"You're forgiven, but don't do it again!" Direct partner regulation buffers the costs of forgiveness

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Abstract:

Although forgiveness can have numerous benefits, it can also have a notable cost—forgiveness can allow transgressors to continue behaving in ways that can be hurtful (McNulty, 2010, 2011). Accordingly, two studies tested the prediction that the implications of forgiveness for whether the partner transgresses or fails to behave benevolently depend on whether forgivers regulate partners away from future transgressions and toward benevolent behaviors. Study 1 was an experimental study of emerging adult couples in which participants were (a) asked to report their partners' tendencies to engage in partner-regulation behaviors, (b) led to believe their partners were either forgiving or unforgiving, and (c) given the opportunity to transgress against their partners. Study 2 was a longitudinal study of newlywed couples in which participants were (a) asked to report their tendencies to forgive their partners, (b) observed during problem-solving discussions, and then (c) asked to report their satisfaction with their partners' considerateness every 6 months for 4 years. Both studies provided evidence that direct oppositional partner-regulation behaviors moderate the implications of forgiveness for partner behavior. Among intimates who demanded more change, forgiveness was associated with the partner transgressing less (Study 1) and compromising more (Study 2), as well as participants being more satisfied with their partners' considerateness over time (Study 2); among intimates who demanded less change, forgiveness was associated with these outcomes in the opposite direction. These findings suggest that supplementing forgiveness with partner-regulation behaviors can help nondistressed couples avoid the undesirable outcomes and maximize desirable outcomes associated with forgiveness.

Keywords: forgiveness | partner regulation | romantic relationships | reoffending

Article:

People often enter into relationships expecting that their partners will not hurt them. Nevertheless, it is virtually inevitable that members of all close relationships will at times behave in ways that can hurt one another, either by failing to engage in benevolent behaviors, such as sacrifice (Van Lange et al., 1997) and responsiveness (Reis, Clark, & Holmes, 2004), or by engaging in transgressions, such as deception (e.g., DePaulo & Kashy, 1998) and even aggression (e.g., Hellmuth & McNulty, 2008). When faced with hurtful behaviors, people often

forgive partners who are important to them (Burnette, McCullough, Van Tongeren, & Davis, 2012). Indeed, forgiveness is associated with numerous immediate benefits, such as increased individual well-being (e.g., Berry, Worthington, O'Connor, Parrott, & Wade, 2005; Bono, McCullough, & Root, 2008; VanOyen Witvliet, Ludwig, & Vander Laan, 2001) and relational well-being (e.g., Fincham & Beach, 2007; Fincham, Beach, & Davila, 2007; McCullough et al., 1998; Paleari, Regalia, & Fincham, 2005). At the same time, however, expressing forgiveness to a partner can have a notable cost—it may fail to sufficiently motivate the partner toward more desirable behaviors in the future (McNulty, 2010, 2011; McNulty & Russell, 2016). The goal of this research is to examine whether supplementing forgiveness with behaviors that attempt to regulate partners away from transgressions and toward benevolent behavior helps intimates to capitalize on the benefits of forgiveness while avoiding its potential costs.

Potential Benefits of Forgiveness

Forgiveness is the process by which victims of interpersonal transgressions reduce their motivations to think, feel, and behave negatively toward a transgressor (McCullough et al., 1998), as well as increase their motivations to behave benevolently toward a transgressor (Fincham & Beach, 2002; Paleari, Regalia, & Fincham, 2009). There are several reasons to expect that forgiving a close relationship partner should confer important individual and interpersonal benefits. First, in the immediate aftermath of a transgression, forgiveness is associated with reductions in negative affect toward the partner and thus increases in personal well-being and relationship satisfaction (see McCullough et al., 1998). Second, forgiveness involves thinking more benevolently about the partner (e.g., Fincham & Beach, 2002; Paleari et al., 2009), and such benevolent cognitions tend to increase relationship satisfaction on average (see Bradbury & Fincham, 1990; though see McNulty, O'Mara, & Karney, 2008). Third, forgiveness is associated with immediately behaving more benevolently toward the partner (see Karremans & Van Lange, 2004), and such positive behaviors are associated with positive relationship outcomes on average (Heyman, 2001; though see McNulty & Russell, 2010; Overall, Fletcher, Simpson, & Sibley, 2009). Finally, forgiveness may lead transgressors to behave more benevolently in return. Not only does forgiveness signal to the transgressor that the relationship is still valued and can be repaired (Emmers & Canary, 1996)—the norm of reciprocity (Gouldner, 1960) dictates that individuals should be kind to those who have been kind to them. For both reasons, transgressors may reciprocate forgivers' kindness with benevolent behaviors of their own (DeWall & Richman, 2011; Kelln & Ellard, 1999).

Nevertheless, despite consistent evidence that intimates experience immediate individual and interpersonal benefits by forgiving their partners (Berry et al., 2005; Bono et al., 2008; McCullough et al., 1998; VanOyen Witvliet et al., 2001), evidence of extended benefits has been more limited (Fincham & Beach, 2007; Fincham et al., 2007; McNulty, 2008; Paleari et al., 2005; Tsang, McCullough, & Fincham, 2006). In one study, Paleari and colleagues (2005) demonstrated that spouses who were initially more forgiving reported greater relationship satisfaction six months later, but these effects were indirect and emerged only through subsequent forgiveness. In another study, Fincham and Beach (2007) reported that wives', but not husbands', initial forgiveness predicted their marital quality 1 year after their initial assessment, controlling for their initial reports of marital quality. Finally, McNulty (2008) demonstrated that greater forgiveness was associated with more stable marital satisfaction and less severe problems over a 2-year period among spouses with partners who transgressed

infrequently, but with steeper declines in satisfaction and more severe problems among those with partners who transgressed more frequently.

