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# HUMILITY, FORGIVENESS, AND EMERGING ADULT FEMALE ROMANTIC RELATIONSHIPS

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*Among a sample of emerging adult females (*N = 152*) we empirically examined the role of humility and forgiveness in romantic relationships. We specifically tested a model linking perceived humility to relationship satisfaction with self-forgiveness and partner-forgiveness. Participants in a romantic relationship completed measures of self-reported humility, self-forgiveness, partner-forgiveness, and relationship satisfaction. Serial mediation analyses were conducted using path analysis to test the following sequence, humility → self-forgiveness → partner-forgiveness → relationship satisfaction. Findings indicate that humility was related to relationship satisfaction via a serially mediated path of self-forgiveness and partner-forgiveness, which was not reducible to impression management. We consider implications for research and clinical practice.*

Researchers have long focused on the antecedents, correlates and consequences of relationship distress (e.g., partner violence, mental health; for reviews see Devries et al., 2014; Fincham & Beach, 2010a; Gottman & Notarius, 2000). This invaluable research has furthered our understanding of relationship distress and led to the development of educational programs (e.g., PREP; Markman, Stanley, & Blumberg, 2010; RELATE; Busby, Ivey, Harris, & Ates, 2007) and therapies (e.g., EFT; Johnson, 2004; IBCT; Jacobson & Christensen, 1996) to prevent and remediate relational discord. Yet, flourishing promoting processes remain under developed.

Fincham and Beach (2010b) called for a positive relationship science emphasizing the need to examine how positive processes (e.g., forgiveness, commitment) promote relational flourishing. Farrell et al. (2015) found humility was positively related to relational outcomes (i.e., forgiveness, satisfaction) and that commitment mediated these associations indicating that individuals were more forgiving and experienced greater relationship satisfaction if they viewed their partners as humble. Also, Fife, Weeks, and Stellberg-Filbert (2013), building on the work of Worthington (Worthington, 1998; Worthington & Sandage, 2016), proposed a couple therapy forgiveness model with humility as an essential component. We built on and expanded their work by testing whether forgiveness is a mechanism responsible for the humility and relationship satisfaction link, and provide implications for clinical work with emerging adult women in romantic relationships.

Arnett (2000) proposed emerging adulthood as a time of identity exploration with regard to romance, employment, and other areas of life; and stated that "accepting responsibility for one's self" (p. 473) was one of the top two character traits that matter most to emerging adults. Fincham and Cui (2011) assert that it is a critical time for romantic relationship development due to their formation and maintenance, their development impacts health and wellbeing, and patterns established at this time may predict later romantic relationship behavior. Therefore, we sought to examine our hypothesized forgiveness model with a sample of emerging adult women.

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## REVIEW OF LITERATURE

*How Does Humility Lead to Greater Relationship Satisfaction?*

Scholars have found positive processes such as partner-forgiveness (Braithwaite, Selby, & Fincham, 2011), self-forgiveness (Thompson et al., 2005), sacrifice (Corkery, Curran, & Parkman, 2011), gratitude (Algoe, Gable, & Maisel, 2010), and commitment (Givertz & Segrin, 2005) positively influence romantic relationships, and are foundational to relationship flourishing. These processes can buffer couple conflict and promote relationship repair. Humility is linked to self-forgiveness (Krause, 2015), partner-forgiveness (Van Tongeren, Davis, & Hook, 2014), and relationship functioning (Farrell et al., 2015; Goddard, Olson, Galovan, Schramm, & Marshall, 2016). How might humility promote self-forgiveness that leads to partner-forgiveness and greater relationship satisfaction?

We theorized that humility leads to greater relationship satisfaction by providing conditions for self-forgiveness to occur, thus leading to increased partner-forgiveness, which in turn promotes greater relationship satisfaction. But how does this occur for an emerging adult woman? Viewing herself accurately allows her to see her actions more clearly. Her willingness to admit mistakes demonstrates she is not shamed by her actions and therefore she does not avoid stimuli (e.g., her partner, thoughts) related to the transgression. An other-orientation promotes turning toward her partner for support and apologize as needed. Then, as she accepts her own fallibility and humanness (Exline, Baumeister, Zell, Kraft, & Witvliet, 2008; Neff, 2003) she can consider the fallibility and humanness of her partner, leading her to be more empathic and willing to forgive her partner (Pelucchi, Paleari, Regalia, & Fincham, 2015). Thus, by forgiving her partner she works to repair the relationship and rebuild intimacy (Worthington, 1998).

