

An Investigation of Forgiveness-seeking Communication and Relational Outcomes

Douglas L. Kelley & Vincent R. Waldron

Therapists and theologians claim that the process of forgiveness is essential to the restoration of damaged relationships, but this possibility has received limited empirical attention. Furthermore, the role of an offender's communicative behavior in the forgiveness process remains understudied. This project first analyzed an inductively derived list of communication behaviors to develop a taxonomy of forgiveness-seeking approaches used by 186 romantic partners. These were interpreted with reference to face-management, uncertainty reduction, and rule-negotiation approaches to relationship recovery. Associations between the types of forgiveness-seeking communication and several different measures of post-transgression relationship change were examined. Results indicated that relationships recovered significantly when offending partners used behaviors labeled as explicit acknowledgment, nonverbal assurance, and compensation. Significant communicative effects remained after the effects of transgression severity were controlled. Results are interpreted as partially supportive of the assumption that forgiveness-seeking communication facilitates recovery from relational damage.

Keywords: Forgiveness; Relationship Change; Reconciliation; Relationship Quality; Relationship Maintenance

Introduction

That the people we most cherish are those we hurt most deeply is a common refrain in the literature on relationship maintenance (Emmers-Sommer, 2003). Indeed, recovery from hurtful transgressions is a task faced eventually in nearly all long-term romantic partnerships. Therapists and marriage researchers have increasingly studied

Douglas Kelley (Associate Professor) and Vincent Waldron (Professor), Department of Communication Studies #3251, Arizona State University West, PO Box 37100, Phoenix, Arizona 85069, USA (Tel: +1-602-543-6641; Fax: +1-602-543-6612; Email: douglas.kelley@asu.edu). Correspondence should be addressed to the first author.

the process of forgiveness as an important step in relationship recovery (e.g., Fincham & Beach, 2002). While it is possible to forgive while also choosing to end a relationship or reduce its intimacy, when partners forgive, they willingly give up legitimate claims to hostile emotion and retaliation (Exline & Baumeister, 2000). Those interested in reconciliation may require an extended period of therapy and communication aimed at relationship repair. The process of forgiveness helps to lay the emotional groundwork for relationship recovery, if not full reconciliation. The forgiveness process may also reduce emotional burdens, help individuals regain their spiritual footing, and restore a sense of relational justice.

Theorists increasingly conceptualize forgiveness as an interpersonal process, rather than an individual decision (Fincham & Beach, 2002). However, few studies have documented the communication behaviors partners use when they seek forgiveness. Even fewer have examined whether those behaviors are associated with positive or negative relational outcomes. The current study advances research in this area by developing potential theoretical linkages between the forgiveness and communication literatures, creating a working taxonomy of self-reported forgiveness-seeking approaches, and examining partner perceptions of how different types of forgiveness-seeking behaviors affected their relationships.

The theory base in the forgiveness literature consists primarily of descriptive models (e.g., Enright et al., 1991), which assume that the forgiveness process is triggered when one of the partners commits a serious transgression. Kelley (1998) summarized previous descriptive work by suggesting four model components. The first is the nature of the relationship prior to the forgiveness transaction, including its quality, longevity, and intimacy. A second factor is motivation, the reasons why forgiveness is sought or granted. For example, some individuals sought forgiveness as a means of helping their partner save face, while others had a genuine desire to repair the relationship. A third factor is the communication behavior used to seek and grant forgiveness. Finally, the relational outcomes associated with forgiveness episodes are of obvious interest. Kelley studied 304 narratives, finding that the forgiveness process resulted in decline in some relationships and the strengthening of others. Our study focuses primarily on the communicative components of forgiveness models.

