THE ROLE OF TRAIT FORGIVENESS AND RELATIONSHIP SATISFACTION IN EPISODIC FORGIVENESS

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Given the positive individual and relationship benefits associated with interpersonal forgiveness, the present study examines the association of trait forgiveness and relationship satisfaction with episodic forgiveness. One hundred and eighty participants in romantic relationships answered questions about forgiving the most serious transgression in their relationship. Both trait forgiveness and relationship satisfaction were related to forgiveness of the transgression. For participants in the process of forgiving, relationship satisfaction moderated the link between trait forgiveness and episodic forgiveness. At relatively higher levels of relationship satisfaction, trait forgiveness and episodic forgiveness were positively related whereas they were negatively related at lower levels of relationship satisfaction. Results are discussed in terms of the roles that trait forgiveness and relationship satisfaction play in regard to episodic forgiveness in romantic relationships.

Those we love are often the ones most likely to hurt us. When interpersonal transgressions occur in close relationships they can elicit strong negative feelings and have the potential to disrupt the relationship. Forgiveness provides one way of coping with such interpersonal hurts and is associated with positive short–term and long–term consequences. For example, in long–term successful marriages, spouses reported that the willingness to seek and grant forgiveness is one of the most important factors contributing to relationship satisfaction and marital longevity (Fenell, 1993). Further, in a study where participants rated 64 dimensions in terms of their centrality regarding relationship quality, forgive-

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ness obtained an average centrality score of 2.40 on a scale ranging from 1 (*very good indicator of the relationship quality*) to 7 (*not a good indicator of the relationship quality*; Hassebrauck & Fehr, 2002). Notwithstanding its significance for romantic relationships, a consensual definition of forgiveness is lacking in the scholarly literature.

CONCEPTUALIZING FORGIVENESS

To forgive a romantic partner logically requires the forgiver to be conscious of being hurt by the partner. Without a transgression or hurt there is nothing to forgive (cf. Enright & Coyle, 1998; for a more complete analysis, see Fincham, 2000). In analyzing forgiveness, McCullough and Witvliet (2002) noted three senses in which the term can be used: as a personality trait, as a response to a specific transgression, and as a characteristic of social units. In this study we investigated forgiveness both as a personality trait and as a response to a specific interpersonal transgression.

TRAIT FORGIVENESS

Because researchers have mainly focused on forgiveness as a response to interpersonal transgressions, differences in people's disposition to forgive have gone largely unstudied (e.g., Emmons, 2000; McCullough, 2000). At the dispositional level, forgiveness is conceptualized as a tendency to forgive transgressions over time and across a wide variety of interpersonal circumstances (Berry, Worthington, Parrott, O'Connor, & Wade, 2001; Brown, 2003; Emmons, 2000; Mullet, Houdbine, Laumonier, & Girard, 1998). Trait forgiveness has been emphasized as a basis for responses of forgiveness to specific transgressions (cf. Roberts, 1995).

An important initial question in studying trait forgiveness is whether it simply reflects the Big Five personality taxonomy (John & Srivastava, 1999). Some research has begun to shed light on personality correlates of trait forgiveness, particularly the Big Five personality factors (for reviews see McCullough & Witvliet, 2002; Mullet, Neto, & Rivière, 2005). For example, Berry et al. (2001) reported that trait forgiveness is positively related to agreeableness ($r = .33$) and conscientiousness ($r = .24$). Individuals high in agreeableness tend to thrive in the interpersonal realm and experience less interpersonal conflicts. Several studies have demonstrated that highly agreeable people tend to score higher on trait forgiveness than their less agreeable counterparts (e.g., Ashton, Paunonen, Helmes, & Jackson, 1998; Brown, 2003).

By contrast, trait forgiveness is negatively related to extraversion and neuroticism. For example, Walker and Gorsuch (2002) showed that trait

forgiveness is negatively related to three facets of neuroticism, namely anxiety, emotionality, and distrust, and positively to emotional stability as the converse of neuroticism. Several studies show that emotionally stable individuals score higher on trait forgiveness (e.g., Berry et al., 2001; McCullough & Hoyt, 2002). Although related to the Big Five, forgiveness appears to be more than the mere expression of these personality traits.

