion, and love. Consistent with this view, our data suggest that some types of prayer may increase selfless concern for others, thereby increasing forgiveness and potentially promoting cooperative goals. This mechanism may provide a partial explanation for the beneficial effects of prayer on relationship satisfaction over the longer term (Fincham et al., 2008).

Limitations and future directions

Our studies were conducted in the southeastern United States, and the student participants may have been more religious than potential participants in other regions of the United States, which might limit the generalizability of the findings. However, the fact that we drew participants from a relatively religious section of the country was also a strength in the design, because if control participants had relatively high baseline levels of prayer, it would have been particularly difficult for the manipulation to produce an effect on the dependent variable. Only participants comfortable with prayer were invited to participate in Study 2, which increased the likelihood of a

religiously committed sample and diminished the contrast between the experimental condition and the control conditions. Given these factors, it is especially notable that simply directing the frequency and content of individuals' prayers had an effect on forgiveness.

There is clearly a need to document the boundary conditions for the beneficial effects of the type of prayer we studied. As researchers better understand the various mediating processes that produce positive and negative effects of prayer on relationships, it is likely that the complexity of the proposed mediators will increase. In particular, it is likely that some types of prayer will prove destructive of relationships under some circumstances, and it will be important to document these effects in future research.

Another priority for future research will be to identify and test additional mechanisms that might account for the documented relationship between prayer and positive relationship outcomes. For example, participants from two qualitative studies (Holeman, 2003; Lambert & Dollahite, 2006) mentioned that their religion helped them want to forgive their partner because God had forgiven them. Perhaps prayer primes thoughts of a forgiving God, which could then motivate individuals to forgive out of gratitude for being the beneficiary of God's forgiveness. There is a need for data that speak to this possibility.

Conclusion

In two experiments, we found that praying for a friend or a romantic partner increases one's willingness to forgive that individual. These studies set the stage for further empirical examination of a prevalent religious practice—90% of Americans pray at least occasionally—and suggest at least one mechanism linking spiritual practices to relationship outcomes. We conclude by noting that a complete understanding of human behavior requires systematic investigation of spiritual activities such as prayer.

Declaration of Conflicting Interests

The authors declared that they had no conflicts of interests with respect to their authorship and/or the publication of this article.

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