Victim and Perpetrator Accounts of Interpersonal Transgressions: Self-Serving or Relationship-Serving Biases?

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Two studies investigated perpetrator and victim biases in reported transgressions. Study 1 showed that in nonromantic relationships, perpetrators were more likely than victims to emphasize details that minimized their transgressions, whereas victims were more likely to exaggerate the severity of the event. Study 2 examined these perspective-related differences in romantic relationships and their relationship to forgiveness. Although victims were less likely than perpetrators to include features that minimized the event, they were no more likely to include features that magnified the event; individuals in highly satisfying relationships were less likely to exhibit self-serving biases than were individuals in less satisfying relationships. The data also were consistent with a causal sequence in which positive relationship quality led to more benign interpretations of a transgression, which in turn, promoted forgiveness.

Keywords: forgiveness; interpersonal transgressions; self-serving biases; relationship quality

It is a rare person who does not, at some point in their life, feel "hurt," "let down," "betrayed," "disappointed," or "wronged" by another human. Likewise, it is equally uncommon to find a person who has not, at some point, been the cause of these feelings in others. Regardless of whether these incidents are relatively minor (e.g., forgetting to pick a friend up from school) or much more severe (e.g., romantic infidelity), people are often motivated to maintain favorable views of themselves following these interpersonal transgressions because taking responsibility for the negative consequences of a transgression can reflect badly on the self and threaten self-esteem (Baumeister, 1998; Taylor & Brown, 1999). It is therefore not surprising that perpetrators tend to engage in self-serving distortions, such as emphasizing external or mitigating factors, which allow them to diminish their responsibility for a transgression and maintain their self-worth. Perhaps more surprising is that victims' accounts of transgressions also may show motivated biases and distortions (Baumeister, Stillwell, & Wotman, 1990; Stillwell & Baumeister, 1997). For example, in accounts of real-life transgressions (e.g., broken promises, lies, unfair treatment, betrayal of secrets), Baumeister et al. (1990) found that victims described the event as having severe consequences, as part of an ongoing pattern of misbehavior, as inexcusable, and immoral. In contrast, perpetrators tended to downplay the consequences of the transgression and described their actions as arising from motives that were understandable and often legitimate. Similarly, Exline, Yali, and Lobel (1998) found that when individuals were placed in the perpetrator role as opposed to the victim role, they were more likely to portray their own offenses as less harmful, less repeated, less intentional, less malicious, more justifiable, and more reparable.

Although this work clearly demonstrated that victims and perpetrators gave systematically different accounts of interpersonal transgressions, in the absence of objective accuracy criteria it was difficult to determine who, if anyone, was telling the truth. In addition, because participants were asked to tell one victim story and one perpetrator story, rather than comparing both perspectives on the same incident, it was difficult to ascertain whether the roles, rather than the selection of the event recounted, introduced bias. For example, victims may have simply chosen to write about more severe events,

whereas perpetrators may have chosen relatively minor events.

Stillwell and Baumeister (1997) addressed these limitations by having participants read a story while identifying with either its victim or perpetrator and then retell the story in their own words. By eliminating incident choice, they were able to demonstrate that perpetrators and victims distorted the narrative to an equal degree, but in very different ways. For both victims and perpetrators, bias resulted from selective omission of information that ran contrary to self-serving motivations. Thus, for example, perpetrators tended to leave out some of the negative consequences that the victim suffered, whereas victims tended to omit some of the mitigating circumstances that were, in part, responsible for the perpetrator's action. These findings are important because they highlight the fact that both victims and perpetrators have self-serving motives that result in distortions of transgression events.

Motivated Biases in Romantic Relationships

Although previous work clearly demonstrates that victim and perpetrator roles result in self-serving biases, an important limitation of this work is that in most of these studies the victims and perpetrators did not know each other well. Many transgressions, however, involve individuals who are in committed, ongoing relationships with one another, such as dating or married couples. Transgressions against intimate partners are unique in that they are likely to threaten not only the perpetrator's self-regard but also the well-being and security of the relationship.

An extensive line of research has focused on understanding how people in satisfying relationships resolve the tension between their desire for a sense of security and the doubts that they inevitably experience when confronted with negative partner behavior (e.g., Murray & Holmes, 1993, 1999; Murray, Holmes, & Griffen, 1996). This research has shown that in satisfying dating and marital relationships, individuals often exhibit motivated biases that enable them to construe events in ways that allow them to perceive their partners and their relationships in the most positive light possible.

For example, Murray and Holmes (1993) provide evidence that suggests individuals in satisfying dating and marital relationships construct stories that depict potential flaws or imperfections in their partners in the best possible light. They had dating individuals depict their partners as rarely initiating disagreements over joint interests and then turned this seemingly positive tendency into a fault by showing participants an article that argued for the intimacy-promoting aspects of conflict engagement. When later given the opportunity to describe their partner, participants constructed images of conflict-engaging partners, suggesting that threatened individuals were able to "see what they wanted to see" despite their initial depiction of low-conflict partners. Similarly, Murray and Holmes (1999) showed that individuals were able to find redeeming features in their partners' faults, to construct "yes, but" refutations that minimized specific faults, and to link virtues to faults within integrated, more general mental models. Moreover, their results suggested that an individual's ability to successfully elevate the significance of virtues and downplay the significance of faults in their romantic partner and their relationship was critical for maintaining a satisfying, stable relationship.

Attribution research also has demonstrated that maritally satisfied spouses, in contrast to distressed spouses, often extend self-serving biases to their partners and make more benign attributions for their partner's behavior than for their own (Fincham, Beach, & Baucom, 1987). In contrast, spouses with lower levels of marital satisfaction tend to make more conflict promoting attributions for negative partner behaviors (Bradbury & Fincham, 1990). A similar attribution pattern has been demonstrated in dating relationships. Fletcher, Fitness, and Blampied (1990) had individuals involved in long-term, premarital relationships imagine 20 hypothetical relationship behaviors that varied in terms of valence (positive or negative) and self- or partner initiation. Participants then completed a spontaneous attribution probe by stating what they would think and feel in response to each behavior; happy partners produced attributions that enhanced relationship quality, whereas unhappy partners produced attributions that maintained their current levels of distress.

