Prayer and Forgiveness: Beyond Relationship Quality and Extension to Marriage

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The majority of the world population profess religious/spiritual beliefs and prayer is a form of spiritual activity common across numerous religious/spiritual belief systems. Three studies therefore examined the role of prayer in romantic relationships. Study 1 ($n = 91$) showed that prayer for a dating partner predicted lower aggressive tendencies and greater forgiveness of partner transgressions, independently of relationship closeness. Study 2 ($n = 89$ married couples) is among the first to examine the prayer–forgiveness association using dyadic data. Controlling for relationship satisfaction in the actor–partner interdependence model, prayer for the spouse predicted own forgiveness but not partner's reports of their own forgiveness. To obviate the problem of obtaining all the data from the same reporter, Study 3 ($n = 91$ married couples) used partner reports of the spouse's forgiveness in an actor–partner interdependence model analysis. Controlling for religiosity, the results showed that prayer for the partner predicted partner reports of the prayer's forgiveness. The implications of these results are then discussed.

Keywords: romantic relationships, marriage, prayer, forgiveness

Despite a documented decline in the number of Americans who identify as religious from 1972 to 2014 (94% to 79%), only 15% of the population say that they never pray (Twenge, Sherman, Exline, & Grubbs, 2016). Not surprisingly, many Americans use prayer spontaneously to cope with their problems (Barnes, Powell-Griner, McFann, & Nahin, 2004; McCaffrey, Eisenberg, Legedza, Davis, & Phillips, 2004). The practice of prayer is also widespread across the world (e.g., South America, Africa). Although spiritual activities such as prayer are therefore central to human behavior, social scientists have paid limited attention to this behavior (see Spilka & Ladd, 2012). Given the obvious similarity of prayer to other behaviors and cognitive processes of interest to social scientists, such as mindfulness and meditation, the limited attention given to research on prayer is striking. The primary objective of the current studies is to examine whether praying for one's romantic partner is related to important relationship behaviors independently of one's evaluation of the relationship.

There is evidence to suggest that religiosity is related to a number of positive outcomes in close relationships. For example, greater involvement in religious activities is related to higher levels of marital satisfaction (Mahoney, 2010). Atkins and Kessel (2008) found that attendance at religious services is associated with a decreased likelihood of infidelity and there is evidence that religious participation helps couples negotiate conflict in their marriage (Lambert & Dollahite, 2006). It is difficult to determine whether specific religious behaviors caused these outcomes, or whether the relationship is due to self-selection into a religious group. A further problem is the plausibility of third variable explanations. For example, the link between religious involvement and greater marital satisfaction may simply reflect the operation of marriage enhancing attitudes and norms found in faith groups and not specific religious activities. Similarly, the documented inverse relationship between depression and religiosity (Townsend, Kladder, Ayele, & Mulligan, 2002; Smith, McCullough, & Poll, 2003) could simply reflect the more expansive social networks (and thereby greater potential social support) found among religious participants (Ellison & George, 1994; Joiner, Perez, & Walker, 2002; Taylor, Chatters, & Levin, 2004) rather than any specific religious behaviors.

Most studies relating religion to important outcomes use some global index of religious involvement (e.g., religious service attendance) thereby offering little information on specific religious behaviors that may be helpful or harmful. The present research therefore examines a specific religious/spiritual behavior, prayer. No comparison is made to those who do not practice the behavior thereby limiting selection effects. Because prayer may be practiced individually, it has the potential to reduce the chance that common third variable problems (e.g., religious social networks) are operative.

Theoretical Framework

As noted, the vast majority (85%, Twenge et al., 2016) of Americans engage in prayer at least occasionally. Prayer is a form of spiritual activity common to all the "Abrahamic" faiths (i.e., Judaism, Christianity, and Islam) and has strong parallels in other religious traditions (e.g., Buddhism, Hinduism, Shinto). Because of its central role in many religious traditions, prayer is a spiritual

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activity worthy of empirical investigation. However, research on prayer has most often investigated the effect of distant, intercessory prayer on physical health and has been criticized for having "no explicit theories" and inconsistent findings (e.g., Masters, Spielmans, & Goodson, 2005, p. 271; Sloan, 2006).