*Defining the Variables*

Prior to reviewing the literature further we clarify our conceptualizations of humility and self-forgiveness. Tangney (2000) viewed humility as multidimensional and including: (a) accurate assessment of abilities and achievements, (b) openness to new or contradictory ideas and information, (c) capacity to maintain abilities and accomplishments in perspective, (d) low self-focus, (e) ability to admit limitations and mistakes, and (f) appreciation and value of all things. Davis et al. (2013) conceptualized humility as a personality judgment characterized by (a) other-orientation, (b) regulation of self-focused emotions, and (c) accurate self-view. Humility definitions continue to be refined and a recent Delphi study noted intrapersonal and interpersonal emphases to humility (Rowden, Harris, & Wickel, 2014). Panelist's views of humility were, overall, consistent with those of Tangney and Davis et al. Our views were informed by theirs in as much as we define humility as a personality judgment comprised of intrapersonal and interpersonal processes including: (a) accurate self-view (intrapersonal); (b) willingness to admit limitations and mistakes (interpersonal); and (c) other-focused orientation (interpersonal). Self-reports are less than optimal in personality judgment in that the individual is both target and judge; however, social acceptance and interpersonal effectiveness are aided by an accurate perception of how one is viewed (Davis et al., 2017). Because self-report can lead to reporter bias we controlled for socially desirable responding.

Self-forgiveness has been defined as a transformation in motivation that results in less avoidance of stimuli (i.e., thoughts, feelings, situations) related to an offense, decreased desire to retaliate against oneself (e.g., engage in self-punishment) and an increased motivation to act benevolently toward oneself (Hall & Fincham, 2005). Additionally, responsibility for a wrong must be accepted by the individual for genuine, rather than pseudo (i.e., minimization, rationalization, avoidant coping) self-forgiveness to occur (Hall & Fincham, 2005; Holmgren, 1998).

Partner-forgiveness is a transformation in motivations in which the injured individual has decreased avoidance and revenge motivations toward the transgressor, and increased benevolent motivations (e.g., compassion, approach behavior). Forgiveness is not to be confused with reconciliation, which can occur without forgiveness (Freedman, 1998), neither is forgiveness condoning nor forgetting an offense (Enright & Coyle, 1998; Kolnai, 1973–74).

Relationship satisfaction is the most frequently studied topic in marital literature yet clear definitions of the construct are rare. As a result, it has been argued that conventional measures used

to assess the construct (e.g., Marital Adjustment Test, Dyadic Adjustment Scale) contain items that are too heterogeneous, lack conceptual clarity and often yield tautological findings (Fincham & Bradbury, 1987; Fincham & Rogge, 2010). As a result, we restrict our conceptualization of relationship satisfaction to subjective evaluations of the relationship.

### The Need to Examine Humility and Self-Forgiveness

A particular need to study positive relationship processes in marital and family therapy exists. Humility and self-forgiveness research in the context of romantic relationships is sparse. Psychologists have investigated humility over the last decade and found it is related to prosocial behaviors including generosity and kindness (Exline & Hill, 2012), helpfulness (LaBouff, Rowatt, Johnson, Tsang, & Willerton, 2012), forgiveness (Van Tongeren et al., 2014) social relationship quality (Peters, Rowatt, & Johnson, 2011), relationship satisfaction (Farrell et al., 2015), and relational maturity (Sandage, Jankowski, Bissonette, & Paine, 2016). Yet, few within marital and family therapy have considered or examined the impact of humility and self-forgiveness in romantic and familial relationships (see Ruffing et al., 2017). A search of 10 marital and family therapy/studies journals over the past 20 years revealed one study of humility (see Goddard et al., 2016) and none of self-forgiveness, although some advocate the importance of humility in marital and family therapy (see Fife et al., 2013; Worthington, 1998).

Why are humility and self-forgiveness important to marital and family therapy? A few have attempted to answer this question. Worthington (1998), and Fife et al. (2013) explained the necessity of helping family members develop humility in marital and family therapy. Fife et al. proposed that the offender and offended develop humility prior to promoting forgiveness to "grow together" and respond less defensively (p. 356). Worthington, along with Fife et al., posited that accepting responsibility for offenses is requisite for offending partner's humility to develop and that this occurs as they accept their own fallibility and recognize their desires for forgiveness. This allows forgiveness to be extended and received; thus, promoting repair and healing. Therefore, along with Worthington, and Fife and colleagues, we argue that humility, and also self-forgiveness, are important and may be preemptive to forgiveness.