Potential Costs of Forgiveness

One reason that evidence for the long-term benefits of forgiveness is limited and nuanced may be that forgiveness can actually fail to minimize the likelihood that some partners will be hurtful in the future, which may erode or even reverse any immediate benefits of forgiveness for well-being. Specifically, transgressors' perceptions that they have been forgiven may protect them from negative consequences of the transgressions that would otherwise motivate them to avoid transgressions and/or behave more benevolently in the future. Transgressors who believe they have not been forgiven often feel shame and guilt (Baumeister, Stillwell, & Heatherton, 1994; Rapske, Boon, Alibhai, & Kheong, 2010). Given that people are less likely to repeat behaviors that are followed by undesirable consequences (e.g., Skinner, 1969), feeling shame and guilt could motivate transgressors to either refrain from transgressions or otherwise behave benevolently. In contrast, perceiving forgiveness may leave transgressors feeling free to transgress again or neglect benevolence. Indeed, although forgivers may not intend to signal that the transgressor's behavior was tolerable, some people assume forgiveness signals accepting, tolerating, condoning, and/or excusing the transgression (Kearns & Fincham, 2004; Younger, Piferi, Jobe, & Lawler, 2004).

Consistent with the possibility that forgiveness may leave partners feeling free to behave in ways that could be hurtful, several recent studies indicate that intimates' forgiveness is associated with a greater likelihood that their partners will continue transgressing (McNulty, 2010, 2011; McNulty & Russell, 2016). First, a diary study of newlywed couples indicated that spouses who reported forgiving their partner for a transgression on one day were more likely to report that the partner behaved in a hurtful manner again the next day (McNulty, 2010). Second, a longitudinal study demonstrated that more-forgiving spouses experienced continued physical and psychological aggression from their partners over the first 4 years of marriage, whereas less-forgiving spouses experienced declines in physical and psychological aggression (McNulty, 2011). Third, across multiple studies, McNulty and Russell (2016) demonstrated that such effects indeed emerge because some partners perceive forgiveness as an opportunity to continue offending. In that research, forgiveness was associated with an increased likelihood of subsequent partner transgressions among partners who were low in agreeableness because such partners viewed forgiving intimates as less likely to get angry. Nevertheless, consistent with the idea that forgiveness can also lead offenders to avoid transgressing, forgiveness was associated with a decreased likelihood of subsequent partner transgressions among partners who were high in agreeableness because such partners were motivated to refrain from future transgressions.

Partner Regulation and Forgiveness

How can people minimize the extent to which forgiveness leaves transgressors feeling free to behave in a hurtful manner again and thus maximize the extent to which they refrain from such behaviors or engage in more benevolent behaviors? One way may involve supplementing forgiveness with behaviors that attempt to regulate partners away from future transgressions and toward more benevolent behaviors. A growing body of research on partner regulation suggests a set of behaviors that may be particularly effective in this regard. Partner regulation involves

attempts to modify a partner's behavior (see Overall, Fletcher, & Simpson, 2006; Overall & McNulty, 2017; Overall & Simpson, 2013). Partner regulation behaviors fall along two dimensions: partner regulation that is direct (explicit and overt) versus indirect (passive and covert), and oppositional to versus cooperative with the partner's goals (Overall & McNulty, 2017). Most relevant to the current issues, direct forms of oppositional partner regulation, such as directly pointing out the partner's responsibility for hurtful behaviors and demanding change, are particularly effective at changing partner behavior (e.g., Baker & McNulty, 2015; McNulty & Russell, 2010; Meltzer, McNulty, & Karney, 2012; Overall et al., 2006, 2009), because they motivate partners to change *and* effectively communicate exactly how the partner is expected to change (Baker & McNulty, 2015; Overall et al., 2009; Overall & Simpson, 2013). By contrast, more indirect oppositional behaviors, which tend to be vague in terms of what needs to be changed and how, have been shown to be relatively ineffective at motivating partner change (Jayamaha, Antonellis, & Overall, 2016; McNulty & Russell, 2010; Overall et al., 2009).

Direct partner regulation behaviors are likely pivotal to ensuring that partners do not transgress and instead behave more benevolently when forgiven. In particular, given that forgiveness may remove undesirable consequences for the transgressor (e.g., guilt and shame) that may otherwise motivate transgressors to refrain from transgressions and behave more benevolently in the future, failing to supplement forgiveness with direct partner-regulation behaviors may leave partners feeling free to continue their hurtful behavior. By contrast, given that direct partner-regulation behaviors should offer supplemental motivations for forgiven partners to avoid behaving hurtfully again, supplementing forgiveness with direct partner-regulation behaviors should leave partners feeling valued but also obligated to avoid hurtful behavior in the future.

To illustrate, consider a wife whose husband flirts with other women on multiple occasions. Although forgiving the husband may minimize conflict and the wife's negative affect, it also may leave the husband feeling free to continue flirting or otherwise neglect being more considerate. By contrast, although failing to forgive the husband may signal to him what he needs to do, it may leave both partners in a state of conflict and with negative affect. However, the wife may motivate her husband to refrain from flirting and behave more benevolently as well as reduce conflict by forgiving her husband *and* explicitly stating that his flirting is upsetting and must stop. Not only may the regulation behaviors convey that she wants him to stop and offer some motivation in that regard, the forgiveness may convey that she values the relationship and thus offer further motivation for him to refrain from flirting and behave more benevolently.