Mahoney (2010), however, developed a relational spirituality framework that addresses this concern. In her model, she suggested that a family member may draw on his or her felt connection to the divine to determine goals for family relationships and how to deal with obstacles that thwart such goals. Consistent with Mahoney's (2010) relational spirituality framework, Fincham and colleagues have offered a goal theory perspective on prayer (see Fincham, Beach, Lambert, Stillman, & Braithwaite, 2008; Fincham, Lambert, & Beach, 2010). In their analysis, these authors emphasized the importance of partner-focused petitionary prayer (PFPP), a form of prayer that invokes God's help, using the individuals' own language rather than a set or "memorized" prayer. This focus stems from their argument that prayer can influence goal choice and thereby the intentions and willingness to engage in behaviors that can either support or undermine relationship functioning. For example, Dudley and Kosinski (1990) have suggested that spiritual activities may often help couples to more often "think of the needs of others, be more loving and forgiving, treat each other with respect, and resolve conflict" (p. 82). This proposal seems particularly relevant to PFPP in which there is an explicit focus on the needs of the partner. Such a focus may mitigate against aggressive tendencies toward the partner and could potentially facilitate forgiveness.

Building on this goal theory analysis of prayer, Beach, Fincham, Hurt, McNair, and Stanley (2008) offered a conceptual framework in which they argue that prayer for a relationship partner can function in ways that are consistent with the aims of traditional skills-based interventions with couples. That is, when implemented in the context of conflict, prayer can function as a time out, a commonly used procedure in skills-based couple interventions. In this context prayer provides a time during which the partner can self-sooth and during which cooperative goals can regain their dominance, replacing revenge-oriented or competition-oriented motives associated with aggressive tendencies toward the partner (Fincham & Beach, 1999). Moreover, praying for the partner connects the praying person to their partner vis-à-vis the deity. In this way, prayer also serves to prime or reinforce couple identity. Finally, colloquial prayer to a deity has the added advantage of providing what can be considered (the ultimate form of) "social support." Notwithstanding this analysis, it is important to note that no research has been conducted with clinically distressed couples to test this theory. Rather, existing research on prayer in relationships has been conducted with partners who are relatively satisfied with their relationships.

Research on PFPP in Relationships

A series of studies has examined PFPP showing that it is related to important outcomes. Initial research showed that PFPP predicted later relationship satisfaction controlling for earlier satisfaction and social desirability responding; earlier satisfaction did not predict later prayer (Fincham et al., 2008). A second study showed that PFPP predicted relationship satisfaction over and beyond

general prayer and positive and negative dyadic behavior (Fincham et al., 2008).

These correlational data were followed by research using experimental designs. Lambert, Fincham, Stillman, Graham, and Beach (2010) reported a laboratory study and a field study conducted over a four week period in which participants randomly assigned to engage in PFPP reported greater willingness to forgive their partner. They also found that selfless concern mediated the PFPP–forgiveness link. Another set of studies has systematically documented the impact of PFPP and in doing so provided support for the goal theoretic perspective outlined earlier. One study showed that persons who engaged in more PFPP were rated by objective observers as less vengeful in a dyadic interaction that involved talking about a partner transgression (Lambert, Fincham, DeWall, Pond, & Beach, 2013, Study 1). A second study replicated the finding that 4 weeks of PFPP, compared to simply thinking positive thoughts about the partner, impacted willingness to forgive a partner using partner ratings of the praying person's forgiveness (Lambert et al., 2013, Study 3). A third study showed that PFPP on days when there was a conflict with the partner corresponded to reports of higher cooperative tendencies and forgiveness (Lambert et al., 2013, Study 5). Finally, compared to participants who engaged in positive thoughts about their partner, those who prayed following a partner's "hurtful behavior" were more cooperative with their partners in a mixed-motive game (Lambert et al., 2013, Study 4). The last two findings suggest that prayer for the partner will be negatively associated with aggressive tendencies toward the partner.