### Humility, Forgiveness, and Relationship Satisfaction

Empirical research supports associations between humility and each of the following: self-forgiveness, partner-forgiveness, and romantic relationships. Humility and self-forgiveness are positively related over time (Krause, 2015). Those that viewed their partners as more humble, were more likely to forgive them (Farrell et al., 2015; Goddard et al., 2016), humility buffered against avoidance and retaliation in long-distance relationships (Van Tongeren et al., 2014), and was positively related to relational outcomes (Davis et al., 2013; Farrell et al., 2015). To our knowledge these factors have not been examined concurrently, neither has the offended partner's self-perception of humility and willingness to forgive; this led to the current investigation.

Self-forgiveness and relationship outcomes research is limited. Pelucchi, Regalia, Paleari, and Fincham (2013), Pelucchi et al. (2015) found self-forgiveness to be positively related to relationship satisfaction, and subsequently that heightened revenge and avoidance was negatively related to partner and personal relationship satisfaction. Contrary to their hypothesis, the benevolence component of self-forgiveness was not related to relationship satisfaction. Due to this discrepancy, we examined the self-forgiveness–relationship satisfaction association.

Numerous studies document a positive forgiveness–relationship satisfaction association (e.g., Braithwaite et al., 2011; McCullough et al., 1998; Paleari, Regalia, & Fincham, 2005). Fehr, Gelfand, and Nag (2010) found in a meta-analysis of 21 studies and 3,678 participants that a satisfactory relationship with the transgressor predicted partner-forgiveness. Longitudinal data support a positive forgiveness and relationship satisfaction link (Braithwaite et al., 2011) and suggests a bi-directional relationship, although this did not hold for men in one study (Fincham & Beach, 2007). We expected partner-forgiveness to mediate a humility-relationship satisfaction link in on the basis of prior research indicating that humility directly affects forgiveness and forgiveness directly affects relationship satisfaction.

*Current Study*

This study had four aims. First, determine whether humility is related to self-forgiveness, partner-forgiveness, and relationship satisfaction. We expected positive associations between humility and self-forgiveness (Krause, 2015), partner-forgiveness (Van Tongeren et al., 2014), and relationship satisfaction (Hypothesis 1; Farrell et al., 2015). Second, test whether self- and partner-forgiveness are linked. We predicted a positive self-forgiveness and partner-forgiveness association (Hypothesis 2). Third, replicate and expand previous research that self- and partner-forgiveness are related to relationship satisfaction. We expected self- and partner-forgiveness to be positively related to each other and relationship satisfaction (Hypothesis 3a; Braithwaite et al., 2011; Pelucchi et al., 2015). We also predicted partner-forgiveness to mediate the association between self-forgiveness and relationship satisfaction (Hypothesis 3b; Pelucchi et al., 2015). Fourth, determine whether self- and partner-forgiveness mediate a humility–relationship satisfaction link. We expected humility to be positively related to relationship satisfaction via self- and partner-forgiveness separately (Hypothesis 4a). We also predicted sequential mediation of humility and relationship satisfaction via self- then partner-forgiveness (Hypothesis 4b). Serial mediation allowed us to test whether humility interacted with relationship satisfaction directly and indirectly via a process in which humility promoted self-forgiveness, self-forgiveness promoted partner-forgiveness, which in turn promoted relationship satisfaction. Examining this model would help clinicians determine which aspects of therapy call for attention prior to others.

*Alternative Model*

Kline (2011) suggests that alternative models may be plausible i.e., relationships may occur in differing directions (e.g., relationship satisfaction to partner-forgiveness). Given that previous research indicates a bidirectional association between partner-forgiveness and relationship satisfaction (Paleari et al., 2005), and that partner-forgiveness is positively related to humility (Farrell et al., 2015; Van Tongeren et al., 2014), we examined an alternative serial mediation model in which relationship satisfaction and self-forgiveness mediated a humility-partner-forgiveness link. This allowed us to determine the plausibility of our model.