Research on trait forgiveness has not focused exclusively on associations with the Big Five personality factors. For instance, Ashton et al. (1998) reported that altruistic individuals show more trait forgiveness than less altruistic individuals. There is also an association between trait gratitude and trait forgiveness (McCullough, Emmons, & Tsang, 2002). People who indicated that they tended to experience gratitude reported higher trait forgiveness. Further, people high in trait forgiveness are less ruminative than people low in trait forgiveness (McCullough, Bellah, Kilpatrick, & Johnson, 2001). It appears that ruminative tendencies interfere with people's tendency to forgive interpersonal transgressions. In addition, people high in trait forgiveness tended to report less vengeful attitudes and behaviors (Brown, 2003). Finally, people who consider themselves to be highly religious tend to value forgiveness more highly and report higher trait forgiveness than those who consider themselves less religious (McCullough & Worthington, 1999).

EPISODIC FORGIVENESS

Forgiveness can also be conceptualized as a prosocial change in a victim's thoughts, emotions, motivations and/or behaviors toward a transgressor for a specific transgression (cf. McCullough, Pargament, & Thoresen, 2000). Although definitions of forgiveness as a response to a specific incident have been quite diverse (Scobie & Scobie, 1998), McCullough et al. (2000) observed that all the existing definitions seem to build on one core feature: "When people forgive, their responses toward (or, in other words, what they think of, feel about, want to do, or actually do to) people who have offended or injured them become more positive and less negative" (p. 9). We therefore use the term *episodic forgiveness* to describe forgiveness that is related to a specific interpersonal transgression episode.

Episodic forgiveness is influenced by several factors and circumstances (for a review, see McCullough & Witvliet, 2002; McCullough et al., 1998; Worthington, 1998). These include characteristics of the transgression (e.g., severity, intentionality) as well as the context in which the transgression occurs. People find it more difficult to forgive transgressions that are more severe and intentional and have more negative con-

sequences (e.g., Boon & Sulsky, 1997; Fincham, Jackson, & Beach, 2005). As regards context, episodic forgiveness also appears to be influenced by the relational context (e.g., relationship closeness, commitment, satisfaction, specific types of relationships) in which an offense takes place.

To summarize, it can be seen that research on trait forgiveness and episodic forgiveness has proceeded independently. This is far from optimal as they are related at a conceptual level. Specifically, it can be argued that trait forgiveness gives rise to episodic forgiveness. If this is correct, it can be hypothesized that the two are correlated empirically, an issue that we investigate in the current study.

FORGIVENESS IN CLOSE RELATIONSHIPS

Fincham (2000) notes that, "As a core social construct important in all types of relationships, the study of forgiveness has the potential to facilitate a more integrated science of close relationships" (p. 20). However, remarkably little research has investigated forgiveness in close relationships. Relationship research has tended to eschew study of strengths or personal resources (e.g., forgiveness, social support) that sustain satisfactory relationships (cf. Fincham, 2003) in favor of vulnerabilities or risk factors (e.g., negative communication, neuroticism) that lead to relationship distress. Exceptions to this trend include a study by McCullough, Worthington, and Rachal (1997) which showed that the relationship between receiving an apology from and forgiving an offender is a function of increased empathy for the offender. In addition to empathy, other important relational factors (e.g., closeness, commitment, beliefs about the relationship) have been linked to forgiveness (Fincham, Hall, & Beach, 2005; Worthington, 1998). Indeed, Finkel, Rushbult, Kumashiro, and Hannon (2002) showed that the commitment–forgiveness link was mediated by cognitive interpretations of betrayal incidents.

Forgiveness is also related to communication and conflict resolution. For example, Fincham and Beach (2002) demonstrated that forgiveness is positively related to constructive communication in the relationship and negatively related to psychological aggression. Additionally, Karremans and Van Lange (2004) found that forgiveness predicts and restores pro–relationship motivation and behavior. Importantly, the results of their studies revealed that level of forgiveness predicted pro–relationship motivation, independently of level of commitment to the offender. Finally, Fincham and his associates have shown that forgiveness in married couples is associated with better conflict resolution (Fincham, Beach, & Davila, 2004).

To summarize, empirical evidence suggests that episodic forgiveness

may promote relationship adjustment, pro–relationship motivation and behavior, and also may foster relational functioning (e.g., communication, conflict resolution). However, little is known about episodic forgiveness in romantic relationships, and especially about the links among episodic forgiveness, trait forgiveness and relationship satisfaction. The present study therefore examined these links.