In a similar vein, Fincham et al. (2010) have shown that PFPP was associated with lower levels of extradyadic romantic behavior over a 6-week period over and beyond initial levels of extradyadic romantic behavior. They also showed that PFPP was associated with observable behavior in that participants who had been praying for their partner for 4 weeks were rated by observers as more committed to their romantic relationship than control participants. A concern regarding extant research is that it uses college students in dating relationships and in some cases same sex friendship relationships. Also, as previously noted, the data pertain to relatively happy relationships rather than the type of distressed relationships one encounters in the therapy. It is therefore unclear whether PFPP prayer operates in the same manner at different life stages and in more established relationships (e.g., marriage). Moreover, use of dyadic analyses is extremely rare precluding a systematic understanding of how PFPP operates in the dyadic context.

Two studies provide some data that speak to this issue. Beach et al. (2011) incorporated PFPP in a preventive intervention with African American couples and examined its impact on a composite measure of communication, satisfaction and positive intentions. Compared to the same intervention that did not include PFPP and a control condition, the intervention that included PFPP produced a better outcome for wives, but not husbands. Fincham and Beach (2014) provided the only dyadic data analysis concerning PFPP. Using an extension of the actor–partner interdependence model (APIM) that allows for examination of mediation they showed that PFPP for both spouses was related to own and partner relationship satisfaction and that satisfaction acted as a mediator of the relation between PFPP and own commitment to the marriage. Although

encouraging, available marital data fail to address an important concern, to which we now turn.

In the marital and close relationships literatures, it is critical to show whether PFPP adds conceptual value in a landscape already littered with conceptually overlapping constructs (Fincham & Bradbury, 1987; Fincham & Rogge, 2010). Couple therapists are familiar with partners who respond noncontingently to the spouse and questions about the relationship and instead base their responses on their dominant sentiment toward the relationship. Weiss (1980) used the term *sentiment override* to describe this phenomenon. In light of the preceding observation it is critical to show that constructs do not operate as proxies for subjective evaluation of the relationship, its closeness or some other indicator of relationship quality. Thus, it is important to show that PFPP does more than capture variance in commonly used measures of relationship quality. A stringent test can be provided by controlling for the relationship quality of both partners in the relationship as it is especially critical in regard to PFPP given its documented association with relationship quality.

Current Studies and Hypotheses

The goal of the present research is to advance understanding of the role of PFPP in romantic relationships by examining it independently of relationship quality and in a dyadic context. Because prayer for the well-being of a partner seems inimical to aggressive inclinations toward the partner, Study 1 explores the association between PFPP and aggressive tendencies toward a romantic partner as well as forgiveness of the partner. It is hypothesized that PFPP will be negatively related to aggressive tendencies and positively related to forgiveness independently of relationship closeness. Study 2 examines the role of PFPP in a dyadic context using the APIM to examine PFPP and forgiveness among married couples. On the basis of prior findings, it is hypothesized that significant within person (actor) effects will be obtained independently of the marital satisfaction of both spouses. In the absence of prior research, no hypothesis is offered regarding partner effects. Study 3 addresses an important shortcoming of the first two studies and of forgiveness research more generally, namely, reliance on self-reports of forgiveness. In this study, partner reports of the praying person's forgiveness is examined in a sample of married couples. It is hypothesized that self-reported prayer will be related to partner report of the prayer's forgiveness giving rise to significant between person (partner) effects. In light of the association between PFPP and religiosity this study includes religiosity as a control in the APIM.

Study 1

The goal of this study is twofold. First, building on past research that has examined PFPP in romantic relationships among emerging adults, this study investigates whether the documented association between prayer for the partner and forgiveness is replicated when the closeness of the relationship is taken into account. Second, it examines whether a previously unexplored variable in research on prayer in close relationships, aggressive inclinations toward a relationship partner, is related to PFPP. Again this relationship is examined controlling for relationship closeness.

Method

Participants and procedure. Undergraduate students ($n = 91$, 82 females) who prayed at least occasionally participated in the study for partial course credit. They reported being in a romantic relationship that had a median length of between 1 and 2 years. Participants ranged in age from 18 to 24 with a mean age of 19.22 ($SD = 1.18$) years. All measures were completed online after an Institutional Review Board consent form had been signed.

Measures.