In light of such findings, it is expected that perspective-related differences in the interpretation of transgressions will vary as a function of self versus relationship interests: they are especially likely if the parties involved are motivated by their immediate self-interest, whereas they are less likely to occur if the parties involved are relationship oriented and are motivated to develop or maintain a positive relationship. If more relationship oriented, which is likely to be the case in the context of romantic relationships as opposed to nonromantic relationships, victims' accusing styles and perpetrators' defensive styles may be replaced by more benevolent evaluations of the transgression.

Moreover, it is likely that the strength of the self versus the relationship orientation depends on the quality of the relationship between the parties. Specifically, individuals in highly satisfying relationships who experience a transgression may be least likely to exhibit the self-serving biases typically observed in perpetrator and victim roles. Rather, for these individuals, the motivation to construct accounts that portray their partners and rela-

tionships in a positive light may be more influential than their motivation to make themselves look good.

The present research therefore investigates whether the observed discrepancies between victims and perpetrators are reduced, eliminated, or even reversed when examined in the context of romantic relationships. It is possible that romantic couples, particularly highly satisfied couples, may engage in partner-serving or relationship-serving biases as opposed to self-serving biases when confronted with a partner's transgression.

Motivated Biases and Forgiveness in Romantic Relationships

Although numerous studies have shown that perpetrators and victims encode and recall transgressions in self-serving ways, few studies have examined how these interpretations affect the likelihood of forgiveness following an interpersonal offense. When interpersonal transgressions occur, they are likely to elicit strong negative feelings that encourage revenge and avoidance, thereby disrupting the relationship between the transgressor and the victim. Being able to forgive one's partner for these transgressions is crucial to maintaining a healthy and satisfying relationship. Not surprisingly, spouses report that the willingness to forgive and be forgiven is one of the most important characteristics for marital satisfaction and longevity (Fenell, 1993). Therefore, it is important to understand what factors might facilitate or impede forgiveness following a partners' interpersonal offense.

A number of social-cognitive variables are associated with forgiveness. Forgiving is facilitated by more benign attributions for the transgression (e.g., lower perceived blame and intentionality; Boon & Sulsky, 1997; Girard & Mullet, 1997; Weiner, 1995), by the extent to which an offender apologizes and seeks forgiveness for the offense (Darby & Schlenker, 1982; McCullough, Worthington, & Rachal, 1997; Weiner, Graham, Peter, & Zmuidinas, 1991), and by the perceived severity of the offense, with more severe offenses being more difficult to forgive (Girard & Mullet, 1997; Ohbuchi, Kameda, & Agarie, 1989).

As previously noted, victims tend to overlook many details that are likely to facilitate forgiveness (e.g., mitigating circumstances and apologies) and embellish their memories with details that are likely to hinder forgiveness (e.g., recall greater suffering). Perpetrators, on the other hand, have a tendency to distort events in a way that is advantageous for them (e.g., embellishing mitigating circumstances and emphasizing apologies). These distortions are likely to make the accomplishment of forgiveness in a close relationship extremely difficult. Therefore, in addition to examining whether victim and perpetrator biases found in nonromantic relationships also exist in the context of romantic relationships, an additional goal of the present research was to examine the influence of these biases on the likelihood of forgiveness following a romantic partners' interpersonal offense.

Relationship Quality and Forgiveness

An association between relationship quality and forgiveness is well established and a number of researchers have shown that partners are more willing to forgive one another for interpersonal transgressions in relationships that are characterized by high satisfaction, closeness, and commitment (Fincham, 2000; Fincham & Beach, 2002; Fincham, Paleari, & Regalia, 2002; McCullough et al., 1998). For example, McCullough and colleagues (1998) report that forgiveness occurs more frequently in close, committed relationships and that it is associated with restored relational closeness following an interpersonal transgression. Similarly, Fincham (2000) showed that forgiveness was associated with marital satisfaction and that it predicted overall behavior toward the partner, independently of marital satisfaction.

Efforts have recently begun to identify the mechanisms by which increased relationship satisfaction results in greater forgiveness. For example, McCullough and colleagues (1998) discuss two mechanisms that appear to be partially responsible for why people are more likely to forgive in close, committed, satisfactory relationships. First, they found that in close relationships, transgressors were more likely to offer apologies. Second, victims were more likely to develop empathy for their transgressors when their relationship was close, committed, and satisfactory.

In the current research, we hypothesized that the way victims interpret partner transgressions is another potential mediator of the association between relationship satisfaction and forgiveness. We propose that when confronted with partner transgressions, individuals high in relationship satisfaction will be more likely to interpret transgressions in less malevolent (or more benevolent) ways. It is likely that for these individuals, their motivation to construct accounts that portray their partner in a positive light and their relationship as well adjusted is more important than their motivation to engage in self-serving biases. These positive interpretations, we hypothesize, create an atmosphere that increases the likelihood of forgiveness. Therefore, a final goal of the current research was to examine a mediational model in which positive relationship quality leads to more positive interpretations of transgressions, which in turn, increases the likelihood of forgiveness.

Current Studies and Hypotheses

The goal of the present research was to increase understanding of previously documented biases in victim and perpetrator accounts by examining whether these differences occur in romantic relationships. We also examine how these biases are related to relationship quality and forgiveness. To accomplish these goals, we conducted two studies. In Study 1, we first attempted to establish whether Baumeister et al.'s (1990) findings occur in exclusively nonromantic relationships to ensure that the results of our second study did not reflect a failure to replicate. In Study 2, we then examined victim-perpetrator differences in romantic relationships investigating, in particular, the extent to which positive relationship quality was associated with a decreased likelihood of engaging in self-serving distortions when describing partner transgressions. We hypothesized that individuals high in relationship satisfaction, as compared to less satisfied individuals, would be less likely to engage in self-serving distortions. We also hypothesized that fewer self-serving distortions would be associated with an increased likelihood of forgiveness and that higher levels of relationship quality also would be associated with a greater likelihood of forgiveness.