Overview of the Current Studies

We conducted a laboratory experiment of dating couples and drew from an existing longitudinal study of marriage to examine the interactive implications of forgiveness and partner regulation for partners' potentially hurtful behavior. The experiment provided internal validity, and the longitudinal study provided external validity. Given that hurtful behaviors can vary from those that fail to be generally benevolent to those that entail specific transgressions, we operationalized partners' behavior differently across the studies. Because the goal of Study 1 was to examine the causal effects of forgiveness, we (a) assessed participants' perceptions of their partners' tendencies to engage in direct oppositional partner-regulation behaviors, (b) manipulated participants' perceptions of their partners' forgiveness, and (c) assessed whether they engaged in a specific transgression using a dyadic version of a common laboratory measure

of aggression—a forced choice between blasting the self or the partner with loud and uncomfortable noise. Because the goal of Study 2 was to examine associations among naturally occurring behaviors over time, we used an existing longitudinal study of newlywed couples that assessed each partner's general tendencies to engage in relatively common benevolent behaviors. Both members of newlywed couples reported their general tendencies to forgive one another. Next, they engaged in two problem-solving discussions that were coded for actors' tendencies to engage in a specific partner-regulation behavior common during such discussions—demanding change—as well as partners' tendencies to engage in a benevolent behavior common during such discussions—compromise. Finally, we also assessed how satisfied participants were with the extent to which their partners behaved in a considerate manner over the subsequent 4 years.

In both studies, we hypothesized that actors' tendencies to regulate their partners with direct oppositional partner-regulation behaviors would moderate the association between actors' forgiveness and partners' behavior. Specifically, we predicted that actors' forgiveness would be associated with partners being more likely to transgress (Study 1) and less likely to behave benevolently (Study 2) when actors tended to engage in low levels of partner regulation, but that forgiveness would be associated with partners being less likely to aggress and more likely to behave benevolently when actors tended to engage in greater partner regulation.

Study 1

The goal of Study 1 was to provide an internally valid test of our predictions. We assessed participants' perceptions of their partners' tendency to regulate them, manipulated their perceptions of their partners' tendencies to forgive, and observed their tendencies to transgress against those partners. First, both members of the couple reported their perceptions of their partners' tendencies to engage in direct oppositional partner-regulation behaviors. Second, experimenters randomly assigned participants to receive false feedback about their partners' levels of forgiveness. Finally, participants completed a task adapted from a well-validated measure of aggression (Taylor, 1967) in which they were forced to prioritize either their own or their partner's well-being at the expense of the other's well-being by making a zero-sum choice regarding how much uncomfortable noise to direct toward their partners versus themselves.

We predicted that being led to believe that a partner is forgiving would be associated with choosing a louder volume (i.e., hurtful behavior/transgression) among participants who perceived that their partners tended to rarely engage in direct oppositional partner-regulation behaviors, but would be associated with choosing a quieter volume among participants who perceived that their partners tended to regularly engage in direct oppositional partner-regulation behaviors.

Method

Participants. Participants were 94 members of 47 emerging adult couples at a midsize university in the Southeastern United States (see the online supplemental materials for more information). Nine participants did not believe the false feedback and were excluded from all analyses. The remaining 85 participants (39 men, 46 women) were 18.88 years of age ($SD = 1.29$), on average, and had been in a romantic relationship for 13.55 months ($SD = 14.13$). Participants enrolled in psychology courses received partial course credit for their participation. Participants not enrolled in psychology courses were entered into a lottery for a $25 gift card.

Procedure. All procedures were approved by the institutional review board where the research was conducted. Upon arriving at the laboratory, participants were separated into two private rooms, where they provided informed consent. Next, they completed a series of measures, which included a measure assessing their perceptions of the extent to which their partners attempt to regulate them with direct oppositional partner-regulation behaviors. After completing these measures, participants completed a computerized priming task to set up the forgiveness manipulation. Instructions for this task, and all other tasks, were provided by an experimenter. The task required participants to categorize positive and negative words after being primed with words related to forgiveness and unforgiveness. Upon completing the task, participants were told that their reaction times indicated their automatic feelings about forgiveness (for more information about this task, see McNulty & Russell, 2016). All participants were told that they scored slightly above the middle of the distribution of scores (60th percentile), indicating that they are sometimes forgiving and other times not forgiving. To manipulate participants' perceptions of their partners' forgiveness, participants were told that their partners also completed the test. Participants were randomly assigned to be told either that their partner scored very highly on the test (89th percentile), indicating that he or she is very forgiving, or that their partner scored very low on the test (21st percentile), indicating that he or she is not very forgiving. The manipulation was bolstered by casually telling participants that such automatic tendencies are reliably predictive of actual forgiveness, whereas any specific memories of times when the partner either did or did not forgive them can be unreliable. Participants then completed a manipulation check of their perceptions of their partners' level of forgiveness.

Finally, participants were told that they would be participating in an ostensibly unrelated study examining the implications of noise for memory. The task was adapted from a well-validated (e.g., Giancola & Zeichner, 1995) method for measuring aggression (Taylor, 1967) that has been previously used to identify the extent to which participants are willing to transgress against their partners (e.g., Fitz, Marwit, & Gerstenzang, 1983). Specifically, participants were instructed that they would memorize a series of words presented at 1-s intervals while listening to white noise through headphones. After completing a practice trial of the memory task, participants were presented with a volume slider that ranged from 0 to 100. To ensure that participants were aware of the range of volumes they could hear, participants listened to samples of the noise at the lowest (i.e., 0), middle (i.e., 50), and loudest (i.e., 100) possible volumes. Participants were then informed that the researchers wanted variability between people in the administered volumes and that participants could select the volume that they would hear, ranging from 0 to 100; however, participants were also told that, to ensure adequate variability, their partners would hear the exact opposite of their selection. Thus, if they selected a relatively loud noise (e.g., 75), their partners would hear a relatively quiet noise (e.g., 25), and vice versa. The experimenter then left the room so that the participants could make their selection, which was recorded by the computer. Deciding who would be exposed to a potentially painful level of noise required participants to either prioritize their own well-being at the expense of their partners' well-being or to prioritize their partners' well-being at the expense of their own, which effectively captures many transgressions (see Rusbult, Olsen, Davis, & Hannon, 2001). Thus, the volume chosen served as our measure of a transgression against the partner. Finally, participants were debriefed, probed for suspicion, and given credit for their participation.