Prayer for partner. Prayer for partner was measured using the four-item measure utilized in previous research (e.g., Fincham et al., 2010). It included items such as "I pray for the well being of my romantic partner" and "I pray that good things will happen for my partner." Participants indicated the frequency with which they engaged in the behavior described by each item using a 5-point scale ranging from 1 (*never*) to 5 (*very frequently*). Scores were summed such that larger scores indicated greater frequency of prayer for the partner. Coefficient alpha for this sample was .97.

Forgiveness. Forgiveness was assessed with nine items used in prior research (Fincham, Beach, & Davila, 2004). An initial statement ("When my partner wrongs or hurts me . . .") was followed by possible avoidant responses (three items; e.g., "I tend to give him/her the cold shoulder"), retaliatory responses (three items; e.g., "I find a way to make him/her regret it"), and benevolent responses (three items; e.g., "I soon forgive him/her"). Items were coded so that higher scores represented greater forgiveness. In the present sample coefficient alpha was .67.

Aggressive inclination. Previous research has validated the use of voodoo dolls as proxies for harmful or aggressive behavior in laboratory settings (Pronin, Wegner, McCarthy, & Rodriguez, 2006). Building on such findings, DeWall et al. (2013) developed a voodoo doll task (VDT) that can be used online. Nine studies provided data to support the view that people transfer characteristics of a person onto a voodoo doll representing that person across settings and relationship contexts. VDT scores showed good test–retest reliability over 4 weeks ($r = .58$) as well as strong construct validity, and convergent validity. For example, VDT scores were significantly correlated with physical and psychological aggression, physical assault against a relationship partner, and behavioral measures of aggressive inclinations, such as calling one's partner names during a problem-solving task, behaving angrily during a conflict discussion task, and blasting a close relationship partner with intense and prolonged bursts of white noise.

In the VDT, participants were shown a picture of a doll on a computer that they were told represented their romantic partner. Participants were told that they could release any negative energy they experienced during the study by inserting pins into the voodoo doll. Participants could select from 0 to 51 pins. The average number of pins inserted into the doll was 2.49 ($SD = 4.61$). Higher numbers of pins inserted indicate higher levels of aggressive inclination. To account for the skewed nature of our count-based dependent variable (the number of pins used by participants; see Gardner, Mulvey, & Shaw, 1995) we followed the precedent of numerous prior studies (DeWall et al., 2013; Slotter et al., 2012) and employed Poisson regression and supplemented it by checking the results using a negative binomial regression analysis.

Relationship closeness. Perceived closeness was measured using the Inclusion of Other in the Self Scale (Aron, Aron, & Smollan, 1992). This scale consists of seven circle-pairs that differ in their level of overlap, from nonoverlapping to almost complete overlap. Participants were instructed to indicate which of these circle pairs best represented their relationship with the other person. This single-item scale has been widely used in previous research as an indicator of experienced closeness. Aron et al. (1992) report good test–retest reliability over two weeks for romantic couples ($r = .85$) and also found that this measure of relationship closeness was positively related to measures of marital commitment.

Results

Partner prayer and aggressive inclinations. To test whether partner prayer accounted for unique variance in aggressive tendencies, we conducted a Poisson regression analysis predicting pin insertion, with partner prayer and relationship closeness as predictor variables. As expected, both prayer for partner, $B = -0.12$, $\chi^2(1, 88) = 95.75$, and relationship closeness, $B = -0.22$, $\chi^2(1, 88) = 21.68$. were significantly associated with pin insertion ($p < .001$). An additional analysis using negative binomial regression analysis yielded similar results.[1]

Partner prayer and forgiveness. Our second hypothesis was that prayer for the partner would relate to forgiveness independently of relationship closeness. To test this hypothesis, we conducted a multiple regression analysis with forgiveness as the dependent variable and both partner prayer and relationship closeness as predictor variables. Both partner prayer ($\beta = .22$, $p < .04$) and relationship closeness ($\beta = .25$, $p < .02$) were significantly related to forgiveness.

Discussion

This study provides a replication of the previously documented association between PFPP and forgiveness. Most importantly, however, it shows that this relationship is not simply a reflection of the quality of the relationship which was indexed by closeness in this study. In addition, the study documents a new correlate of PFPP, aggressive inclinations toward the partner. Again the association did not simply reflect shared variance with relationship quality.