Finally, we hypothesized that the association between relationship quality and forgiveness would be partially mediated by victims' interpretations of the transgressions. Specifically, individuals high in relationship satisfaction will be more likely to interpret the transgression in less malevolent (or more benevolent) ways, which would, in turn, increase the likelihood of forgiving their partner.

STUDY 1: PERPETRATOR AND VICTIM DIFFERENCES
IN NONROMANTIC RELATIONSHIPS

One goal of our first study was to replicate Baumeister et al.'s (1990) findings for victim and perpetrator accounts of interpersonal conflict. In addition, we attempted to improve on the methodology used in Baumeister et al.'s (1990) study by limiting the type of relationship in which the transgressions occurred. In their study, some participants reported transgressions in dating relationships, whereas others described transgressions within the context of nondating relationships. To conclude that any results obtained from an exclusively dating sample are indeed different from those observed in a nondating sample, it is important to first document the perspective difference phenomenon in the context of an exclusively nondating sample.

As noted earlier, another limitation of Baumeister et al.'s (1990) study was that participants were asked to choose conflicts to report, which opened the possibility that perpetrators might report relatively minor events, whereas victims might report more severe events. To address this concern, we assessed the severity of the reported transgressions. Because the length of time since the transgression is also likely to influence the perceived levels of severity, we examined this variable as well.

Method

Participants. Participants included 143 undergraduates (88 men, 55 women) who volunteered to take part in partial fulfillment of the requirements for an introductory psychology class. The mean age of participants was approximately 19.65 years (range = 18-42). The majority of the participants were Caucasian (61%), although there were smaller percentages of African Americans (9%), Asians (21%), Pacific Islanders (1%), Latinos/Latinas (4%), and Middle Easterners (1%). Approximately 3% of the sample indicated that they were of another ethnic background.

Procedure and measures. Participants completed the sessions in groups of four. They were provided with written instructions requesting them to write two stories and to complete a number of questionnaires. The instructions for the "victim" story were as follows: "Please describe an incident in which someone other than a romantic partner hurt or wronged you." They were instructed to be thorough and provide the full story. The perpetrator instructions replaced the phrase "someone other than a romantic partner hurt or wronged you" with "you hurt or wronged someone other than a romantic partner." The instructions were identical in all other respects. The designations "victim" and "perpetrator" were not used. By random assignment, half of the participants wrote the victim story first, whereas half wrote the perpetrator story first. In between the two stories, participants completed a number of questionnaires. These intervening measures functioned primarily as a distraction task between writing the two stories.

Most participants wrote about two transgressions that conformed to the instructions. However, some participants indicated that they could not think of an event that satisfied the instructions. In addition, some participants failed to complete both stories or otherwise failed to follow the instructions. The final sample consisted of 117 participants who had completed both narratives. Participants wrote about a wide range of events, including broken promises or commitments, betrayal of secrets, and lies.

After writing each story, participants then completed a number of questions regarding the transgression. Participants indicated their relationship with the person involved in the transgression as well as how well they knew the person (1 = *not at all*, 7 = *very well*). They also reported how long ago the event had happened (1 = *less*

than 1 week ago, 2 = *1 week to 1 month ago*, 3 = *2-3 months ago*, 4 = *4-5 months ago*, 5 = *6 months to a year ago*, 6 = *over a year ago*). Finally, after writing the victim story, participants rated their subjective severity of the perpetrators' actions by indicating how much harm occurred to them because of the incident (1 = *no harm*, 7 = *very great harm*), whereas after writing the perpetrator story, participants rated how much harm they thought had occurred to the person that they hurt as a result of the incident (1 = *no harm*, 7 = *very great harm*).

Coding transgression accounts. To evaluate perpetrator-victim differences in describing transgressions, two coders independently coded each narrative for the presence or absence of various features that belonged to the categories reported by Baumeister et al. (1990) (see Table 1 for a list of the coding categories). Dichotomous codings were used to increase the objectivity and reliability of the ratings. Cohen's Kappa across the 23 categories ranged from .41 to 1.0 (*M* = .67, *Mdn* = .61) for the victim narratives and from .66 to .96 (*M* = .67, *Mdn* = .87) for the perpetrator narratives. Although the current research was primarily interested in understanding the subjective experiences of victims and perpetrators, we also obtained objective coders' ratings of severity so that we could examine whether the perceptions of participants matched those of outside observers. The two coders rated the objective severity of each event by indicating on a 5-point scale how much harm they thought the victim had experienced as a consequence of the transgression (1 = *no harm at all*, 2 = *mild harm*, 3 = *moderate harm*, 4 = *a lot of harm*, 5 = *severe harm*). A 5-point scale was used (rather than the 7-point scale used to assess participants' subjective severity ratings) to increase the reliability of the ratings. Interrater reliability was adequate for both the victim (*K* = .49, *r* = .73) and the perpetrator (*K* = .56, *r* = .77) narratives.

After coding the narratives independently, the two coders discussed any discrepancies until consensus was reached. These codings formed the basis for our analyses.

As Baumeister et al. (1990) discuss, some of these coding categories are reflective of individuals' attempts to minimize the severity of the perpetrators' behavior (e.g., emphasizing mitigating circumstances), whereas others are reflective of individuals' attempts to maximize the severity of the perpetrators' behavior (e.g., emphasizing negative consequences). Therefore, we computed an overall minimization score for each individual by summing individuals' responses across the 12 categories reflective of minimization of the perpetrators' behaviors. Likewise, we computed an overall maximization score by summing individuals' responses across the 11 categories reflective of maximization of the perpetrators' behaviors. To compute an overall magnification

index for each participant, we then subtracted individuals' minimization scores from their maximization scores.