Measures.

   Perceived direct oppositional partner-regulation behavior. In line with existing theoretical perspectives on partner regulation (McNulty & Russell, 2010; Overall et al., 2009; Overall & McNulty, 2017), we created three items that assessed the extent to which participants perceived that their partners tended to engage in direct oppositional partner-regulation behaviors. These three items asked participants to report how their partners generally behave during times of conflict—that is, "during discussions of problems . . .": ". . . how often does your partner pressure you to change?"; ". . . how often does your partner express dissatisfaction with the problem?"; ". . . how often does your partner blame you for the problem?" Participants responded using a 7-point Likert-type response scale ranging from 1 (never) to 7 (frequently). These three items were summed such that higher scores indicate greater direct oppositional partner-regulation behavior. Internal consistency was acceptable ($\alpha = .70$).
   Forgiveness manipulation check. To verify the validity of the forgiveness manipulation, participants were asked to respond to the question "How forgiving is your partner?" using a scale from 1 (*not at all forgiving*) to 100 (*completely forgiving*). Multilevel analyses that controlled for the interdependence of partners' reports indicated that participants reported that their partners were more forgiving in the forgiving-partner condition ($M = 81.60$, $SD = 16.61$) than in the non-forgiving-partner condition ($M = 46.98$, $SD = 24.79$), $t(38) = 7.48$, $p < .001$.

Results

   Descriptive statistics and bivariate correlations between variables can be found in Table S1 of the online supplemental materials. To examine whether perceptions of partners' direct partner-regulation behavior moderated the association between the forgiveness manipulation and the volume participants selected for their partners, we used the HLM 7.01 computer program to estimate a two-level model in which the volume selected for the partner was regressed onto a dummy code for the forgiveness condition (0 = nonforgiveness, 1 = forgiveness), mean-centered perceptions of partners' direct partner-regulation behavior scores, and the Partners' Forgiveness × Partners' Direct Oppositional Partner-Regulation Behavior interaction.
   Results are presented in Table 1. Consistent with predictions, the analysis revealed a significant Partners' Forgiveness × Partners' Direct Oppositional Partner-Regulation Behavior interaction. The significant interaction is plotted in Figure 1. Given that partners' tendency to engage in direct oppositional partner-regulation behaviors was a continuous variable, we followed instructions provided by Preacher, Curran, and Bauer (2006) to use the Johnson-Neyman method (Johnson & Neyman, 1936) to identify the exact levels of partners' direct oppositional partner-regulation behavior at which forgiveness demonstrated significant associations with the volume chosen—that is, the regions of significance of the simple effects of forgiveness. The advantage of this method over the traditional simple slope approach is that it provides the exact level of the moderator at which the independent variable is significantly associated with the dependent variable rather than testing such effects at one specific point on this continuum (e.g., 1 *SD*). Consistent with predictions, being led to believe that the partner was forgiving led to an *increase* in the volume directed at the partner among participants who reported the partner engaged in direct oppositional partner-regulation behaviors less frequently

than average (<-1.02 *SD*s). In contrast, but also consistent with predictions, being led to believe that the partner was forgiving led to a *decrease* in the volume directed at the partner among participants who reported the partner engaged in direct oppositional partner-regulation behaviors more frequently than average (>0.16 *SD*s). Notably, subsequent analyses indicated the interaction was not moderated by participant sex, $b = 1.33$, $SE = 1.54$, $t(32) = 0.86$, $p = .395$, and remained significant after controlling for partners' perceptions of participants' direct oppositional partner-regulation behaviors, $b = -26.67$, $SE = 5.50$, $t(35) = -4.85$, $p < .001$.

Table 1
Effects of Partners' Forgiveness Conditions, Partners' Direct Oppositional Partner-Regulation Behavior, and Their Interaction on the Volume Selected for Partners in Study 1

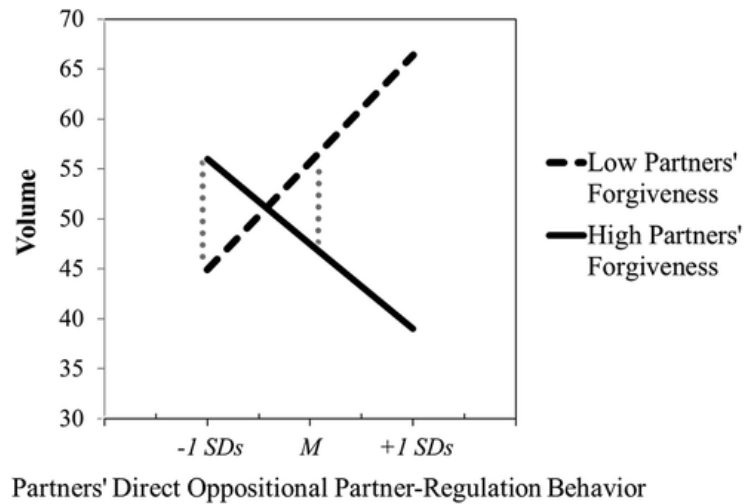| Predictors	Volume			
	b	Effect size *r*	95% CI	*p*
Partners' forgiveness (PF)	−8.18	.21	[−21.07, 4.71]	.215
Partners' direct oppositional partner-regulation behavior (PRB)	15.07	.59**	[8.29, 21.84]	<.001
PF ✖ PRB	−27.02	.64**	[−37.72, 16.32]	<.001

Note. df = 36. CI = confidence interval.
**p ≤ .01.