IMPLICATIONS OF RELATIONSHIP SATISFACTION FOR FORGIVENESS

Relationship satisfaction is one of several relational factors (e.g., closeness, commitment) that may be related to episodic forgiveness (Worthington, 1998). Previous studies have found an association between relationship quality and episodic forgiveness (e.g., Fincham, 2000; Fincham & Beach, 2002; Fincham, Paleari, & Regalia, 2002; McCullough et al., 1998). It is still unclear, however, what processes underlie this association. In addition to the view, noted earlier, that episodic forgiveness may promote relationship adjustment, McCullough et al. (1998) offered seven possible hypotheses to explain this relationship using a different line of causal reasoning. They argued that partners in romantic relationships may be more willing to act in a forgiving manner because they have considerable resources invested in the relationship. In addition, partners in high–quality relationships may have a long–term orientation that might motivate them to overlook hurts in order to maximize the likelihood of preserving the relationship. Another hypothesis is that partners might be more likely to apologize or communicate remorse and attempt to remediate the effects of their transgressions in high–quality relationships compared to partners in low–quality relationships.

To test the association between relationship quality and episodic forgiveness, Fincham et al. (2002) examined the extent to which both relationship–level variables (e.g., marital quality) and social–cognitive variables (e.g., attributions, affective reactions, emotional empathy) predicted episodic forgiveness in married couples. They found that relationship quality predicted more benign attributions that, in turn, facilitated episodic forgiveness both directly and indirectly via negative affective reactions (angry, sad, nervous) and emotional empathy (sympathetic, softhearted). Marital quality was only indirectly linked to episodic forgiveness through a causal chain in which responsibility attributions seemed to play the main role.

Further support for the link between relationship quality and episodic forgiveness comes from a study by McCullough et al. (1998, Study 3). They showed that a composite measure of relationship commitment and

satisfaction was negatively related to reported avoidance and revenge following a recent hurt and also following the worst relationship hurt as identified by participants in a romantic relationship. People with high scores in avoidance motivation and revenge motivation reported low relationship satisfaction.

Fincham (2000) also found a reliable relationship between marital satisfaction and episodic forgiveness. He went on to show that episodic forgiveness accounted for variance that was independent of marital satisfaction in predicting overall behavior toward the partner and in reported conciliatory and retaliatory responses to a partner transgression. Moreover, episodic forgiveness fully mediated the relationship between responsibility attributions for partner behavior and reported behavior toward the partner.

Noting that the link between relational quality and episodic forgiveness is usually limited to global indices of relational quality, Fincham (2000) argued "that the more important empirical task is to identify the specific features of relationship quality that are important for forgiveness" (p. 15). In the present study we therefore focused on relationship satisfaction as an important aspect of relationship quality (cf. Bradbury, Fincham, & Beach, 2000). Recently, Kachadourian, Fincham, and Davila (2004) examined the associations among trait forgiveness, attachment, and marital satisfaction in dating and marital couples. They found that trait forgiveness was related to relationship satisfaction ($r = .44$). However, we know of no study that has examined the relations among trait forgiveness, episodic forgiveness, and relationship satisfaction.

This is an important omission because of sentiment override (Weiss, 1980). Sentiment override is a widely accepted construct among marital researchers and refers to the fact that highly satisfied spouses respond to partners in terms of their sentiment rather than the partner's behavior. This phenomenon has two important implications in the present context. First, it provides a plausible third variable explanation for any association found between the two measures of forgiveness. It is therefore important to demonstrate that any association between trait forgiveness and episodic forgiveness in relationships is independent of relationship satisfaction. Second, it is possible that the association between trait and episodic forgiveness varies as a function of level of satisfaction such that at low levels of satisfaction trait forgiveness is related to episodic forgiveness whereas at high levels trait forgiveness, and episodic forgiveness are unrelated. We therefore examine several questions regarding the relationships among trait forgiveness, episodic forgiveness and relationship satisfaction.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

The present study addresses two sets of hypotheses. The first set examined the relationships among trait forgiveness, episodic forgiveness, and relationship satisfaction. The second set examined the role of trait forgiveness and relationship satisfaction in predicting episodic forgiveness.