Results

Results are based on the comparison of the stories told from the victim's perspective and those told from the perpetrator's perspective. Preliminary analyses revealed no significant effects of the order in which participants wrote the narratives (e.g., perpetrator narrative first vs. victim narrative first). Therefore, all results are reported collapsed across these two conditions. The results for the main coding dimensions are summarized in Table 1.

Description of the stories. Both perpetrators and victims chose to write about incidents involving friends, family members, and people that they knew from work or school. Perpetrator and victim accounts did not differ in the type of transgressions reported, $\chi^2(100, N = 117)$ = 120.88, *ns.* Moreover, paired samples *t* test indicated that the accounts did not differ in the level of closeness reported between the two parties, $t(116) = -.25$, $p = .801$. Perpetrator and victim transgressions also did not differ in the length of time that had passed since the transgression occurred, $t(116) = -.27$, $p = .788$. For the victim narratives, the average length of time since the transgression was approximately 4.4 months (*SD* = 1.79), whereas for the perpetrator narratives, it was approximately 4.5 months (*SD* = 1.65).

Most important, the incidents described in the perpetrator condition did not differ in subjective severity from those described in the victim condition, $t(116) = .978$, $p = .330$; the mean subjective severity rating for victim stories was 5.33 (*SD* = 1.51), whereas the mean severity rating for perpetrator stories was 4.99 (*SD* = 1.62). The perpetrator and victim narratives also did not differ on objective severity ratings, $t(114) = -.09$, *ns*; the mean objective severity rating for victim stories was 3.04 (*SD* = .73), whereas the mean severity rating for perpetrator stories was 3.05 (*SD* = .77). Participants' subjective severity ratings were significantly correlated with the coders' objective ratings for both the victim ($r = .24$, $p < .01$) and the perpetrator narratives ($r = .33$, $p < .001$). Therefore, it appears that both victims and perpetrators were choosing relatively severe incidents to write about.

Victims' and perpetrators' open-ended accounts of the transgressions. Previous research suggests that perpetrators and victims provide very different accounts of transgressions (e.g., Baumeister et al., 1990), and this finding was replicated in the current study. A series of McNemar tests for related proportions on the categories coded from the transgression accounts indicated a number of significant effects (see Table 1). For example, when writing as perpetrators, compared to victims, participants more

TABLE 1:   Results of Content Coding from Study 1

Item	% Perpetrators	% Victim
Maximization items		
Long-term past events preceding the incident	50	55
Negative consequences	33	55**
Damage to the relationship	30	36
Victim is still angry or hurt	3	17***
Perpetrator's behavior described as incomprehensible	4	29***
Perpetrator's behavior was inconsistent	2	11**
Perpetrator's behavior was immoral	10	15
Perpetrator's behavior was deliberately hurtful or malicious	6	11
Victim's anger was justified	11	50***
Victim was angry but no overt expression of anger	2	3
Multiple or accumulated provocations	32	36
Minimization items		
Positive consequences	3	3
Denial of negative consequences	41	34
Perpetrator apologizes or makes amends	16	10
External or mitigating circumstances	67	37***
Perpetrator's behavior was impulsive	5	7
Perpetrator's behavior could not be helped	5	0
Perpetrator's behavior was justified	33	3***
Victim's response portrayed as an overreaction	6	0
Victim provoked the incident	1	0
The cause of the incident includes the victim	32	27
The perpetrator regrets the incident	22	3***
Self-blame	28	7***

NOTE: Percentages represent the proportion of stories on that dimension that were coded as having the specified feature.
**$p < .01$. ***$p < .001$.

often portrayed their actions as caused by external or mitigating circumstances (67% vs. 37%) and wrote that their behavior was justified (33% vs. 3%). However, they were also more likely than victim narrators to mention regret for the incident (22% vs. 3%) and to blame themselves for what happened (28% vs. 7%).

In contrast, victims were more likely than offenders to write that the perpetrators' motives were incomprehensible (29% vs. 4%) and inconsistent (11% vs. 2%). In addition, victims' accounts, compared with perpetrators' accounts, were also more likely to claim that there were negative consequences of the transgression (55% vs. 33%). Finally, victims were also more likely to portray their anger as being justified (50% vs. 11%) and to indicate that they were still angry or hurt (17% vs. 3%).

We then examined whether perpetrators and victims differed on the composite measure of overall magnification. As expected, we found that victims ($M = .88$, $SD = 2.01$) magnified more than perpetrators ($M = -.99$, $SD = 1.89$), $t(116) = 8.31$, $p < .001$. Not surprisingly, when broken down into maximization and minimization, results indicated that victims maximized more than perpetrators, $t(116) = 6.07$, $p < .001$, with victims including a mean of 2.7 ($SD = 1.68$) maximizing items and perpetrators including a mean of 1.7 ($SD = 1.32$) maximizing items. In contrast, perpetrators minimized the event more than victims, $t(116) = -4.60$, $p < .001$, with perpetrators includ-

ing a mean of 2.7 ($SD = 1.63$) minimizing items and victims including a mean of 1.8 ($SD = 1.58$) minimizing items.

Discussion

The results from this study replicate past findings showing that perpetrators and victims construct systematically different accounts of transgressions. More specifically, we found that in comparison to victims' descriptions of transgressions, perpetrators were more likely to emphasize details that minimized or downplayed their transgressions. For example, they were more likely to portray their actions as being caused by external or mitigating circumstances and to write that their behavior was justified. In contrast, victims were more likely than perpetrators to include details that tended to exaggerate the severity of the event. For example, they more frequently mentioned that there were negative consequences as a result of the transgression and they described their anger as being justified. In addition, they frequently described offenders' motives as incomprehensible and inconsistent.