The Nature of Forgiveness-Seeking Communication

Researchers have paid limited attention to the third, communicative, element of the model. However, several existing communicative frameworks can be usefully applied to what has traditionally been conceived of as a psychological process. For example, Metts (1994) used rules theories to explain how relational transgressions are assessed and new relational agreements are constructed. As Kelley (1998) reported in one of the few studies of forgiving communication, aggrieved partners sometimes set new conditions as part of the forgiveness process ("I forgive you as long as you don't do it again"). Presumably this kind of communication restores relational rules or imposes new ones. Another communicative approach is evident in the work of Emmers and

Canary (1996) who used an uncertainty reduction framework to study the relationship repair tactics used by young couples. Although forgiveness was not a primary focus, their work indicates that seeking forgiveness is one way for partners to manage the relational uncertainty that stems from transgressions. For example, an aggrieved partner may use the sincerity of an apology to gauge the likelihood that the offending partner will repeat the transgression. A third communicative framework links forgiveness to the face-management of relational partners (Afifi, Falato, & Weiner, 2001). From this point of view, forgiveness-seeking behavior is most efficacious when it helps the wronged partner protect his or her identity from threats inherent in unfaithful behavior. For example, a private confession and earnest request for forgiveness would be less face threatening to the victimized partner than an approach that implied shared blame.

These varying theoretical perspectives suggest that interpersonal communication should play multiple roles in the forgiveness process. However, a limited understanding of the varieties of forgiveness-seeking communication has been an impediment to research progress in this area (McCullough, Hoyt, & Rachal, 2000). In some cases, researchers report the *decision* to forgive as a relationship repair strategy, but provide limited analysis of how forgiveness is sought or enacted. For example, forgiveness was listed as one of many “interactive” strategies of relationship repair reported by Emmers and Canary (1996). In other reports, forgiveness-seeking is equated with apology, a widely-studied form of account-making behavior (see Cody & McLaughlin, 1990). Consistent with this conceptualization, Metts (1994) reported that partners who are caught in a deception might offer an apologetic response (“I am sorry, please forgive me”). In fact, apology is the one kind of communication behavior that has concerned forgiveness researchers, who generally confirm that it facilitates a forgiving reaction from the wronged partner (McCullough, Worthington, & Rachel, 1997).

However, the single study that addresses the matter directly suggests that forgiveness-seeking communication involves more than a simple apology. Kelley (1998) asked members of friend, family, and romantic relationships to describe relational incidents that required them to forgive another person. One of his open-ended questions solicited descriptions of the behaviors used to seek forgiveness. Coders identified a complex set of 28 different behaviors used by offending partners to communicate that they “needed or wanted forgiveness.” Some of these, like apology, are familiar. Others are less so. For example, offending partners sometimes ingratiated themselves, used humor to lift the spirits of the offended partner, or offered “conditions” to convince the partner that the relationship could be safely restored (e.g., “If you take me back, I won’t do it again . . .”). Some simply requested forgiveness while others offered elaborate explanations for their actions. Transgressors offered gifts to compensate for the harm, or simply let time pass until the hurt receded. Displays of emotion, such as allowing the partner to see tears, were also reported to be forgiveness-seeking tactics.

Kelley (1998) proposed a preliminary system of categorization, distinguishing primarily between “direct” and “indirect” approaches to forgiveness seeking. Direct tactics were explicit in acknowledging that a wrong had been committed, whereas indirect tactics were either nonverbal or implicit. However, this two-category system may oversimplify the diversity of the tactics reported in the forgiveness narratives Kelley collected (e.g., simple apology seems different than offering compensation or promising better behavior) and it misses potentially important distinctions between nonverbal and other indirect behavior (e.g., it is possible to be verbally indirect). For these reasons, our first research task was to subject the whole range of behaviors reported in Kelley’s qualitative study to statistical analysis, with the objective of developing a more discriminating taxonomy of forgiveness-seeking behavior. Previous research made clear that apology-related behavior should emerge from such an analysis. Research Question 1 guided our search for additional behavior types.

RQ1: What categories of forgiveness-seeking behavior (in addition to apology-related behaviors) are reported by members of romantic relationships?

Forgiveness-Seeking Communication and Relationship Outcomes

For many years therapists have argued that forgiveness can heal broken relationships (e.g., McCullough & Worthington, 1994; Worthington & Diblasio, 1990). Hargrave (1994) argues that forgiveness can result in a new (and possibly) improved “relationship covenant.” Of course, it is possible to forgive one’s partner but still choose to end the romantic involvement. In fact, preliminary evidence suggests that in non-therapeutic romantic relationships, the relational outcomes of forgiveness vary. In Kelley’s (1998) sample of forgiveness narratives, 28% of relational outcomes involved stabilization or “return to normal.” However, long-term relationship change was more pervasive (72%), with roughly half of these narratives reporting deterioration and half reporting strengthening of the relationship after the forgiveness episode. Partial recovery is another possibility. Forgiveness-seeking behavior may alleviate some of the face threat associated with a transgression, but a return to original levels of trust and intimacy may not be possible (see Afifi et al., 2001). Based on these varied reports, we expected that forgiveness-seeking behavior could be associated with negative or positive relationship change after a transgression, or simply no change.