Is trait forgiveness related to episodic forgiveness and is this association independent of relationship satisfaction?

We explored how individual differences in the disposition to forgive relate to forgiveness of a real–life interpersonal transgression episode. Specifically, we examined the following hypotheses:

(1) trait forgiveness is positively related to episodic forgiveness,
(2) episodic forgiveness is positively related to relational satisfaction (e.g., Kachadourian et al., 2004), and
(3) trait forgiveness predicts episodic forgiveness independently of relationship satisfaction.

Does relationship satisfaction moderate the link between trait forgiveness and episodic forgiveness?

The second set of hypotheses examined episodic forgiveness as a function of trait forgiveness and relationship satisfaction. Given the existence of sentiment override, whereby highly satisfied spouses respond to partners in terms of their sentiment rather than the partner's behavior (Weiss, 1980), we hypothesized that:

(4) relationship satisfaction moderates the trait forgiveness–episodic forgiveness association. Specifically, we anticipated that for individuals with low relationship satisfaction, level of trait forgiveness influences episodic forgiveness whereas for individuals in satisfying relationships level of trait forgiveness would not be related to episodic forgiveness.

METHOD

PARTICIPANTS

Participants ($N = 180$; 51 males and 129 females) were students (38.3%) and non–students (61.7%) recruited from courses at University of Zurich and through flyers posted on campus. Only individuals who were in a heterosexual relationship of six months or more were included in order to allow time for relevant relationship issues to emerge and to allow partners to develop interdependence and some sense of couple identity.

The mean length of relationships was 4.7 years (SD = 3.9 years). Participants ranged in age from 19 to 65 years, with mean age of 27.6 years (SD = 8.7 years). Sixteen percent of the participants were married. Students and non–students did not significantly differ with respect to relationship satisfaction, trait forgiveness, and episodic forgiveness (all ps > .10). However, students were younger (p < .01) and less frequently married (p < .05) than nonstudents.

MATERIALS

Participants filled out four sets of materials comprising a relationship satisfaction questionnaire, a trait forgiveness questionnaire, an interpersonal transgression recall sheet, and an episodic forgiveness questionnaire.

Relationship Satisfaction. Participants completed a German version of the Relationship Assessment Scale (RAS; Hendrick, 1988; Sander & Böcker, 1993). The RAS is a 7–item instrument that taps global satisfaction with the relationship. Most importantly, the RAS does not confound the appraisal of global relationship satisfaction with specific behavioral phenomena that indicate satisfaction or dissatisfaction. The respondents indicated degree of agreement with each of the items (e.g., "In general, how satisfied are you with your relationship?") on a 5–point Likert scale ranging from 1 (*not at all*) to 5 (*very much*). The RAS has been shown to be a reliable and valid measure of relationship satisfaction (Hendrick, Dicke, & Hendrick, 1998). In the present study, the RAS had a Cronbach alpha of α = .86.

Trait Forgiveness. Trait forgiveness was assessed using the 10–item Forgiveness subscale from the VIA–Inventory of Strengths (VIA–IS; Peterson & Seligman, 2001; see also Peterson & Park, 2004; e.g., "I always allow others to leave their mistakes in the past and make a fresh start," and "I am usually willing to give someone another chance"). Participants responded to each item on a 5–point Likert scale ranging from 1 (*not at all) to* 5 (*completely*). In this study, the internal consistency for this measure was α = .79.

Episodic Forgiveness. We adapted the widely used transgression recall procedure (e.g., McCullough et al., 1998) to assess a specific real–life interpersonal transgression. Participants were instructed to recall the *most serious transgression* by their partner and to briefly describe it. Several questions followed. First, we asked the participants about the severity of the incident "How deeply were you hurt when the incident occurred?" using five levels of hurt as a response scale (*not hurt, a little hurt, some hurt, much hurt, a great deal of hurt*). Second, participants completed a German version

of the Enright Forgiveness Inventory (EFI; Enright, Rique, & Coyle, 2000). The goal of this measure is to assess the degree to which the respondent forgives a transgressor and assesses the actual status of emotions, cognitions, and behaviors within the context of the remembered transgression. The EFI has 60 items and three subscales that assess the *current feelings* (e.g., hostile, angry, goodwill), *current thoughts* (e.g., dreadful, wish him/her well, immoral), and *current behavior* (e.g., avoid, ignore, show friendship) toward someone who has hurt them deeply and unfairly. Participants responded to each item using a 5–point Likert scale ranging from 1 (*not at all*) to 5 (*completely*). The EFI total scores range from 60 (low degree of episodic forgiveness) to 360 (high degree of episodic forgiveness). Cronbach's alphas for the EFI subscales were α = .90 for Emotion, α = .88 for Cognition, and α = .88 for Behavior. The reliability for the total EFI was α = .95. Participants were also asked to what extent they have forgiven their partner (*not at all, in progress, completely forgiven*).