The above findings reflect several limitations of the existing literature on prayer in relationships. First, they were found using data obtained from only one partner in a relationship and hence beg the question of whether similar findings would emerge when the constructs are examined in a dyadic context. Second, they are limited to dating relationships among emerging adults prompting the questions of whether similar findings pertain to more established relationships such as marriage and to developmental periods other than young adulthood. Finally, even though the Inclusion of Other in the Self Scale is widely used in relationship research, it comprises a single item and is therefore potentially subject to measurement error. As a consequence, it is important to examine correlates of PFPP using more psychometrically sophisticated measures of relationship quality.

Study 2

To address the concerns mentioned, data were collected from both members of the couple, which allowed examination not only of intrapartner effects (actor effects) but also interpartner effects (partner effects) using the APIM (Kenny, Kashy, & Cook, 2006). In addition, to control for relationship quality the study employed a psychometrically optimized measure of couple satisfaction derived using item response theory.

Method

Participants and procedure. Participants were married couples ($n = 89$) recruited from the community through advertisements and flyers. Wives averaged 37.81 ($SD = 10.75$; range = 20 to 59) years of age and reported the following racial/ethnic identifications: Caucasian (80.8%), African American (10.1%) Latino (4.6%), Pacific Islander (1.1%), more one race (3.4%). Husbands averaged 39.13 ($SD = 10.90$; range 23 to 59) years of age and reported the following racial identifications: Caucasian (81.0%), African American (12.4%), Latino (4.5%), more than one race (1.1%). One husband declined to answer the question regarding race/ethnicity.

Measures.

Relationship satisfaction. Starting with 180 items previously used to assess relationship satisfaction, Funk and Rogge (2007) conducted an item response theory analysis to develop a four-item measure of relationship satisfaction with optimized psychometric properties. Sample items are "How rewarding is your relationship with your partner?" (answered on a 6-point scale ranging from *not at all* to *extremely*) and "I have a warm and comfortable relationship with my partner" (answered on a 6-point scale ranging from *not at all true* to *very true*). Their measure correlates .87 with the widely used Dyadic Adjustment Scale and −.79 with the Ineffective Arguing Inventory. In the present sample coefficient alpha was .94 for husbands and .95 for wives.

Forgiveness. The measure of forgiveness used the same items as those in Study 1. However, the items were presented as complete sentences and did not follow an initial statement as in the previous study (e.g., "After my partner hurts or wrongs me, I don't want to have anything to do with her/him"). In the present sample, coefficient alpha was .83 for husbands and .81 for wives.

Prayer for partner. The four item measure described in Study 1 was again used. In the present sample, coefficient alpha was .93 for husbands and .94 for wives.

Results

The APIM can be conducted with distinguishable dyads or indistinguishable dyads. A dyad is considered theoretically distinguishable if there is some meaningful factor on which its members can be distinguished, for example, family role of parent versus child. An indistinguishable dyad is one in which there is not a meaningful factor on which its members can be distinguished (e.g., same-sex twins or roommates). It is possible that a dyad that is theoretically distinguishable is not empirically distinguishable. That is, members of the dyad do not differ from each other

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[1] The results of this analysis are available from Frank D. Fincham.

statistically. In this regard, Kenny et al. (2006, p. 131) recommend that it should be standard practice when dealing with conceptually distinguishable dyads "to begin with a test that demonstrates empirically that the members are in fact distinguishable." In the absence of such evidence they state that the dyad "should be treated as if they were indistinguishable" (Kenny et al., 2006, p. 131). This is done using the omnibus test of distinguishability (I-SAT; Olsen & Kenny, 2006). In this test, equality constraints are imposed on the means, variances, and covariances of the manifest variables for both members of the dyad. In the present sample when these constraints were imposed, this yielded a χ^2 that was not significant, which shows that the members of the dyads were not empirically distinguishable. Similar findings were obtained when only the covariances were constrained. An APIM for indistinguishable dyads was therefore conducted and adjusted for model fit with the results of the I-SAT.