## METHODS

*Procedure and Participants*

Participants were undergraduate students ($N = 248$) from a southeastern United States university, receiving course credit for participation. Participants completed an online survey after providing consent. To participate individuals needed to accept responsibility for their transgressions (i.e., score $\geq 4$ on the item "When I wrong or hurt another person, s/he is to blame for what I did"; 38 excluded), be dating exclusively in a romantic relationship for at least 3 months (42 excluded), be female (15 males excluded), and between the ages of 18 and 25 (one excluded). Our final sample consisted of 152 participants. The majority (61.2%) reported dating longer than 1 year; were on average 19.7 years old; and identified as 66% White, 19.5% Hispanic, 8.5% Black, 2% Asian or Pacific Islander, 0.5% Native American or Alaskan Native, and 3.5% Other. Sexual orientation of the sample was 91.5% exclusively heterosexual, 6.5% mostly heterosexual, 1% mostly homosexual, 0.5% bisexual, and 0.5% did not report.

*Measures*

*Humility.* Humility was assessed using a modified self-report (e.g., "He/she knows his/her weaknesses" modified to say "I know my weaknesses") version of the Relational Humility Scale (RHS; Davis et al., 2011). Confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) found all factor loadings were significant at the $p < 0.001$ level, and the biased-corrected confidence intervals based on 10,000 bootstrap samples did not contain zero for any factor indicators. CFA results indicated the same factor structure of the self-report version of the RHS as the original. Participants rated their agreement with 16 items (e.g., "Certain tasks are beneath me", "Even strangers would consider me humble", "Others feel inferior when they are with me") using a 5-point scale (1 = *strongly disagree* to 5 = *strongly agree*). The RHS has been used as a one-dimensional, bipolar measure of humility (Davis et al., 2011, 2013), with higher scores

indicating greater humility and has high internal consistency (α = .89). We obtained similar results (α = .82), with scores ranging from 36 to 60.

*Self-forgiveness.* The Heartland Self-Forgiveness Scale (HFSS; Thompson et al., 2005) measured self-forgiveness. The HFSS is an 18-item measure assessing tendencies to forgive in three domains: oneself, others, and situations beyond one's control. The six items assessing self-forgiveness were used (e.g., "I hold grudges against myself for negative things I've done"). Participants rated their agreement with items on a 5-point scale (1 = *completely disagree* to 5 = *completely agree*). Research indicates adequate internal consistency (α = .72–.76; Thompson et al., 2005) with similar results in this study (α = .75), and scores ranging from 6 to 30.

*Responsibility acceptance.* A single item i.e., "When I wrong or hurt another person, s/he is to blame for what I did", assessed responsibility acceptance for transgressions, and was rated on a 5-point scale (1 = *completely disagree,* 5 = *completely agree*).

*Partner-forgiveness.* A modified version of the Relationship Forgiveness Scale-Event (RFS; Fincham, Beach, & Davila, 2004) assessed partner-forgiveness tendencies. The scale has three subscales: benevolence (e.g., "I soon forgive him/her."), avoidance (e.g., "I tend to withdraw from him/her."), and retaliation (e.g., "I find a way to make him/her regret it.") that provide a full scale forgiveness score. Participants indicated agreement with nine items on a 9-point scale (1 = *strongly disagree* to 9 = *strongly agree*). Internal consistency from .72 to .86 has been found (Fincham et al., 2004) and in this study it was .80, with scores ranging from 27 to 81.

*Relationship satisfaction.* The four-item version of the Couple Satisfaction Index measures relationship satisfaction with varied response scales and formats (CSI; Funk & Rogge, 2007). Participants rated agreement with the first three questions (e.g., "How rewarding is your relationship with your partner?") on a 6-point scale (1 = *not at all* to 6 = *completely*). The last item was rated using a 7-point scale (1 = *extremely unhappy* to 7 = *perfect*). Funk and Rogge found good internal consistency. In this study it was .92, with scores ranging from 9 to 25.

*Social desirability.* The Marlowe-Crowne Social Desirability Scale-Form C (M-C Form C; Reynolds, 1982) assesses socially desirable responding on self-report measures. Participants rated agreement on 13 items (e.g., "I sometimes feel resentful when I don't get my way"). Higher scores indicate greater likelihood of responding to other measures in a socially desirable way. The measure has adequate reliability ($r_{KR-20}$ = .76) with scores ranging from 13 to 26.

### Outliers, Missing Data, and Normality

Data outliers were not found using Hoaglin and Iglewicz (1987) method. Missing values (less than 1.5%) were assessed prior to summing measure scores. Data were missing completely at random based on Little's (1988) test ($\chi^2$ = 113.602, $p$ = 2.66); thus, data imputation was advantageous. Missing values were handled in SPSS using the expectation-maximization algorithm (Dempster, Laird, & Rubin, 1977). Values of skewness (1.189–0.102) and kurtosis (−0.351–1.656) were not problematic based on univariate skew (|skewness index| < 3.0) and univariate kurtosis (|kurtosis index| < 10.0; Kline, 2011).