PROCEDURE

The study was conducted in accordance with ethical principles promulgated by the University of Zurich. Participants received a packet containing the study materials by mail. Of 415 packets mailed, 180 (43.4%) were returned. The packets contained an informed consent form and instructions to complete the materials without consulting the partner. After signing the consent form, participants completed a demographic information sheet, the RAS, and the trait forgiveness questionnaire. Next, participants took a couple of minutes to recall the most serious interpersonal transgression in their relationship and then wrote a short description of this incident (see above). After having recalled the transgression, episodic forgiveness was assessed with the EFI which asked questions about their current feelings, their current thoughts, and their current behaviors toward their partner. Participants did not receive any compensation for their participation in the study.

RESULTS

INTERPERSONAL TRANSGRESSIONS

Participants had experienced a variety of interpersonal transgressions by their relationship partner, including emotional abuse (51.0%), verbal abuse (14.7%), physical abuse or threats (3.5%), infidelity (9.1%), emotional neglect by the partner (8.4%), broken commitment (2.8%), or other (10.5%). They reported being deeply hurt (65.6%, i.e., much hurt or a great deal of hurt), some hurt (15.6%), and a little hurt (7.2%) when the

incident occurred. Twenty–one participants (11.7%), who reported events where they said they were not hurt or who reported no events, were excluded from further analyses. The remaining sample consisted of 159 participants. Finally, 64.8% of the participants reported that they had forgiven their partner, and 35.2% reported being in the process of forgiveness.

One hundred thirty–two participants gave responses regarding the length of time that had elapsed since the interpersonal transgression: 0 to 6 months (44.7%), 7 to 12 months (19.7%), 1 to 2 years (15.9%), and 3 or more years (19.7%). Because forgiveness measures and relationship satisfaction were not significantly associated with time since the hurt or with relationship duration, no further analyses were conducted using these temporal variables.

BIVARIATE ASSOCIATIONS

The descriptive statistics and the correlations among all scales are shown in Table 1. In support of our first hypothesis, that trait forgiveness is positively related to episodic forgiveness, we found a significant association between trait forgiveness and episodic forgiveness as measured with the total EFI scores ($r = .21$, $p < .01$). As regards the EFI subscales, trait forgiveness was significantly correlated with the Emotion subscale and the Behavior subscale, but not with the Cognition subscale (see Table 1). In support of our second hypothesis, a strong association was found between relationship satisfaction and episodic forgiveness. As regards the subscales of episodic forgiveness (EFI; feelings, thoughts, and behaviors), all were significantly correlated with relational satisfaction (rs = .56 to .63, ps < .001). In view of the differing magnitudes of the trait forgiveness–episodic forgiveness and the relationship satisfaction–episodic forgiveness associations, we examined whether they differed reliably. The association between relationship satisfaction and episodic forgiveness was significantly stronger than that between trait and episodic forgiveness, $t = 4.45$, $p < .001$.

MULTIVARIATE ASSOCIATIONS

To test the hypothesis that trait forgiveness predicts episodic forgiveness regardless of how satisfied the participants are with their current relationship (Hypothesis 3), a multiple regression analysis was conducted that included trait forgiveness and relationship satisfaction as predictors and the total EFI scores as the dependent variable. The predictors explained 37% of the total variance in episodic forgiveness, $F(2, 158)$

TABLE 1. Correlations Among the Measured Variables, Means and Standard Deviations

Variable	1	2	3	4	5	6
1. TF[a]	—					
2. EFI[b] Emotion	.17*	—				
3. EFI Cognition	.13	.66***	—			
4. EFI Behavior	.21**	.75***	.67***	—		
5. EFI Total	.21**	.83***	.84***	.83***	—	
6. RAS[c]	.17*	.63***	.56***	.62***	.60***	—
M	3.33	109.53	115.18	110.39	334.38	4.25
SD	0.55	8.93	5.86	8.02	21.97	0.55

Note. $N = 159$; [a]TF = Trait Forgiveness Scale, [b]EFI = Enright Forgiveness Inventory, [c]RAS = Relationship Assessment Scale. *$p < .05$, **$p < .01$, ***$p < .001$.