These results mirror previous findings with regard to differences between perpetrator and victim accounts. However, the current results extend this literature in two important ways. First, because we assessed the perceived severity of the events, we were able to determine that the

observed differences were not due to differential severity of events reported. Second, because we excluded transgressions in romantic relationships, we can be certain that these differences exist in the context of an exclusively nondating relationship. This is important because in Study 2, we propose that there are likely to be differences in the pattern of biases when examined in the context of romantic relationships. To reliably conclude that there are indeed differences between these two samples, it was important to show that different patterns exist in the two samples when the exact same methodology is used to assess these biases.

STUDY 2: PERPETRATOR AND VICTIM DIFFERENCES IN ROMANTIC RELATIONSHIPS

In this study, we examined whether the same biases and distortions observed in nonromantic relationships also exist in regard to transgressions involving a romantic partner. We proposed that these biases might not exist in the context of romantic relationships, particularly within well-functioning relationships, because individuals in such relationships will be motivated to construct accounts that portray their partners and their relationship in a positive light.

In addition, the current study investigated the role of relationship quality and motivated biases in promoting forgiveness in ongoing, romantic relationships. We expected that more benign interpretations (fewer self-serving distortions) of partners' transgressions and positive relationship quality would be associated with greater levels of forgiveness. Finally, we examined whether motivated biases are a potential mediator of the relationship between relationship quality and forgiveness. We proposed a mediational model in which positive relationship quality promotes more benign interpretations of partner transgressions, which in turn, facilitates forgiveness.

Method

Participants. Participants included 177 volunteer undergraduate students (87 men, 90 women) who received partial fulfillment of the requirements for an introductory psychology class. Participants who indicated that they were currently involved in a dating relationship of at least 4 months in duration were eligible. On average, participants had been involved with their partner for approximately 16.74 months. The mean age of participants was approximately 19.63 years (range = 17-35). The majority of the participants were Caucasian (72%), although there were smaller percentages of African Americans (7%), Asians (14%), Pacific Islanders (2%), Latinos/Latinas (2%), and Middle Easterners (2%). Approximately 3% of the sample indicated that they were of another ethnic background. The majority of

participants indicated that they were Catholic (40%), Protestant (10%), or Athiest or Agnostic (10%). An additional 6% indicated that they were Jewish, whereas 1% identified themselves as Muslims. The remainder of the sample (34%) indicated "other" as their religious preference.

PROCEDURE AND MEASURES

Groups of four participants were provided with written instructions requesting them to write two stories and to complete a number of questionnaires. The instructions for the "victim" story were as follows: "Please describe an incident in which your partner hurt you." Participants were instructed to be thorough and provide the full story. The perpetrator instructions inserted the phrase "you hurt your partner" in place of "your partner hurt you" and was identical in other respects. The designations "victim" and "perpetrator" were not used. By random assignment, half of the participants wrote the victim story first, whereas half wrote the perpetrator story first. In between the two stories, participants completed a number of questionnaires. These intervening measures functioned primarily as a distracting task between writing the two stories.

Most of the participants successfully followed the instructions and wrote about two transgressions that met the requirements. However, some participants failed to complete both stories or otherwise failed to follow instructions. The final sample consisted of 156 participants who successfully completed both narratives.

After writing each story, participants then answered a number of questions about the transgression. First, they indicated how long ago the event had happened (1 = *less than a week ago*, 2 = *1 week to 1 month ago*, 3 = *2-3 months ago*, 4 = *4-5 months ago*, 5 = *6 months to a year ago*, 6 = *over a year ago*). After writing the victim story, participants also rated their subjective severity of the transgression by indicating how much harm had occurred to them as a result of the incident (1 = *no harm*, 7 = *very great harm*), whereas after writing the perpetrator story, participants rated how much harm they thought had occurred to the victim as a result of the incident (1 = *no harm*, 7 = *very great harm*). Finally, after writing the victim story, participants indicated how much they had forgiven the person who had hurt them (1 = *not forgiven at all*, 7 = *completely forgiven*), whereas after writing the perpetrator story, participants indicated how much they believed that the victim had forgiven them for what they had done (1 = *not forgiven at all*, 7 = *completely forgiven*).

Relationship quality was assessed using the Perceived Relationship Quality Components Inventory (PRQC; Fletcher, Simpson, & Thomas, 2000). The PRQC is an 18-item self-report inventory that consists of six subscales: satisfaction, commitment, intimacy, trust, passion, and

love. The items on each of the subscales were summed together to form an overall measure of relationship satisfaction, where greater scores indicated greater relationship quality. This measure has been shown to be a reliable and valid measure of relationship quality (Fletcher et al., 2000). Across all items, the PRQC in the current study had a Cronbach's alpha of .94.

Coding the transgression accounts. The procedure used for coding the narratives in this study was identical to the procedure used in Study 1. Two coders independently coded each narrative for the presence or absence of the various features. Cohen's Kappa across the 23 categories ranged from .42 to .93 ($M = .72$, $Mdn = .75$) for the victim narratives and from .40 to .89 ($M = .65$, $Mdn = .67$) for the perpetrator narratives. The two coders also rated the objective severity of each event by indicating on a 5-point scale how much harm they thought the victim had experienced as a consequence of the transgression ($1 = no$ *harm at all*, $2 = mild$ *harm*, $3 = moderate$ *harm*, $4 = a$ *lot of harm*, $5 = severe$ *harm*). Interrater reliability was adequate for both the victim ($K = .66$, $r = .84$) and the perpetrator ($K = .58$, $r = .81$) narratives. After coding the narratives independently, the two coders discussed any discrepancies until consensus was reached. As in Study 1, these categories were then used to form indices of minimization and maximization for each participant. An overall magnification index was then formed by subtracting individuals' minimization scores from their maximization scores.