### Data Analytic Plan

Serial mediation was estimated in Mplus 7.4 (Muthén & Muthén, 2015) using Hayes' (2013) method. He asserts that the causal steps approach to mediation is inadequate because (a) indirect effects are not quantified nor are inferential tests required, (b) three null hypotheses must be rejected for $M$ to mediate $X$ and $Y$, (c) data is under analyzed when requiring a direct effect between $X$ and $Y$, and (d) it encourages qualitative thinking about mediation (i.e., partial, complete, not at all). He states that quantifying indirect effects is gaining consensus because it is more methodologically sound than the causal steps approach (see Cerin & MacKinnon, 2009; Shrout & Bolger, 2002). We examined both direct and quantified indirect effects, while controlling for socially desirable responding. Maximum likelihood estimation with 10,000 biased-corrected bootstrap samples based on 95% confidence intervals (CI) and significance tests (i.e., $p$-values; Du Prel, Hommel, Röhrig, & Blettner, 2009; Preacher & Hayes, 2008). A CI is considered significant if zero is not within the given range (e.g., 0.122–0.235). CI's provide a range of plausible "true" values. Relying solely on $p$-values to indicate significance runs the risk of overlooking clinically relevant

results, which CI's can identify (see Du Prel et al., 2009; for a discussion of confidence intervals and *p*-values).

## RESULTS

Hypotheses were not generated from the literature review regarding demographic and model variable interactions; however, age, year in school, and relationship length were examined in relation to each of the variables, while ethnicity was not due to small group sample sizes. One-way analysis of variance results indicated that participants did not differ on model variables based on demographic variables. We controlled for social desirability to ensure humility ratings were not influenced by impression management. Thus, this sample represented a fairly homogenous group of emerging adult women. Descriptive statistics and bivariate correlations for model variables can be seen in Table 1. Humility was significantly and positively correlated with self- and partner-forgiveness. Self-forgiveness was significantly and positively correlated with partner-forgiveness. Both self- and partner-forgiveness were significantly and positively correlated with relationship satisfaction suggesting that the results are statistically significant.

*Hypotheses 1 and 2*

Partial support was obtained for hypothesis 1. The direct effect of humility to self-forgiveness was positive and significant ($\beta = .174$, $p < 0.05$, 95% CI $= 0.010, 0.199$; see Table 2). However, the direct effects between humility and partner-forgiveness ($\beta = .123$, $p = 0.332$, 95% CI $= -0.075, 0.537$), and humility and relationship satisfaction ($\beta = -.002$, $p = 0.958$, 95% CI $= -0.096, 0.087$) were nonsignificant. Self-forgiveness was directly and positively linked to partner-forgiveness ($\beta = .268$, $p < 0.01$, 95% CI $= 0.283, 1.348$) as we expected in hypothesis 2.

*Hypothesis 3*

Partner-forgiveness was significantly and positively related to relationship satisfaction ($\beta = .400$, $p < 0.001$, 95% CI $= 0.064, 0.180$) providing partial support for hypothesis 3a. However, self-forgiveness was not directly related to relationship satisfaction ($\beta = .016$, $p = 0.888$, 95% CI $= -0.154, 0.199$). Partner-forgiveness mediated self-forgiveness and relationship satisfaction ($\beta = .107$, $p < 0.05$, 95% CI $= 0.034, 0.206$) providing support for hypothesis 3b as anticipated.

*Hypothesis 4*

Self-forgiveness ($\beta = .003$, $p = 0.901$, 95% CI $= -0.017, 0.030$) and partner-forgiveness ($\beta = .049$, $p = 0.346$, 95% CI $= -0.007, 0.074$) did not individually mediate humility and relationship satisfaction (hypothesis 4a). However, self- and partner-forgiveness serially mediated humility

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Table 1
*Correlations, means, and standard deviations for study variables (N = 152)*

| Study Variables | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| 1. Humility | – | | | | |
| 2. Self-Forgiveness | .15 | – | | | |
| 3. Partner-forgiveness | .17* | .28** | – | | |
| 4. Relationship Satisfaction | .07 | .13 | .41** | – | |
| 5. Social Desirability | −.14 | −.25** | −.31** | −.06 | – |
| *M* | 64.49 | 20.63 | 60.32 | 20.95 | 18.99 |
| *SD* | 6.35 | 3.82 | 11.93 | 3.69 | 2.69 |