$= 45.23, p < .001$. Trait forgiveness was marginally ($\beta = .11, p < .10$) related to episodic forgiveness. Relationship satisfaction ($\beta = .58, p < .001$) was significantly related to episodic forgiveness.

To test the fourth hypothesis, that relationship satisfaction moderates the association between trait and episodic forgiveness, the trait forgiveness scores and the relationship satisfaction scores were centered on their respective means before the term reflecting the interaction between them was created (Aiken & West, 1991). The centered predictor variables of trait forgiveness and relationship satisfaction were then entered into a regression equation predicting EFI scores. In this equation we also included forgiveness status (not forgiven = 0, forgiven = 1) as a predictor variable as we were concerned about lack of variability in episodic forgiveness among those who had already forgiven the partner. Interaction terms were then entered into the equation after these main effects. The overall regression equation was significant $F(7, 151) = 26.23, p < .001, R^2 = .55$. A significant three-way interaction among the predictor variables emerged, $t = 3.62, p < .001$. This second-order interaction showed that the two way interaction term (trait forgiveness × relationship satisfaction) was not significant ($t = 1.15, p > .10, \beta = -.09, p > .10$) for those who had forgiven their partner but was significant for those who were in the process of forgiving the partner ($t = 2.97, p < .01, \beta = .33, p < .01$).[1]

Simple slope tests were then conducted to clarify the nature of this interaction (see Aiken & West, 1991, pp. 12–22). They revealed that at

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1. Those in the process of forgiving ($N = 56$) displayed the following characteristics: they had a mean age of 26.9 years ($SD = 9.2$); the mean length of relationships was 4.8 years ($SD = 4.6$ years); and 20.4% were married.

higher levels of relationship satisfaction (high RAS), trait forgiveness was positively related to episodic forgiveness ($\beta = .36$, $p < .05$). In other words, participants with a satisfied relationship and high trait forgiveness tended to show higher episodic forgiveness than those with a satisfied relationship and low trait forgiveness. However, at lower levels of relationship satisfaction (low RAS) trait forgiveness was negatively related to episodic forgiveness ($\beta = -.33$, $p < .05$). Specifically, participants with an unsatisfactory relationship and high trait forgiveness tended to show lower episodic forgiveness than those with an unsatisfied relationship and low trait forgiveness. Figure 1 shows the results of this analysis.

DISCUSSION

Transgressions in romantic relationships are inevitable. To understand how partners maintain relationship satisfaction over time in the face of such transgressions it is essential to know how they deal with negative experiences and how they overcome interpersonal hurts. Consistent with past research (e.g., Fincham, 2000; Fincham & Beach, 2002; Fincham et al., 2002; Kachadourian et al., 2004; McCullough et al., 1998), we found significant associations between trait forgiveness, episodic forgiveness and self–reported relationship satisfaction.