We further expected that the quality of the forgiveness-seeking communication used by the offending partner should partially explain these varying outcomes. A recent review of forgiveness research indicates that partners must accomplish three forgiveness-related tasks if the relationship is to recover from a severe transgression (Gordon, Baucom & Snyder, 2000). First, the emotional impact of the offense must be absorbed and acknowledged. Second, the partners must make sense of the situation. The causes, motives, and relational implications of the offense must be

interpreted. This stage helps the offended party fully assess the severity of the transgression, reevaluate the character of the partner, and determine if a continued relationship will be psychologically safe. Third, having progressed on the emotional and cognitive tasks, the partners begin a process of planning the future. This task may involve ongoing negotiation of the “relational covenant” (Hargrave, 1994). In sum, forgiveness-seeking communication that facilitates the completion of these tasks ought to facilitate relationship recovery.

Several communicative frameworks explain how these forgiveness tasks might be accomplished through interpersonal interaction. With regard to the first task, emotional recovery, recent applications of face-management theory (e.g., Afifi et al., 2001) suggest that behavior which affirms the emotional reaction of the offended partner and places blame on the self, should be most efficacious. These behaviors might include expressions of remorse or regret, explicit acknowledgment of harm, and a willingness to accept emotion-charged criticism. As opposed to avoidance, minimization, or defensiveness, these responses acknowledge that the identities of the partner and the relationship have been threatened. Communication that acknowledges and apologizes for relational harm may have an emotionally transformative effect, making it more likely that feelings of affection can be restored (see Metts, 1994, p. 232.).

Uncertainty reduction approaches to relationship repair (e.g., Emmers & Canary, 1996) illuminate the forgiveness-seeking tactics that facilitate sense-making, the second forgiveness task. Explanations and accounts may be required if this task is to be accomplished, as the forgiver clarifies the circumstances surrounding the transgression and resolves ambiguities about the meaning of the partner’s behaviors, motives, and intentions. Assurances and promises of improved behavior may be useful as well, because they help the wronged partner assess the likelihood of repeated offenses and predict the psychological safety of a continued relationship.

Rules-based frameworks are useful in describing the type of communication that facilitates the third psychological task, moving to the future. For example, Mett’s (1994) drew on Newell and Stutmans’ (1991) social confrontation episode to show how relationships can be repaired through reaffirmation or re-legislation of rules. Similarly, forgiveness theorists suggest that partners must renegotiate the “relationship covenant” (Hargrave, 1994) by revising rules and imposing new conditions (e.g., restrictions on dating others). An offender who proposes new rules and/or pledges to comply with relational conditions may increase the margin of psychological safety perceived by the damaged partner. Rule-related communication may be the means by which relational trust is gradually restored. Relationship repair tasks that have been labeled meta-communicative (Dindia & Baxter, 1987) might be particularly relevant to this rule negotiation component of the forgiveness process.

In sum, face-management, uncertainty reduction, and rule negotiation frameworks all illuminate forms of forgiveness-seeking communication that should facilitate the performance of the forgiveness tasks proposed by Gordon, Baucom, & Snyder (2000). At this early stage in the conceptual development of forgiveness research, it is not our

purpose to determine which of these theories offers a superior explanation of how forgiving communication leads to relational outcomes. However, each of these theories can help forgiveness researchers conceptualize the types of communication used in forgiveness and possible rationales for why they might be linked to relationship changes. This information will be particularly useful as theorists develop forgiveness frameworks that acknowledge more explicitly the role of interpersonal communication. To advance this work, we examined associations between types of forgiving communication and perceived relationship changes. We considered changes in global dimensions of personal relationships, such as perceived quality, as well as more specific contributing elements, such as intimacy (for a recent discussion of these dimensions, see Dindia, 2003). Of course, prior to obtaining an answer to *RQ1*, we could not fully anticipate the specific categories of forgiveness-seeking communication reported by romantic partners. Even so, each of the three theoretical perspectives discussed above supports a general hypothesis.