Discussion

Study 1 used methods that prioritized internal validity and provided initial evidence that direct oppositional partner regulation can help minimize the costs of forgiveness. Specifically, being led to believe that the partner was more (vs. less) forgiving was associated with transgressing against the partner by selecting a louder and more uncomfortable volume for that partner among participants who perceived that their partners engaged in relatively less frequent direct partner-regulation behaviors. By contrast, being led to believe that the partner was more (vs. less) forgiving was associated with behaving benevolently by selecting a quieter and more comfortable volume for the partner among participants who perceived that their partners engaged in more frequent direct partner-regulation behaviors.

Study 2

Study 1 used methods that prioritized internal validity and provided initial evidence that direct oppositional partner regulation can help minimize the costs of forgiveness. Specifically, being led to believe that the partner was more (vs. less) forgiving was associated with transgressing against the partner by selecting a louder and more uncomfortable volume for that partner among participants who perceived that their partners engaged in relatively less frequent direct partner-regulation behaviors. By contrast, being led to believe that the partner was more (vs. less) forgiving was associated with behaving benevolently by selecting a quieter and more comfortable volume for the partner among participants who perceived that their partners engaged in more frequent direct partner-regulation behaviors.

Figure 1. Interactive effects of partners' forgiveness and partners' direct oppositional partner-regulation behavior on the volume selected for partners. Vertical dotted lines indicate regions of significance.

Based on our theoretical framework, we expected that observations of actors' direct oppositional partner-regulation behavior would moderate the association between their self-reported forgiveness and partners' benevolent behavior. Specifically, we expected actors' forgiveness to be associated with partners compromising less and actors being less satisfied with those partners' considerateness over time among spouses who engaged in relatively low levels of direct oppositional partner regulation, but in contrast, associated with these outcomes in the opposite direction among actors who engaged in relatively high levels of direct oppositional partner regulation.

Method

Participants. Participants were 135 newlywed couples recruited from communities in and around Eastern Tennessee. Given the broader aims of the study, eligibility required that (a) this was the first marriage for each partner, (b) the couple had been married fewer than 3 months, (c) each partner was at least 18 years of age, and (d) each partner spoke English and had completed at least 10 years of education (to ensure comprehension of the questionnaires), and (e) to allow a similar probability of transitioning to first parenthood for all couples, couples did not already have children and wives were not older than 35 years. Previous work using this sample (McNulty & Russell, 2016) demonstrated that partners' agreeableness moderates the effects of actors' forgiveness on partners' offending. Given that actors may be more likely to regulate disagreeable partners, we controlled for partners' agreeableness and the Partners' Agreeableness × Forgiveness interaction in supplemental analyses. All primary results remained significant. The online supplemental materials provide details regarding these analyses and the sample.

Procedure. All procedures were approved by the institutional review board where the research was conducted. Participants were mailed a packet of questionnaires to complete at home, which included a consent form, self-report measures of tendencies to forgive the partner, evaluations of the partner's considerateness, agreeableness, and a letter instructing couples to

complete their questionnaires independently of one another and to bring their completed questionnaires to their upcoming laboratory session. During the laboratory session, spouses were asked to independently identify areas of difficulty in the marriage, and then both spouses participated in two 10-min videotaped discussions in which they were left alone to "work toward some resolution or agreement" for each area of difficulty. After completing the laboratory session, couples were paid $80 for participating in this phase of the study.

Couples were subsequently contacted every 6 to 8 months for approximately 5 years and mailed questionnaires assessing their evaluations of their partner's considerateness, tendencies to forgive the partner, and other items beyond the scope of the current study. After completing each phase, couples were mailed a $50 check for participating.

Measures.

Forgiveness. Forgiveness was measured at baseline and every 6 months for the 4-year duration of the study, using a measure modeled after the Transgression Narrative Test of Forgiveness (Berry, Worthington, Parrott, O'Connor, & Wade, 2001; see McNulty, 2008). Spouses were asked to imagine themselves in five detailed situations (e.g., the partner spent money after promising not to do so) and then asked to report how likely they would be to "express forgiveness" on a scale ranging from 1 (definitely no) to 7 (definitely yes). We reasoned that expressions of forgiveness would have the strongest and most obvious effects on partners compared with more private and potentially hidden feelings of forgiveness. Spouses' responses to these items were summed to create a scale that could range from 5 (indicating they "definitely would not express forgiveness") to 35 (indicating they "definitely would express forgiveness"). Internal consistency was acceptable ($\alpha \geq .79$ at all assessments for both husbands and wives).

Direct oppositional partner-regulation behavior. Spouses' general tendencies to engage in direct oppositional partner-regulation behaviors were assessed at baseline by coding video recordings of couples' problem-solving discussions for their tendencies to directly demand that their partner change in ways that benefited actors or the relationship, using a modified version of the Verbal Tactics Coding Scheme (Sillars, 1986). Each speaking turn for both spouses was coded. A speaker received a "demanding" code for speaking turns that directly instructed the partner to engage in behaviors to resolve the problem (e.g., "Do not do that anymore."). Approximately 20% of the discussions were coded by a second rater. The intraclass correlation coefficient (ICC = .61) indicated low but acceptable agreement between coders (see Cicchetti, 1994).