THE LINK BETWEEN TRAIT FORGIVENESS
AND EPISODIC FORGIVENESS

In support of our first hypothesis, the results indicated that the disposition to respond to transgressions in a forgiving manner was related to higher scores in episodic forgiveness in the context of a real–life interpersonal hurt. It is commonly assumed that trait forgiveness influences episodic forgiveness and even though the present result is consistent with this assumption it does not provide definitive support for it. This is because it is equally plausible that people report dispositional tendencies (trait forgiveness) based on observations of relevant behavior (occurrences of episodic forgiveness). In any event, this finding needs to be considered in terms of Fincham's (2000) distinction between two levels of trait forgiveness: A general disposition to forgive and a disposition to forgive the partner. Following this distinction, Fincham (2000) hypothesized that personality characteristics in relation to the partner are likely to be more powerful determinants of episodic forgiveness in the relationship. It is therefore possible that we had assessed a disposition to forgive the partner rather than people in general, an even stronger association between dispositional and episodic forgiveness may have
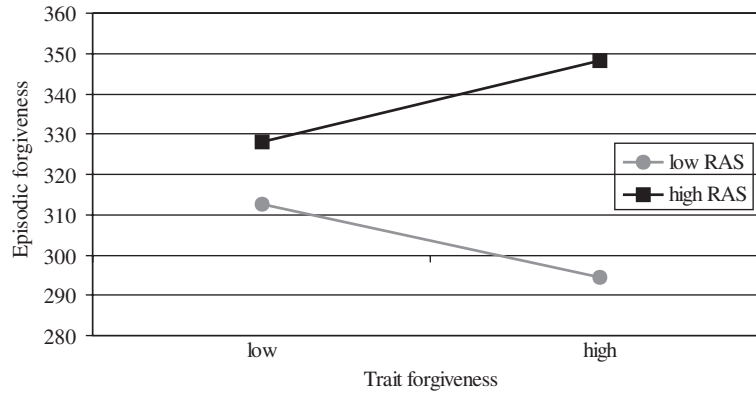
FIGURE 1. Episodic forgiveness as a function of trait forgiveness and relationship satisfaction for participants reported being currently in the process of forgiving ($N = 56$). Episodic forgiveness = total scores of EFI, RAS = Relationship Assessment Scale.

emerged. Future research should therefore take into account this distinction between general and partner–related trait forgiveness.

THE LINK BETWEEN TRAIT FORGIVENESS AND RELATIONSHIP SATISFACTION

Replicating prior findings (e.g., Kachadourian et al., 2004) the present study found an association between trait forgiveness and relationship satisfaction. An enduring willingness to forgive, to give a new chance to a transgressor, or to allow him or her to leave his or her mistakes in the past and make a fresh start may foster relationships and build individual and interpersonal resources, which may have a positive impact on relationship satisfaction. As already mentioned, however, a satisfying relationship with a good relational climate may be an important supporting resource in times of crises (e.g., interpersonal transgressions or hurts) and is likely to provide a context that facilitates episodic forgiveness, an issue which we now consider.

THE LINK BETWEEN RELATIONSHIP SATISFACTION AND EPISODIC FORGIVENESS

Consistent with our second hypothesis, relationship satisfaction was indeed significantly related to episodic forgiveness (e.g., Fincham, 2000;

Fincham et al., 2002; McCullough et al., 1998). Satisfied participants reported higher scores on episodic forgiveness. A current satisfying relationship seems to be an important resource in difficult times and, as noted, may foster episodic forgiveness. Owing to the correlational nature of the data, however, one could also argue that episodic forgiveness predicts pro–relationship motivation and may even foster relational satisfaction (cf. Karremans & Van Lange, 2004).

Trait forgiveness was less strongly related to episodic forgiveness than relationship satisfaction, demonstrating that situational or relational characteristics (e.g., relationship satisfaction) may be more important in understanding forgiveness of interpersonal transgressions in close relationships than trait forgiveness. Nevertheless, the results showed that trait forgiveness helps explain forgiveness of a real–life transgression for those in the process of forgiving.

Owing to the phenomenon of sentiment override, however, we hypothesized that the trait forgiveness–episodic forgiveness association would vary as a function of relationship satisfaction (hypothesis 4). Although we obtained support for this hypothesis, it was limited to those still in the process of forgiving and the nature of the moderating effect was different from that expected. Specifically, higher trait forgiveness predicted greater episodic forgiveness in satisfied relationships. This finding appears to run counter to the idea of sentiment override in which partners respond noncontingently to relationship events using instead the sentiment toward the partner as the basis for their response (Weiss, 1980). However, as the most satisfied persons are those most likely to have forgiven the transgression (and therefore were not reflected in this result) this contradiction may be more apparent than real as the "satisfied" group reflected in the significant interaction term comprised moderately satisfied persons ($M = 4.00$, $SD = 0.62$ vs. $M = 4.38$, $SD = 0.45$ for those who had forgiven the transgression; $t = 4.49$, $p < .001$). In the attitude literature it is well known that attitude accessibility is related to attitude extremity and hence moderate attitudes (sentiment) are less likely to influence judgments of, and behavior toward, the attitude object. In any event, our findings may identify boundary conditions for the sentiment override hypothesis.