Results

Results are based on the comparison of the stories told from the victim's perspective and those told from the perpetrator's perspective. Preliminary analyses revealed no significant effects of the order in which participants wrote the narratives. Therefore, all results are reported collapsed across these two conditions. The results for the main coding dimensions are summarized in Table 2.

Description of the stories. The transgressions reported in the two sets of stories were very similar. Perpetrators and victims accounts did not differ in the type of transgressions reported, $\chi^2(81, N = 156) = 54.23$, *ns*. Both the perpetrator and the victim accounts involved instances of physical infidelity, psychological aggression, lying, and insults. In addition, perpetrator and victim accounts did not differ in the length of time since the transgression occurred, $t(155) = .086$, $p = .932$. For the victim narratives, the average length of time since the transgression was approximately 3.52 ($SD = 1.62$) months, whereas for the perpetrator narratives, it was approximately 3.51 ($SD = 1.62$) months.

Most important, we found that victims did not choose to write about more severe events than perpetrators, $t(155) = .357$, $p = .721$. The mean subjective severity rating for the victim narratives was 4.53 ($SD = 1.69$), whereas the mean severity for the perpetrator narratives was 4.47 ($SD = 1.77$). The perpetrator and victim narratives also did not differ on objective severity ratings, $t(152) = -1.50$, *ns*; the mean objective severity rating for victim stories was 3.0 ($SD = .66$), whereas the mean severity rating for perpetrator stories was 3.1 ($SD = .73$). Participants' subjective severity ratings were significantly correlated with the coders' objective ratings for both the victim ($r = .41$, $p < .001$) and the perpetrator narratives ($r = .34$, $p < .001$). Therefore, it appears that both victims and perpetrators were choosing relatively severe incidents to write about.

Victims' and perpetrators' open-ended accounts of the transgressions. A data-analytic approach similar to that taken in Study 1 was used to examine our hypothesis that previously documented perpetrator and victim biases (e.g., Baumeister et al., 1990) would be attenuated in romantic relationships. A series of McNemar tests indicated that there were still a number of significant differences between the victim and the perpetrator accounts. Specifically, we found that when writing as perpetrators, compared to victims, participants more often portrayed their actions as being caused by external or mitigating circumstances (51% vs. 31%), wrote that their behavior was justified (37% vs. 8%), and described their behavior as impulsive (8% vs. 1%). Perpetrators also were more likely to deny that there were any negative consequences due to the event (12% vs. 3%) and imply that the victims' response to the event was an overreaction (10% vs. 3%). However, as in Study 1, narrators who wrote about events as perpetrators were also more likely than victim narrators to mention regret for the incident (15% vs. 3%) and to blame themselves for what happened (17% vs. 3%).

In contrast, victims were more likely than offenders to write that the perpetrators' motives were incomprehensible (7% vs. 1%). Victims' accounts, compared with perpetrators' accounts, were also more likely to portray their anger as being justified (33% vs. 11%). In contrast to the results obtained in Study 1, however, victims were no more likely than perpetrators to mention negative consequences of the transgression or to indicate that they were still angry or hurt.

We then examined whether perpetrators and victims differed on the overall composite measure of magnification. Similar to the results obtained in Study 1, we found that victims ($M = .11$, $SD = 1.63$) magnified more than perpetrators ($M = -.65$, $SD = 1.64$), $t(155) = 4.01$, $p < .001$. Of interest, though, it appears that this effect is being driven by the fact that perpetrators are more likely than

TABLE 2:   Results of Content Coding from Study 2

Item	% Perpetrators	% Victim
Maximization items		
Long-term past events preceding the incident	51	44
Negative consequences	53	45
Damage to the relationship	14	17
Victim is still angry or hurt	1	6
Perpetrator's behavior described as incomprehensible	1	7*
Perpetrator's behavior was inconsistent	5	3
Perpetrator's behavior was immoral	1	2
Perpetrator's behavior was deliberately hurtful or malicious	6	3
Victim's anger was justified	11	33***
Victim was angry but no overt expression of anger	3	2
Multiple or accumulated provocations	23	20
Minimization items		
Positive consequences	19	19
Denial of negative consequences	12	3**
Perpetrator apologizes or makes amends	12	10
External or mitigating circumstances	51	31***
Perpetrator's behavior was impulsive	8	1*
Perpetrator's behavior could not be helped	3	1
Perpetrator's behavior was justified	37	8***
Victim's response portrayed as an overreaction	10	3*
Victim provoked the incident	1	0
The cause of the incident includes the victim	29	21
The perpetrator regrets the incident	15	3***
Self-blame	17	3***

NOTE: Percentages represent the proportion of stories on that dimension that were coded as having the specified feature.
*$p < .05$. **$p < .01$. ***$p < .001$.

victims to minimize the event. When we examined maximization and minimization separately, perpetrators still tended to minimize the event more than victims, $t(155) = -5.881$, $p < .001$, but there was no difference between perpetrators and victims in maximization. In contrast to the findings from Study 1, then, victims were no more likely than perpetrators to include features in their narrative that magnified the transgression.

Mediation analyses. Earlier, we proposed a mediational model that suggested that differential motives (self vs. relationship orientation) result in satisfied, but not dissatisfied, relationship partners constructing more benevolent (or less malevolent) accounts of their partners' transgressions, which results in greater levels of forgiveness for a partners' transgression. If this is the case, then our measure of magnification should mediate the effects of relationship quality on victims' reports of forgiveness. However, because forgiveness is also likely to be influenced by the severity of the transgression as well as the amount of time that has passed since the transgression occurred, we controlled for these two variables in the following analyses. Because the current study was interested in examining how individuals' subjective experiences of transgressions relate to their own relationship outcomes, we used participants' subjective ratings of severity as our covariate rather than the outside coders' ratings.