*Note.* Two-tailed test.
*$p < 0.05$, **$p < 0.01$.

and relationship satisfaction ($\beta$ = .019, $p$ = 0.10, 95% CI = 0.002, 0.033) as we predicted (hypothesis 4b). Although the $p$-value was not significant, zero did not fall within the 95% confidence interval. Figure 1 depicts the hypothesized serial mediation model and associations among study variables. Preacher and Kelley (2011) and Hayes (2013) advocate reporting multiple effect sizes for mediation analysis. We report partially ($ab_{ps}$) and completely standardized ($ab_{cs}$) effect sizes. Relationship satisfaction is expected to increase by 0.003 standard deviations ($SD$) for every one-unit increase in humility via self- and partner-forgiveness based on $ab_{ps}$, and relationship satisfaction is expected to increase by 0.0189 $SD$'s for every 1 $SD$ increase in humility indirectly via self-and partner-forgiveness based on $ab_{cs}$, suggesting a small to medium effect.

Table 2
*Standardized coefficients, and 95% confidence intervals for pathways in serial mediation model ($N$ = 152)*

| Parameter | $B$ | $\beta$ | $SE$ | 95% CI | $ab_{ps}$ | $ab_{cs}$ |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Direct Effects | | | | | | |
| Humility → SF | 0.106 | .174* | 0.048 | 0.010, 0.199 | | |
| Humility → PF | 0.231 | .123 | 0.156 | −0.075, 0.537 | | |
| Humility → RS | −0.001 | −.002 | 0.046 | −0.096, 0.087 | | |
| SF → PF | 0.822 | .268** | 0.282 | 0.283, 1.384 | | |
| SF → RS | 0.016 | .016 | 0.091 | −0.154, 0.199 | | |
| PF → RS | 0.124 | .400*** | 0.030 | 0.064, 0.180 | | |
| Indirect Effects | | | | | | |
| Humility → SF → RS | 0.002 | .003 | 0.011 | −0.014, 0.027 | 0.001 | 0.003 |
| Humility → PF → RS | 0.029 | .049 | 0.020 | −0.004, 0.079 | 0.008 | 0.050 |
| SF → PF → RS | 0.102 | .107* | 0.043 | 0.033, 0.209 | 0.028 | 0.176 |
| Humility SF → PF → RS | 0.011 | .019 | 0.007 | 0.001, 0.028 | 0.003 | 0.019 |

*Note*. $B$, unstandardized coefficient; $\beta$, standardized coefficient; $SE$, unstandardized standard error; CI, confidence interval; $ab_{ps}$, partially standardized effect size; $ab_{cs}$, completely standardized effect size; SF, Self-forgiveness; PF, Partner-forgiveness; RS, Relationship satisfaction. Two-tailed test.
*$p$ < 0.05; **$p$ < 0.01; ***$p$ < 0.001.
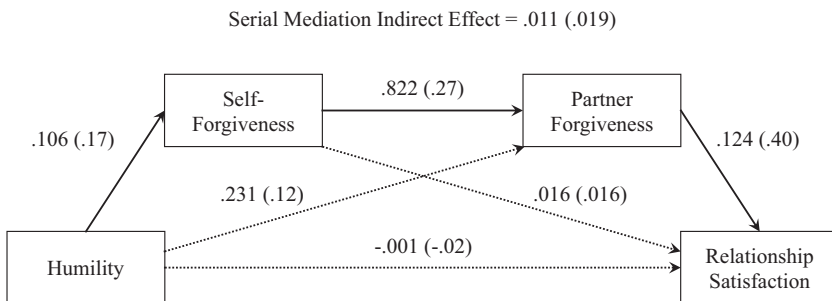
Serial Mediation Indirect Effect = .011 (.019)



*Figure 1.* Serial multiple mediator model of hypothesized associations among humility, self-forgiveness, partner forgiveness, and relationships satisfaction. Solid line indicates significant effect. Standardization scores in parentheses.

*Alternative Model*

Following identical analytic procedures as the hypothesized model, an alternative serial mediation model examined whether partner-forgiveness and relationship satisfaction bidirectionally influenced each other. This model posited a humility independent variable, partner-forgiveness dependent variable, and relationship satisfaction and self-forgiveness mediators. Humility and self-forgiveness ($\beta$ = .243, $p < 0.05$ 95% CI = 0.001, 0.303) and self-forgiveness and partner-forgiveness ($\beta$ = .254, $p < 0.05$, 95% CI = 0.040, 1.715) were significantly related. No indirect effects emerged. An alternate serial mediation model was not supported and relationship satisfaction neither directly nor indirectly related to other variables, indicating our hypothesized model more accurately fit the data, and adding support to previous findings that the partner-forgiveness–relationship satisfaction link is stronger than vice versa (Paleari et al., 2005).