In the APIM analysis we included relationship satisfaction as a control variable and constrained all corresponding paths to be equal, namely, actor effects, partner effects and control paths. This model, displayed in Figure 1, fit the data; adjusted $\chi^2(4) = 8.93$, *ns,* comparative fit index = .99, normed fit index = .95, incremental fit index = .99, root mean square error of approximation = .06. The path between PFPP and own forgiveness (actor effect) was significant, $\beta = .20$, $p < .01$, as was the intraindividual path between relationship satisfaction and forgiveness, $\beta = .46$, $p < .001$.

Discussion

The results of this study are consistent with those obtained for PFPP and forgiveness in which they were not examined in a dyadic context. Specifically, the intrapersonal association (actor effect) between PFPP and forgiveness emerged. Most importantly, this association was found even when the marital satisfaction of both spouses was included in the model. Thus, the PFPP–forgiveness

association met the surplus value test proposed for the study of relationships between constructs in the marital literature (Fincham et al., 2004).

Notwithstanding its contribution, the present findings reflect an important limitation of forgiveness research which has relied almost exclusively on self-reports of forgiveness. In addition, it is quite possible that PFPP is simply a proxy variable for religiosity. The next study is designed to address these limitations. In this study, partner reports of the praying person's forgiveness is examined in a sample of married couples.

Study 3

To address the limits of using self-reports of forgiveness, partner reports of the praying person's forgiveness is examined. Thus, any association found between PFPP and forgiveness will not reflect same source data variance, an issue that plagues the forgiveness literature. In addition, religiosity is assessed to allow for the possibility of ruling it out as a third variable that links prayer and forgiveness.

Method

Participants and procedure. Participants were married couples ($n = 91$) recruited from the community through advertisements and flyers. Wives averaged 35.26 ($SD = 9.67$; range = 19 to 59) years of age and reported the following racial/ethnic identifications: Caucasian (67.7%), African American (18.3%) Latino (9.7%), Asian (1.1%), more one race (3.2%). Husbands averaged 36.84 ($SD = 10.06$; range 19 to 62) years of age and reported the following racial identifications: Caucasian (62.6%), African American (22.0%), Latino (10.0%), more than one race (4.4%). Two husbands declined to answer a question about race/ethnicity.
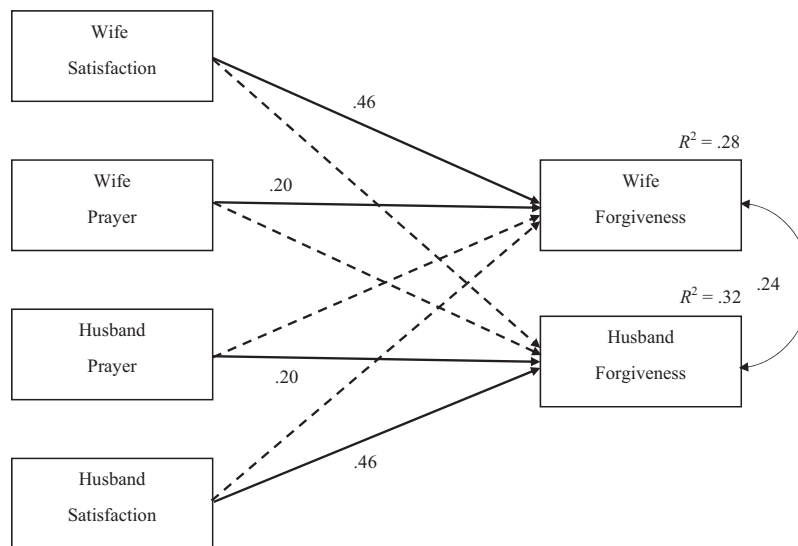

Figure 1. Actor–partner interdependence model for prayer and forgiveness controlling for marital satisfaction. Adjusted $\chi^2 = 8.93$, *ns*; comparative fit index = .99; normed fit index = .95; root mean square error of approximation = .06. Solid paths are significant, $p < .01$; dashed paths are nonsignificant, $p > .05$.

Couples had been married an average of 10.37 (SD = 8.61) years and reported an annual family income of $56,317 ($SD$ = 36,088).

Measures.