Partner benevolence. We assessed two indicators of partners' benevolent behavior. The first was a measure of the partner's level of compromise during the problem-solving discussions. For each discussion, four coders globally rated the extent to which each participant compromised (e.g., "How much did the husband/wife offer to compromise to solve the problem?") on a scale from 1 (not at all) to 7 (extremely/a lot). Using different coding systems in assessing partners' compromise and direct partner-regulation behavior (i.e., global codes vs. speaking turns) reduces common method variance between these variables that might otherwise account for any associations that emerge. Approximately 20% of the discussions were double-coded, and the ICC was acceptable (ICC = .75). The second measure of partners' benevolent behavior was actors' evaluations of how considerate partners were, which was assessed every 6 to 8 months for the duration of the study by the item "How satisfied are you with the extent to which your partner is considerate?" using a 7-point Likert-type response scale ranging from 1 (not at all) to 7

(completely). At the beginning of the study, spouses were highly satisfied with their partners' considerateness ($M = 6.27$, $SD = .98$).

Results

Descriptive statistics and correlations (see Table S2) and preliminary analyses can be found in the online supplemental materials. We predicted that the implications of actors' self-reported tendencies to forgive their partners for those partners' observed tendencies to compromise would be moderated by actors' tendencies to demand positive changes in the partner. To test this hypothesis, we used HLM 7.01 to estimate a two-level model that regressed observations of partners' tendencies to compromise onto actors' tendencies to forgive, actors' tendencies to demand change, and the Actors' Forgiveness × Actors' Demand interaction. The interdependence of couples' data was controlled in the second level of the model with a randomly varying intercept, confirmed as the only necessary random effect by a series of deviance tests.

Results are presented in the first four columns of Table 2. As predicted, and consistent with the findings of Study 1, the Actors' Forgiveness × Actors' Demand interaction was significantly positively associated with partners' compromise. The significant interaction is plotted in Panel A of Figure 2. We again followed instructions provided by Preacher et al. (2006) to use the Johnson-Neyman method (Johnson & Neyman, 1936) to identify the regions of significance of the simple effects of forgiveness. Consistent with predictions and the findings of Study 1, actors' forgiveness was negatively associated with partners' compromise among actors who tended to demand less (<-0.54 SDs), but positively associated with partners' compromise among actors who tended to demand more (>0.93 SDs). Notably, subsequent analyses indicated the interaction was not moderated by participant sex, $\beta = -0.01$, $SE = 0.13$, $t(120) = -0.04$, $p = .965$, and remained significant controlling for partners' demands, partners' forgiveness, and their interaction, $\beta = 1.68$, $SE = 0.52$, $t(113) = 3.22$, $p = .002$.

Although a strength of the previous analysis is that it used observations of partner behavior, a drawback is that all behaviors were assessed concurrently at baseline. Thus, assuming that actors' tendencies to be demanding during couples' conflict discussions were at least partially stable (see Sullivan, Pasch, Johnson, & Bradbury, 2010), we also examined whether the demands observed at baseline would interact with actors' forgiveness at each time point to predict changes in actors' evaluations of the extent to which their partners were considerate over time. Specifically, we estimated a three-level model in which actors' evaluations of the extent to which their partner was considerate at one time point were regressed onto actors' forgiveness at the previous time point, controlling for actors' evaluations of the extent to which their partner was considerate at the previous time point and wave of measurement in the first level of the model. Actors' tendencies to demand change from their partners was entered at the intercept and at the forgiveness slope in the second level of the model to create the Actors' Forgiveness × Actors' Demand interaction.

Table 2

Effects of Actors' Forgiveness, Actors' Demands, and Their Interaction on Partners' Compromise and Changes in Partners' Considerateness in Study 2

Predictors	Partners' compromise[a]				Subsequent partners' considerateness[b]			
	π	Effect size r	95% CI	p	π	Effect size r	95% CI	p
Time	—	—	—	—	−.07	.32	[−.11, −.03]	<.001
Actors' forgiveness (F)	−.01	.05	[−.03, .02]	.595	−.00	.03	[−.01, .01]	.739
Actors' demands (D)	−1.93	.06	[8.02, 4.15]	.533	−7.70	.19	[−14.91, −.49]	.037
F ✖ D	1.87	.30	[.84, 2.91]	<.001	.67	.29	[.28, 1.06]	<.001
Partners' prior considerateness	—	—	—	—	.04	.09	[−.04, .11]	.328

Note. CI = confidence interval. a
[a]*df* = 124. [b]*df* = 122.