## DISCUSSION

Self- and partner-forgiveness serially mediated the relationship between humility and relationship satisfaction, which was not reducible to impression management. These findings build upon Worthington (1998) and Fife et al.'s (2013) framework for facilitating couple forgiveness and add to the extant literature on humility, forgiveness, and romantic relationships (Farrell et al., 2015; Goddard et al., 2016; Van Tongeren et al., 2014). Consistent with prior correlational research, significant positive correlations emerged among study variables. Prior to discussion of the results, limitations to the methodological design are worth noting.

*Limitations and Future Research*

While we believe this study contributes to marital and family therapy research and practice, it is important to note its limitations. First, male participants were not included in the study, a limitation because humility research has relied heavily on female report (e.g., Exline & Hill, 2012; LaBouff et al., 2012). Second, self-report measures of humility provide limited views of humility in romantic relationships. Dyadic data that collects self- and partner-reported humility are need to can increase understanding of the humility in relationships. Third, humility may function differently in married relationships like forgiveness (see Fincham, Hall, & Beach, 2005), particularly for those with children and who have been together for many years. Fourth, this study was cross-sectional and was unable to determine causal associations.

*Direct Effects Among Humility, Self- and Partner-Forgiveness and Relationship Satisfaction*

On the basis of the empirical operationalization of constructs (e.g., Davis, Worthington, & Hook, 2010; Hall & Fincham, 2005; McCullough et al., 1998; Tangney, 2000), self-reported humility was linked to self-forgiveness directly and positively as expected and extended Krause's (2015) findings by using a more robust self-forgiveness measure, and assessing transgression responsibility acceptance. Having an accurate self-view, a willingness to express faults, and an other-orientation may help an emerging adult female take responsibility for her actions, which is a characteristic desired by emerging adults (Arnett, 2000). Thus, it may help her evade self-condemnation for her fallibility and humaneness (Exline et al., 2008), not avoid offense related stimuli or retaliate against herself, and increase motivation to act benevolently toward herself leading to self-forgiveness. These findings extend Worthington (1998) and Fife et al.'s (2013) work and suggests self-forgiveness may be important to facilitating couple forgiveness.

Humility did not have a significant direct effect on partner-forgiveness or relationship satisfaction as predicted and indicated (Farrell et al., 2015; Van Tongeren et al., 2014). Worthington (1998) and Fife et al. (2013) posit that humility precedes forgiveness. It may be that observed humility (i.e., by the partner and therapist) is more important to partner-forgiveness than self-perceived humility. Partner-rated humility (i.e., humility rated by one's partner) has been found to be positively related to the rater's relationship satisfaction (Farrell et al., 2015); however, we examined both self-reported humility and relationship satisfaction. The results suggest that self-reported humility may exert a less direct influence on partner-forgiveness and relationship satisfaction than partner-rated humility. However, as will be discussed later, humility indirectly influences both via

self-forgiveness. Thus, an emerging adult female's self-forgiveness may play a role in forgiving her partner and her own relationship satisfaction.

This study provided additional evidence for a self-forgiveness–partner-forgiveness link. Consistent with prior research (Pelucchi et al., 2015), the more forgiving individuals were of themselves, the more forgiving they were of romantic partners. Exline and Hill (2012) found that individuals were more willing to forgive if they perceived themselves to be capable of committing a similar act, which may help explain this finding. Thus, an emerging adult woman that views herself as capable of transgressing similarly to her partner, may be more likely to forgive. This extends Worthington (1998) and Fife et al.'s (2013) conceptual model that accepting responsibility, a self-forgiveness component, is essential to partner-forgiveness, and extends it by indicating that other aspects of self-forgiveness are related to partner-forgiveness (i.e., decreased revenge and increased benevolence toward self).

Consistent with previous research, partner-forgiveness was directly related to relationship satisfaction (e.g., Braithwaite et al., 2011; Fincham & Beach, 2007; Paleari et al., 2005). This study adds to the literature linking partner-forgiveness and relationship satisfaction, and highlights the need for forgiveness in romantic relationships (Worthington, 1994). As demonstrated by our alternative model, partner-forgiveness has a stronger effect on relationship satisfaction than vice versa. Contrary with hypothesis, a self-forgiveness–relationship link was nonsignificant. Subtle nuances of self-forgiveness (i.e., benevolence vs. revenge) may have been undetected by combining self-forgiveness subscales, and separate examination may be fruitful.