Prayer for partner. The four item measure described in Study 1 was again used. In the present sample, coefficient alpha was .94 for husbands and .92 for wives.

Forgiveness. The items used to measure partner forgiveness were similar to the items described in Study 2. However, the items were rephrased to pertain to partner forgiveness rather than own forgiveness. Thus, the item "I think about how to even the score when my partner wrongs me" was changed to read "My partner thinks about how to even the score when I wrong him/her." In the present sample, coefficient alpha was .75 for husbands and .84 for wives.

Religiosity. Two items were used to assess religiosity. The first item asked, "How often do you attend religious services?" Responses were given on a 4-point scale ranging from *never, or almost never* to *one or more times per week.* The second asked "How important is religion in your life?" with response options ranging from *not important* to *very important* on a 4-point scale. Scores on the two questions were highly correlated for both husbands (r = .68) and wives (r = .65) and thus the two items were summed with higher scores indicating greater religiosity.

Results

The initial I-SAT test yielded a significant $\chi^2(12)$ = 36.69, $p <$ .01, suggesting the dyads were distinguishable. However, the constraint on mean scores is particularly stringent, especially in view of the fact that the APIM is primarily concerned with associations among variables. This is clearly acknowledged by Kenny et al. (2006, p. 130) when they note that "We could also treat dyad members as indistinguishable if the only difference between them is the means." We therefore released constraints on the means. After doing so, the dyads were empirically indistinguishable

$\chi^2(9)$ = 9.86, $p >$ .10. An APIM for indistinguishable dyads was therefore conducted. All corresponding paths were constrained to be equal, namely, actor effects, partner effects and control paths. This model showed a good fit to the data; adjusted $\chi^2(3)$ = 4.76, $p >$ .10, comparative fit index = 1.00, normed fit index = .97, root mean square error of approximation = .00. As anticipated, the path between own PFPP and the partner's perceived forgiveness of the prayer (partner effect) was significant, β = .22, $p <$ .01 (see Figure 2). In addition, own religiosity was related to partner's report of one's forgiveness, β = .29, $p <$ .05.

Discussion

Support was obtained for our hypothesis that prayer for the partner would be related to greater forgiveness as reported by the partner. But does this relationship simply reflect the religiosity of the spouses? Our data suggest that it does not in a community sample. With self-reported religiosity in the model a strong association emerged between it and the partner's report of one's forgiveness but this did not account for the prayer–partner perceived forgiveness association.

General Discussion

The present studies addressed several gaps in the literature on prayer in close relationships and in doing so yielded data consistent with previous findings showing that prayer for a romantic partner is related to important outcomes. The first issue addressed concerned the real possibility that partner focused prayer merely functioned as a proxy variable for subjective evaluation of the partner/relationship that underlie measures of relationship quality such as relationship satisfaction and relationship closeness. The initial two studies ruled out this possibility as the association between prayer for the partner and forgiveness remained when closeness (Study 1) and relationship satisfaction (Study 2) were
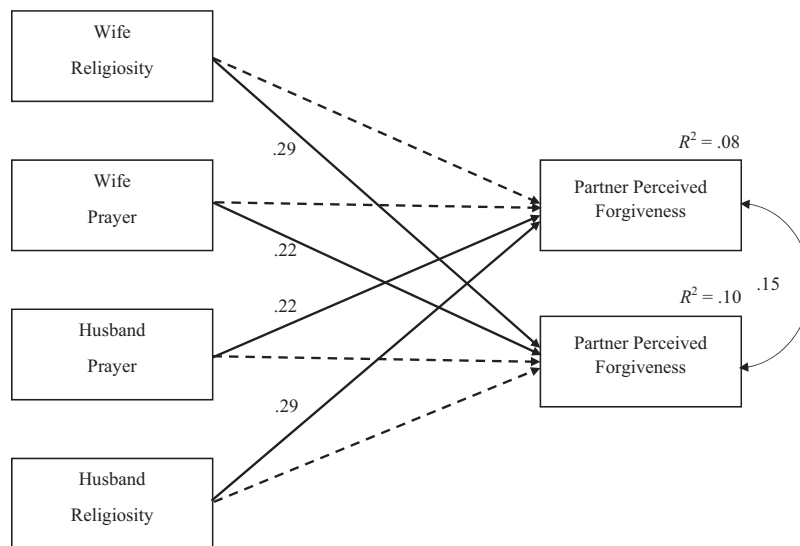