In contrast to the results obtained in satisfied relationships, the negative relationship between trait and episodic forgiveness in the context of relationship dissatisfaction may appear even more surprising. But on closer inspection, this finding also makes intuitive sense. Specifically, when someone high in trait forgiveness finds himself or herself unable to forgive a specific partner transgression this may function as a signal that something is wrong with the relationship and lead to greater relationship dissatisfaction. Although plausible, this causal sequence is an

inference and should be explicitly investigated in future research. For instance, it may also be the case that trait forgiveness is negatively related to episodic forgiveness in dissatisfied relationships due to repeated partner offending over time. Longitudinal research is needed to determine direction of effects.

INTEGRATING THE RESULTS IN A BROADER FRAMEWORK

The present findings can be discussed in a broader theoretical framework. The vulnerability–stress–adaptation (VSA) model of relationships (cf. Karney & Bradbury, 1995) offers an integrative framework for understanding hurts in romantic relationships and for the role of trait forgiveness, episodic forgiveness, and relationship satisfaction. Central to the VSA model are dispositional characteristics, stressful events, and coping processes and their relations to relationship satisfaction and stability. Personality characteristics constitute enduring individual and also interpersonal vulnerabilities and protective factors (e.g., neuroticism, negative childhood experiences, coping capacities or skills, general assumptions about relationships, attribution styles). In the context of this model, an enduring disposition to act in a forgiving manner might be understood as a protective factor. According to Karney and Bradbury (1995), the stability of relationships is directly influenced by relationship satisfaction, which interacts with coping processes or problem solving skills of the partners. Episodic forgiveness might be conceptualized as a relationship maintenance and repair strategy following interpersonal transgressions or in terms of the model, as a coping or adaptive process following hurts. Further, in terms of the VSA model, one might understand hurts in relationships (e.g., infidelities, violations of trust) as stressful events. Following the postulated model, actual stressors could be coped with by adaptive coping processes (e.g., episodic forgiveness). Vulnerabilities or protective factors also might have an influence on coping processes and on the stressful events. The VSA model offers a means of integrating enduring and situation–specific psychological factors and their interactions on relational satisfaction and stability (Karney & Bradbury, 1995).

The current findings are subject to several limitations. As noted, it is not possible to draw conclusions about direction of effects given the cross–sectional nature of the study. The temporal relationship between episodic forgiveness and relationship satisfaction needs to be investigated in future research. In particular, whether forgiving one's partner leads to more satisfied romantic relationships or whether the experience of having a satisfying relationship fosters episodic forgiveness in the longer term needs to be examined. Longitudinal studies therefore are

critical to determine direction of effects and to examine specific temporal aspects of episodic forgiveness (e.g., McCullough, Fincham & Tsang, 2003). Second, the association documented between relationship satisfaction and forgiveness might reflect their joint association with some third variable (e.g., neuroticism). Third, one might question the validity of assessing trait forgiveness and episodic forgiveness using self–report questionnaires. Whether other measures of trait forgiveness and episodic forgiveness (e.g., observer–report measures, behavioral measures, physiological measures) would yield similar results, is an empirical question. Fourth, caution is needed in generalizing these results owing to the limitations of the sample studied. Finally, several studies have reported gender differences in trait forgiveness and episodic forgiveness (e.g., Fincham, 2000; Fincham et al., 2002; Fincham et al., 2004). Future research should take into account possible gender effects on trait and episodic forgiveness.

CONCLUSION

The present study was designed to explore the role of trait forgiveness and relationship satisfaction in facilitating episodic forgiveness (i.e., forgiveness of a real–life interpersonal transgression). As the present research reveals, those who have high trait forgiveness and are satisfied with their romantic relationship show higher forgiveness of real–life transgressions of their partner. The present findings underscore the important role of relationship satisfaction in coping with interpersonal transgressions. In the case of severe interpersonal transgressions, episodic forgiveness is mainly related to the degree of relationship satisfaction of the hurt partners. Additionally, our results show that trait forgiveness interacts with relationship satisfaction in predicting episodic forgiveness; high trait forgiveness is related to high episodic forgiveness in satisfied relationships but is related to low episodic forgiveness in dissatisfied relationships. Such findings show that the construct of forgiveness has the potential to enhance our understanding of close relationships.

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