To evaluate our mediational hypothesis, regression analyses were conducted in accordance with the recommendation of Baron and Kenny (1986). These authors note that four effects are necessary to support a mediational model. First, relationship quality must predict forgiveness. Second, relationship quality must predict the mediator, magnification. Third, the mediator, magnification, must predict the outcome, forgiveness, controlling for relationship quality. Finally, when the mediator, magnification, is included in the analysis, the direct effect of relationship quality on forgiveness needs to be significantly reduced.

Consistent with these requirements, higher levels of relationship quality predicted greater forgiveness by victims, $\beta = .31$, $t(155) = 4.50$, $p < .001$, higher levels of relationship quality predicted lower levels of magnification, $\beta = -.19$, $t(155) = -2.56$, $p < .05$, and higher levels of magnification predicted lower levels of forgiveness when controlling for relationship quality, $\beta = -.19$, $t(155) = -2.78$, $p < .001$. To evaluate whether the association of relationship quality with forgiveness was partially attributable to the level of magnification, we regressed our measure of forgiveness simultaneously onto relationship quality and magnification while controlling for the amount of time since the transgression as well as the severity of the transgression. The association between forgiveness and relationship quality declined substan-

tially when maximization was included in the model. The Sobel (1982) test of the significance of mediation revealed that magnification was a significant, albeit partial, mediator of the association between relationship quality and forgiveness ($z = 1.97$, $p < .05$).

To determine if the mediational model worked differently when the overall magnification variable was broken down into its maximization and minimization components, we also performed the mediational analyses using each of the two components as potential mediators of the association between relationship quality and forgiveness. Maximization was not associated with forgiveness or with relationship quality, precluding this variable from serving as a mediator. In regard to minimization, higher levels of relationship quality predicted greater forgiveness, $\beta = .31$, $t(155) = 4.50$, $p < .001$, higher levels of relationship quality predicted higher levels of minimization, $\beta = .24$, $t(155) = 3.07$, $p < .01$, and higher levels of minimization predicted higher levels of forgiveness when controlling for relationship quality, $\beta = .14$, $t(155) = 2.16$, $p < .05$. We therefore regressed our measure of forgiveness simultaneously onto relationship quality and minimization while controlling for the amount of time since the transgression as well as the severity of the transgression. The association between forgiveness and relationship quality declined substantially when minimization was included in the model. The Sobel test revealed that minimization was a significant partial mediator of the association between relationship quality and forgiveness ($z = 2.99$, $p < .01$).

To determine if the association of relationship quality to minimization and forgiveness was contingent on the severity of the transgression, we conducted multiple regression analyses predicting minimization and forgiveness from relationship quality, subjective severity, and their interaction. No significant interactions were observed for either minimization ($\beta = -.01$, *ns*) or forgiveness ($\beta = .03$, *ns*), indicating that these associations are not moderated by the perceived severity of the transgression.

Discussion

Consistent with the results of Study 1, we found that in comparison to victims' descriptions of transgressions, perpetrators were more likely to emphasize details that minimized or downplayed their transgressions. Although victims were more likely than perpetrators to include several features that exaggerated the severity of the event, when the overall composite indices of minimization and maximization were examined, results indicated that although victims were less likely than perpetrators to include features that minimized the event, they were no more likely to include features that magnified the event. These results suggest that even though there may still be

differences between perpetrator and victim accounts of transgressions in the context of romantic relationships, these differences appear to be driven primarily by perpetrators exhibiting a tendency to downplay the severity of their behavior.

Results from this study also showed that individuals in highly satisfying relationships who experienced a transgression were less likely to exhibit self-serving biases when interpreting their partners' transgressions than were individuals involved in less satisfying relationships. It is likely that for highly satisfied individuals, the motivation to construct accounts that portray their partners in a positive light and their relationship as well adjusted may be more influential than their motivation to make themselves look good.

Moreover, these findings provided support for our proposed mediational model. The interpretations that romantic partners formed in response to their partners' interpersonal offenses were important in understanding their willingness to forgive their partner. More specifically, we found that the process of forgiveness was consistent with a causal sequence in which positive relationship quality promoted more benign interpretations of an interpersonal offense, which in turn, promoted forgiveness. Moreover, the associations of relationship quality to minimization and forgiveness do not appear to be contingent on the severity of the transgression in question. However, it should be noted that most of the participants in the current study wrote about transgressions of moderate severity. Therefore, it is not clear if the same patterns of results would be observed when dealing with relatively trivial transgressions.

GENERAL DISCUSSION

The current research replicates past findings that suggest perpetrators and victims construct systematically different accounts of transgressions. In Study 1, we found that in comparison to victims' descriptions of non-romantic transgressions, perpetrators' descriptions were more likely to emphasize details that minimized or downplayed the severity of the transgression. In contrast, victims were more likely than perpetrators to include details in their descriptions that tended to exaggerate the severity of the event. Because perpetrator and victim stories did not differ in severity, we can be confident that the observed differences are due to biases within the roles rather than in the severity of events reported.

In addition to replicating prior findings and ruling out alternative hypotheses for the findings, Study 1 also was important because it allowed us to realize our primary goal: to determine whether the perspective-related biases exist within romantic relationships. Study 1 was necessary because most studies that have examined perpetrator-victim biases did not limit the type of relation-

ship in which the transgressions occurred. For example, some participants in Baumeister et al.'s (1990) study reported transgressions in dating relationships, whereas others described transgressions in the context of nondating relationships (e.g., friends, family members, strangers, bosses). It would, therefore, be inappropriate to compare directly the findings of Study 2 regarding romantic partners to these studies and conclude that perspective-related biases operate differently in the context of close relationships. By replicating prior findings in Study 1, while restricting transgressions to those involving nonromantic partners, we can be more confident that any differences observed between Studies 1 and 2 are indeed due to the type of the relationship in which the transgressions occurred.