This model estimates the extent to which actors' tendencies to demand assessed at baseline interacted with their self-reports of their tendencies to forgive their partner at each time point to predict changes in the extent to which they evaluated their partners as considerate from that time point to the next. The interdependence of couples' data was controlled in the third level of the model with a randomly varying intercept. We also included random effects for time, partners' prior considerateness, and actors' forgiveness that were confirmed as necessary through the use of deviance tests.
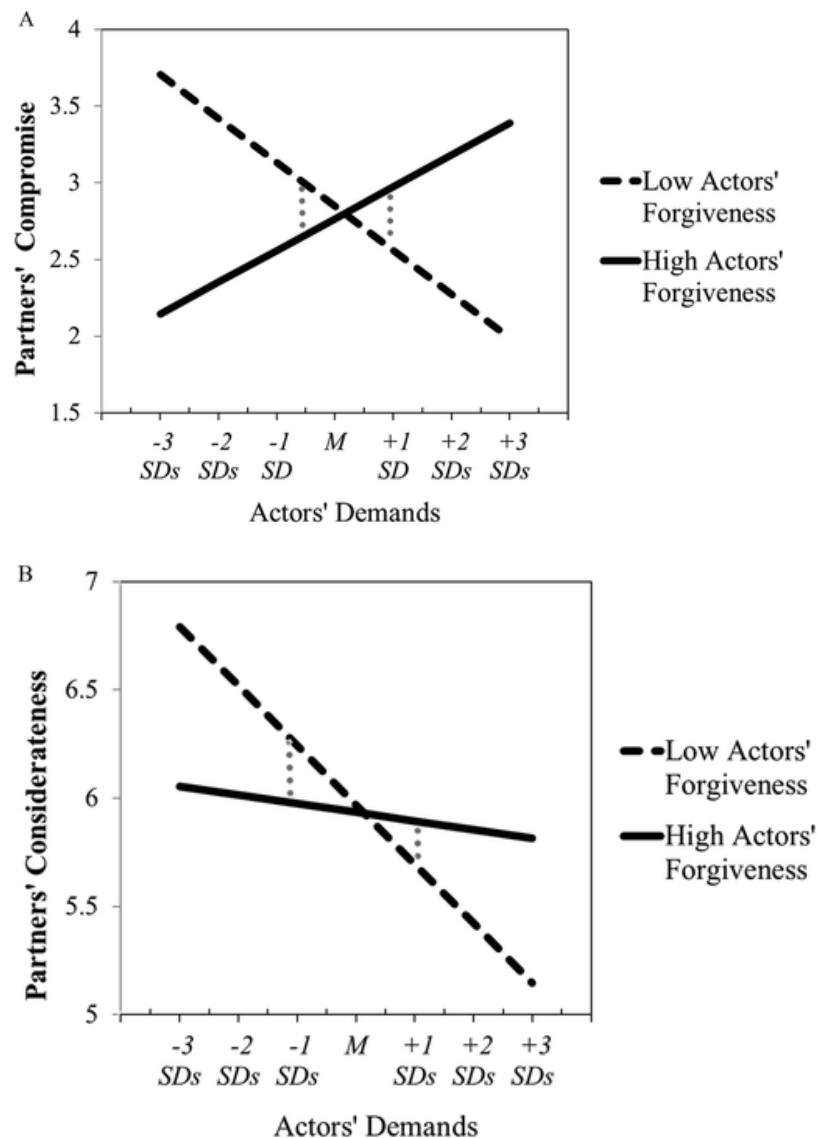

Figure 2. Interactive effects of actors' forgiveness and actors' demands on partners' compromise (Panel A) and changes in satisfaction with partners' considerateness (Panel B). Vertical dotted lines indicate regions of significance.

Although a strength of the previous analysis is that it used observations of partner behavior, a drawback is that all behaviors were assessed concurrently at baseline. Thus, assuming that actors' tendencies to be demanding during couples' conflict discussions were at least partially stable (see Sullivan, Pasch, Johnson, & Bradbury, 2010), we also examined whether the demands observed at baseline would interact with actors' forgiveness at each time point to predict changes in actors' evaluations of the extent to which their partners were considerate over time. Specifically, we estimated a three-level model in which actors' evaluations of the extent to which their partner was considerate at one time point were regressed onto actors' forgiveness at the previous time point, controlling for actors' evaluations of the extent to which their partner was considerate at the previous time point and wave of measurement in the first level of the model. Actors' tendencies to demand change from their partners was entered at the intercept and at the forgiveness slope in the second level of the model to create the Actors' Forgiveness × Actors' Demand interaction. This model estimates the extent to which actors' tendencies to demand assessed at baseline interacted with their self-reports of their tendencies to forgive their partner at each time point to predict changes in the extent to which they evaluated their partners as considerate from that time point to the next. The interdependence of couples' data was controlled in the third level of the model with a randomly varying intercept. We also included random effects for time, partners' prior considerateness, and actors' forgiveness that were confirmed as necessary through the use of deviance tests.

Results are presented in the last four columns of Table 2. The Actors' Forgiveness × Actors' Demand interaction was again significant. The significant interaction is plotted in Panel B of Figure 2. We again used the Johnson-Neyman method (Johnson & Neyman, 1936) to identify the regions of significance of the simple effects of actors' forgiveness. Consistent with the prediction that direct partner-regulation behaviors would complement the effects of forgiveness, actors' forgiveness was negatively associated with changes in actors' evaluations of the extent to which their partner was considerate among actors who tended to demand less frequently (<-1.13 SDs), but positively associated with changes in those evaluations among actors who tended to demand more frequently (>1.04 SDs). Subsequent analyses indicated the interaction was not moderated by participant sex, $\beta = -1.76\text{E-}3$, $SE = 0.01$, $t(110) = -0.21$, $p = .834$ and remained significant controlling for partners' demands, partners' forgiveness, and their interaction, $\beta = 0.66$, $SE = 0.21$, $t(111) = 3.18$, $p = .002$.

Discussion

Study 2 provided evidence that the effects of actors' forgiveness for partners' benevolent behavior depend on actors' use of direct oppositional partner regulation. Forgiveness was negatively associated with partners' tendencies to compromise and changes in actors' evaluations of those partners' considerateness among actors who tended to demand less change from their partners, but positively associated with these outcomes among actors who tended to demand more change from their partners. These findings add further support to the idea that partners can maximize the benefits of forgiveness by supplementing it with direct oppositional partner-regulation behaviors.

General Discussion

The current studies provide support that actors' forgiveness is associated with partners being more likely to transgress and less likely to behave benevolently among actors who tend to engage in direct oppositional partner-regulation behaviors less frequently. By contrast, forgiveness is associated with partners being less likely to transgress, and more likely to compromise and be considerate, among actors who tended to engage in direct oppositional partner-regulation behaviors relatively more frequently. These results indicate that supplementing forgiveness with direct oppositional partner-regulation behaviors can allow people to maximize the numerous benefits associated with forgiveness. Notably, this pattern emerged across different (a) types of samples (dating and married), (b) study designs (experimental and longitudinal), (c) types of measures (self-report, observational, partner report), and (d) operationalizations of hurtful behavior (transgressions and lack of benevolent behaviors), suggesting the effects are quite robust.