### Self-Forgiveness and Forgiveness as Individual Mediators

Self-forgiveness and relationship satisfaction were not directly related, but an indirect association emerged via partner-forgiveness. Women who were more willing to forgive themselves of an offense were more likely to forgive their partners, and willingness to forgive a partner was associated with greater relationship satisfaction. This is contrary with Pelucchi et al. (2015) findings that self-forgiveness was not related to relationship satisfaction directly, or indirectly via partner-forgiveness, suggesting further examination is needed. It is possible that because she sees herself as capable of committing a similar act as her partner, avoidance of and retaliation against her partner decreases and benevolence toward her partner increases, and because of these decreases in avoidance and retaliation, and increases in benevolence greater relationship satisfaction emerges.

Humility was not related to relationship satisfaction via self- or partner-forgiveness separately as predicted. The reasons for the lack of connection between self-forgiveness and relationship satisfaction addressed previously may account for the lack of an indirect effect. Similarly, the nonsignificant humility–partner-forgiveness link may account for the nonsignificant connection between humility and relationship satisfaction via partner-forgiveness.

### Serial Mediation of Humility and Relationship Satisfaction

Humility was significantly related to relationship satisfaction via self- and partner-forgiveness sequentially as hypothesized. This builds upon the findings from the previous hypotheses, and expands the model proposed by Worthington (1998) and Fife et al. (2013) by incorporating a self-forgiveness component. Viewing herself accurately, her willingness to express her limitations, and an other-orientation, an emerging adult female, may decrease avoidance of stimuli related to an offense she commits and retaliation against herself, and increase benevolence toward herself. Forgiving herself fosters a view of her own fallibility and humanness (Exline et al., 2008; Neff, 2003), and herself as capable of committing transgressions similar to her partner (Exline et al., 2008); thus, leading to less avoidance and retaliation, and greater benevolence toward her partner (i.e., partner-forgiveness). Forgiving her partner then leads her to repair and restore intimacy, resulting in positive perceptions of her relationship.

### Clinical Implications

On the basis that we examined emerging adult females in our sample, we apply the findings to how they may impact these women if they were seeking couple therapy, with the caveat that this study was neither longitudinal nor clinical.

Assessment is fundamental to the helping professions and couple therapy methods may be enhanced by assessing humility prior to treatment (Drummond & Jones, 2010). Therapists may gain a sense of each partner's self-awareness, willingness to admit limitations, and other-orientedness. Pace and intervention focus may be aided by performing such an assessment.

Couple therapists can help emerging adult females develop humility to forgive herself of her transgressions, forgive her partner, and increase relational satisfaction. We propose the process would unfold as follows. First, the therapist helps her gain a more accurate self-view of her strengths and weaknesses, and how they influence the relationship. Second, with this understanding the therapist can help her acknowledge how her shortcomings and limitations can negatively impact the relationship. As she becomes more humble in this manner she is more ready to forgive herself of relational transgressions. Third, the therapist can help her take responsibility for her actions (Holmgren, 1998). Taking responsibility for small parts of a transgression may be requisite prior to taking responsibility for a full transgression. In the case of infidelity, she may need to accept responsibility for flirting, and initiating or responding to text messages prior to taking responsibility for the full transgression (Fife et al., 2013). Fourth, after she forgives herself, the therapist can help her move toward partner-forgiveness by helping her see "humans as fallible, the offender as human, and...[her]self as one of those fallible human beings" (Worthington, 1998; p. 64). Fifth, the therapist can help replace her revenge and avoidance desires, with more benevolent ones (Worthington & Sandage, 2016). As forgiveness ensues relational healing can occur, decreasing distress and increasing satisfaction.

*Conclusion*

Processes considered important to flourishing relationships were assessed in this study. Path analysis revealed that self-forgiveness and partner-forgiveness acted as mechanisms through which humility influences relationship satisfaction. Two forms of forgiveness in the association of self-reported humility and relationship satisfaction were highlighted. Greater satisfaction in romantic relationships may be obtained by emerging adult women that are humble, and are willing to forgive themselves and their partners of transgressions. Couples therapists can help couples repair and restore their relationships by promoting humility development, self-forgiveness, and forgiveness of one another other.

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