Motivated Biases in the Context of Close Relationships

In general, results from Study 2 suggested that although there were still some observed differences between perpetrator and victim accounts of transgressions in romantic relationships, these differences result primarily from perpetrators having a greater tendency than victims to downplay the severity of the transgression. When we examined these differences using the composite indices of maximization and minimization, we found that even though victims were less likely than perpetrators to include features that minimized the transgression, victims were no more likely to include features that maximized the event. These findings differ from those in Study 1, which showed that in the context of nonromantic relationships, victims were much more likely than perpetrators to include features that maximized the severity of the transgression (e.g., they emphasized that there were negative consequences because of the transgression).

It is important to note, however, that although we can compare and contrast the pattern of findings observed in Studies 1 and 2, it would be inappropriate for us to draw conclusions about differences between them without conducting direct statistical comparisons. Accordingly, we combined the data from the two studies and assessed the impact of role and relationship type on the composite measures of minimization and maximization. Role was entered as a within-subjects factor and relationship type (dating vs. nondating) was entered as a between-subjects factor. Consistent with the pattern of results described above, no interaction emerged between role and relationship type on minimization, $F(1, 270) = .01$, ns, indicating that regardless of the type of relationship, perpetrators have a tendency to minimize more than victims. However, there was significant interaction between role and relationship type for maximization, $F(1, 270) = 30.05$, $p < .001$. Further examina-

tion of this interaction revealed that victims were more likely than perpetrators to maximize the event only in nondating relationships. In romantic relationships, victims were no more likely than perpetrators to include features that maximized the event.

Moreover, our results suggested that positive relationship quality in romantic relationships promoted more benign interpretations of interpersonal transgressions. It is likely that when confronted with a partner's transgression, highly satisfied individuals are less motivated by their immediate self-interest. Rather, when their partner commits a transgression, they appear to be motivated to restore a sense of security by construing the event in a way that allows them to see their partner and their relationship in the most positive way possible.

Motivated Biases and Forgiveness in Close Relationships

The current findings also demonstrated that the interpretations romantic partners form for their partners' offenses are important in understanding their willingness to forgive their partner. More specifically, our results are consistent with a causal sequence in which positive relationship quality promoted more benign interpretations of an interpersonal offense, which in turn, promoted forgiveness.

Given the nature of the human condition, it is inevitable that partners will transgress in their relationships, and when such transgressions occur, they are likely to elicit strong negative thoughts and feelings. These negative cognitive and affective responses have the potential to prompt revenge and avoidance behaviors and thereby disrupt the relationship between the transgressor and the victim. Transgressions, therefore, pose a significant challenge to intimate relationships.

The current findings suggest that being able to come to understand a transgression in a more benign manner, as evidenced by reduced negative cognition, partially accounts for the association between the well-established link between relationship quality and forgiveness. It appears that victims involved in close, satisfying relationships are more likely than less satisfied individuals to develop less blameful and more benevolent understandings of their partners' negative behaviors, which likely creates an atmosphere conducive to forgiveness.

One of the crucial elements in forgiveness is being able to distinguish the person from his or her transgression. Forgiveness is often facilitated when the injured party is able to see beyond the transgression and appreciate the person behind the act (Fincham, 2000). Positive relationship quality likely creates a climate that encourages benign interpretations of partner transgressions. Individuals in satisfying romantic relationships typically experience a sense of well-being and comfort in the rela-

tionship that enhances their ability to positively reinterpret transgressions, partly because it is easier for them to identify emotionally with the offending partner (McCullough et al., 1998).

The present findings have important implications for interventions designed to facilitate forgiveness between relationship partners. They suggest that forgiveness can be encouraged by changing the way individuals think about transgressions. Therefore, to the extent that interventions reduce negative interpretations of partner transgressions, they should be correspondingly effective in promoting forgiveness in romantic relationships.

Limitations and Future Directions

The current research has several limitations that should be noted. First, in both studies, participants were undergraduate students. Therefore, these results may not generalize to other samples (e.g., married couples). It is possible that the range of offenses that students are likely to encounter, particularly in their romantic relationships, might be relatively restricted. However, it is worth noting that a considerable number of our participants did report serious, painful offenses (e.g., romantic infidelity, relationship violence). Nevertheless, it is important for future research to demonstrate that these findings generalize to nonstudent samples. In addition, because the reports were retrospective, all of the partners had remained in their relationships despite the partner transgression that they reported. Therefore, our results should not be generalized to situations in which individuals have experienced partner transgressions that ultimately lead to relationship dissolution. Future longitudinal research is needed to examine such situations.

It needs to be acknowledged that because our findings do not compare both perpetrator and victim perspectives on the same incident, it is impossible to determine the precise cognitive processes that account for our results. We cannot be certain whether the observed differences between perpetrator and victim accounts were a result of biased encoding, biased selection of what story to tell, distorted recall of specific facts, or from outright lying. Although these subjective accounts may not necessarily reveal the truth about what actually happened, they nevertheless do help us to better understand peoples' motives and beliefs about transgression events.

Finally, it is important to note that the data are correlational and inferences concerning causal sequences are necessarily tentative. An important advantage of the narrative method used, however, is its high level of external validity, something that is typically not found in experimental studies. This points to the importance of using methodologies that combine both experimental and correlational designs in future research.

Despite these limitations, the current studies are important in that they complement existing research on forgiveness processes. Few studies to date have attempted to understand the motivational underpinnings of why people in close, satisfying relationships forgive their partner. The current findings suggest that the interpretations individuals make regarding partner transgressions are often biased by motivated construal processes. Individuals who are involved in satisfying relationships appear to be motivated to reconstruct their partners' behavior in a benevolent manner so as to see their partner and their relationship in the best light possible. In contrast, individuals in less satisfying relationships, similar to people in nonromantic relationships, appear to be motivated to reconstruct the past in a less benevolent manner, so as to see their own behavior in the best light possible. Hence, it appears that developing benevolent (or less malevolent) interpretations of a partner's negative behavior may be a key factor in understanding the association between relationship satisfaction and interpersonal forgiveness.

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