Several strengths of the current studies support our confidence in the reported results. First, the overall pattern of results replicated across two independent samples, reducing the likelihood that they were spurious or limited to characteristics associated with a particular sample. Second, both studies demonstrated the effects of forgiveness on observed behavior, reducing the likelihood that sentiment override processes (Weiss, 1980) accounted for these results by leading more-forgiving intimates simply to overperceive their partners' benevolent behavior. Finally, Study 1 experimentally manipulated perceived forgiveness, enhancing our confidence that the perception of forgiveness exerts a causal influence on partners' behavior.

Nevertheless, there are factors limiting the interpretation of these results until they can be replicated and extended. First, the community and undergraduate participants in the current studies were generally satisfied with their relationships and thus may not have encountered transgressions that were as frequent or severe as those experienced by people in distressed relationships. As such, readers should use caution when generalizing the current results until they can be extended to distressed samples, such as those seeking clinical services for severe transgressions (see McNulty, 2016; McNulty & Fincham, 2012). In fact, previous research suggests that forgiveness and partner regulation may operate differently among couples facing frequent and/or severe problems compared with those facing less frequent and/or severe problems. More specifically, McNulty (2008) demonstrated that couples facing more frequent problems are more at risk for adverse effects of forgiveness. According to this research, one could argue that supplementing forgiveness with direct oppositional partner regulation may be either more or less beneficial for distressed couples. On the one hand, supplementing forgiveness with direct oppositional partner-regulation behaviors may be more beneficial for more distressed couples because such couples appear to be most at risk for the potential costs of repeated transgressions and thus have the most to gain. On the other hand, supplementing forgiveness with direct oppositional partner regulation may be the least beneficial among distressed couples because these more frequent or severe transgressions may be more impervious to direct regulation. Future research would likely benefit by examining whether the interactive effects of forgiveness and partner regulation operate the same way in clinical populations. This distinction is especially important given that several clinical interventions (e.g., Baskin & Enright, 2004) emphasize the importance of forgiving partners for their transgressions.

A second limitation is that the current studies did not examine whether intimates explicitly communicated their forgiveness regarding an actual transgression. Future research

would benefit by examining whether the manner in which actors communicate forgiveness has additional implications for partners' subsequent behavior. Finally, although one strength of the current studies was that we used three different operationalizations of partners' behavior, Study 2 used only a single-item to assess changes in partners' considerateness.

These limitations notwithstanding, these findings have important implications. First, they join others to highlight important moderating processes of the link between forgiveness and subsequent partner behavior. Several studies indicate that forgiveness may increase the likelihood of future hurtful behavior, on average (McNulty, 2010, 2011), presumably because forgiven offenders may believe their behavior is tolerable. Although recent work demonstrates that some partners may be more inclined toward reoffending against forgiving partners than are others (McNulty & Russell, 2016), we are aware of no prior studies that have examined behaviors in which forgivers can engage to reduce the likelihood of reoffending. The current work provides evidence that explicitly regulating partners to push them to act in a desired manner can motivate partners to behave in a more benevolent and less hurtful manner.

Second, the current results also join a growing body of research (e.g., Baker & McNulty, 2015; Cohan & Bradbury, 1997; Karney & Bradbury, 1997; McNulty & Russell, 2010; Overall et al., 2009) in providing novel insights into the implications of direct oppositional partner-regulation behaviors. Based on the observation that intimates become distressed to the extent that they are confronted about their problematic behavior (for review, see Heyman, 2001), early relationship researchers (e.g., Jacobson & Margolin, 1979; Wills, Weiss, & Patterson, 1974) argued that intimates should avoid oppositional behaviors, such as blaming one another for relationship problems or demanding change. Nevertheless, as recently reviewed by Overall and McNulty (2017), a growing body of evidence suggests that such oppositional behaviors can benefit individuals and relationships over time (e.g., McNulty & Russell, 2010; Meltzer et al., 2012; Overall et al., 2009) by motivating partners to change their hurtful behavior (Baker & McNulty, 2015; Overall et al., 2006, 2009). According to the current findings, such behaviors may also reintroduce the motivation to behave benevolently that forgiveness may otherwise remove. Moreover, the current findings also highlight the fact that oppositional behaviors may benefit from signals that the actor still cares for and values the partner. Consistent with the idea that forgiveness likely provides such a signal (e.g., Emmers & Canary, 1996), oppositional behaviors were associated with increased hurtful behavior when not supplemented by forgiveness. Indeed, partners may be less willing to prioritize actors' demands over their own self-interests when they believe reconciliation is unlikely (see Baker & Baumeister, 2017; DeWall & Richman, 2011). In sum, just as direct oppositional partner-regulation behaviors allow people to reap the benefits of forgiveness, forgiveness may allow people to reap the benefits of these partner regulation behaviors.

Conclusion

Prior research demonstrates that forgiveness, despite its intra- and interpersonal benefits, can also be costly for the forgiver by failing to motivate offending partners away from hurtful behaviors and toward more benevolent behaviors in the future. The current studies provide evidence that forgiveness supplemented with direct oppositional partner regulation—behaviors that point out partners' hurtful behavior and demand change—is associated with positive outcomes among nondistressed couples. Specifically, forgiveness was associated with partners engaging in more hurtful and less benevolent behavior among intimates who engage in less

frequent direct oppositional partner-regulation behaviors, and, in contrast, associated with partners engaging in less hurtful and more benevolent behavior among intimates who more frequently engage in direct oppositional partner-regulation behaviors.

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