Figure 2. Actor–partner interdependence model for prayer and partner perceived forgiveness controlling for religiosity. Adjusted χ^2 = 4.76, *ns*; comparative fit index = 1.00; normed fit index = .97; root mean square error of approximation = .00. Solid paths are significant, $p <$ .05; dashed paths are nonsignificant, $p >$ .05.

taken in to account. Fincham et al. (2004) proposed such analyses be viewed as tests of "surplus conceptual value" (p. 74) to indicate that the construct investigated does more than simply capture variance in widely used indices of relationship quality. This criterion was met across different measures of relationship quality and types of relationships in the present research.

A second issue addressed concerned the replicability of findings concerning prayer for the partner across different life stages and types of relationships. This concern arose because all but two previous studies (Beach et al., 2011; Fincham & Beach, 2014) have been conducted using college students. Having replicated the prayer–forgiveness association independently of relationship closeness among college students in Study 1, the second and third studies went on to show that this association can also be found in married couples whose average age was considerably greater than that of the college student sample.

Because research on prayer for the partner has focused almost exclusively on data obtained from individuals, a third issue addressed concerned the possibility that partner focused prayer might function differently in a dyadic context. The last two studies therefore used a dyadic data analytic technique that takes into account the nonindependence in couple data to show that prayer for the partner was indeed related to self-reported forgiveness of the partner (Study 2) as well as partner reports of the prayer's forgiveness (Study 3). These findings also demonstrated that the prayer–forgiveness association was not confined to both constructs being measured by self-report as it was also found with partner reports of forgiveness.

Given the fact that prayer and forgiveness tend to be associated with religion, a fourth issue arises as it is quite possible that their association might simply reflect levels of religiosity. Study 3 therefore included an index of religiosity that is commonly used in the literature. With the level of religiosity of both husband and wife controlled, prayer for the partner was still related to partner reports of the prayer's forgiveness. This demonstrates that religiosity does not account for the prayer–forgiveness association. However, it should be noted that religiosity likely comprises many components including attitudes, beliefs and behaviors that should be examined to rule it out unequivocally as a third variable explanation for the prayer–forgiveness association.

Finally, the present studies investigated a variable conceptually relevant to forgiveness but one that has not received attention previously, namely, aggressive inclinations toward the partner. Study 1 supported our hypothesis that prayer for the partner would be negatively related to an index of aggressive tendencies. This finding is consistent with the positive relation between prayer for the partner and forgiveness that was found in all three studies.

Notwithstanding the contributions outlined, the findings of the present studies need to be interpreted with caution in light of the following limitations. First, and most importantly, the studies provide correlational data only and therefore preclude inferences regarding direction of effects. Although prior research shows that prayer for the partner does have prospective effects (e.g., Fincham et al., 2008, 2010), such effects cannot be presumed in the contexts represented by the current research. Specifically, there is a need for longitudinal data obtained from both partners in the dyad to examine direction of effects in the dyadic context. Second, the issue of mechanism is not addressed in the current studies. Hence it will be important in future longitudinal research with couples to examine variables that might account for any temporal relationship found between prayer for the partner and later forgiveness. Potential candidate variables include the previously identified variable of selfless concern, but other potential candidates include the possibility that prayer induces a longer time perspective, induces greater relationship commitment and primes cooperative goals all of which might facilitate forgiveness. Third, and most importantly, our samples, like those used in prior research on prayer, comprised partners who are relatively satisfied with their relationships. Hence, the present results should not be extrapolated to clinical contexts in the absence of research showing similar findings with clinically distressed couples.

Notwithstanding their limitations, the present studies address important gaps in the literature on prayer for the partner in close relationships. They show that findings in this literature do not emerge because prayer serves as a proxy index for relationship quality. Moreover, they demonstrate that prayer for the partner is related to forgiveness when examined in a dyadic context and in well-established marital relationships. These findings provide a reasonable foundation to justify further research on the role of partner focused intercessory prayer in marital and family relationships.

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