H1: As suggested by face-management perspectives, forgiveness-seeking behaviors that take personal responsibility for emotional harm caused by the transgression (e.g., apologies, expressions of remorse) should be associated with positive relationship change after the transgression.

H2: As suggested by uncertainty reduction perspectives, forgiveness-seeking behaviors that provide the partner with sense-making information and/or make the future more predictable (e.g., detailed explanations, justifications, assurances about future) should be associated with positive relationship change after the transgression.

H3: As suggested by rules perspectives, forgiveness-seeking behaviors that reaffirm or offer compliance with relational rules should be associated with positive relationship change after the transgression.

Transgression Severity

If anything seems certain in the developing forgiveness literature, it is that the severity of a transgression will be a major factor in shaping the partners' responses (Fincham & Beach, 2001). This claim is consistent with a long-line of research on the management of social and relational transgressions (Cody & McLaughlin, 1990; Emmer-Sommer, 2003; Metts, 1994). The effects of transgression severity are particularly important in discussions of forgiveness. After all, a partner's moral sensibility can make some relational transgressions (e.g., infidelity) seem intrinsically unforgivable (Backman, 1985). Presumably, some offenses can be so grave that doubts are raised about the long-term trustworthiness of the partner or the psychological safety of the relationship (Worthington & Wade, 1999). In such cases, the severity of the event leads directly to negative relational outcomes. All of these claims raise the possibility that it is merely the wronged partner's assessment of transgression severity, rather than the form of forgiveness-seeking communication used by the offender, that accounts for relational outcomes. However, we know

that even severe transgressions are often forgiven. The question, then, remains as to what variables, beyond transgression severity, account for variance in relational outcomes.

RQ2: What are the relative contributions of transgression severity and forgiveness-seeking communication in accounting for relational outcomes?

Method

To examine the relationships among transgression severity, forgiveness-seeking communication, and relationship outcomes, a survey was administered to adult members of current or past romantic relationships. Survey questions were developed to describe each of the 28 forgiveness-seeking behaviors identified by coders in Kelley's (1998) qualitative analysis of forgiveness narratives. Survey items were factor analyzed to identify possible forgiveness-seeking approaches. The associations of these approaches with transgression severity and relational outcomes were investigated.

Respondents

The sample consisted of 186 individuals, ranging in age from 18 to 83. Average age of the respondents was 31 years old ($SD = 11.1$). Sixty-nine percent of the respondents were female. With regard to ethnicity, 75% of respondents self-identified as Anglo/Caucasian, 16% as Hispanic, 7% as African-American, and 1% as Asian. Roughly 1/3 (33%) of respondents were married, 13.5% divorced, 50% single/dating, 2.4% were separated from a spouse, and 1 person was widowed. On average, the romantic relationship had lasted 3 years (36 months) and the transgression had occurred approximately two years into the relationship (24.5 months). About 30% of the respondents were married at the time of the incident, which had occurred (on average) about 12 months before. When asked to rate the intimacy of the relationship immediately prior to the transgression on a 1 (lowest) to 7 (highest) scale, 93% of respondents chose a six or seven. Only a small number (18%) indicated that the incident ended their relationship.

Respondents were recruited using network sampling. As one of several options for obtaining a small amount of course credit, students in undergraduate communication courses recruited members of their social networks who met study criteria (adult participants, 18 years or older, who could clearly remember a time when they communicated forgiveness to a romantic partner).

Measures

We used confidential self-reports as data because forgiveness episodes are private and difficult to observe. Several steps were taken to increase the validity of these reports.

First, respondents participated only if they could clearly recall a time when they forgave a romantic partner. Second, they described a concrete relational event and specific partner rather than generalizing across episodes and partners. Third, each section of the questionnaire began with an open-ended question designed to prompt recall of the context. Fourth, each participant rated how clearly they recalled the forgiveness episode on a 1 (not at all clear) to 5 (extremely clear) scale. The average response was 4.3, an indication that respondents were confident in the accuracy of their recall.

The survey included questions about the severity of the transgression, forgiveness-seeking communication, relationship quality, and self-reported relationship change.

Forgiveness-seeking approaches

Measurement began with 28 survey items corresponding as closely as possible to the behavioral descriptions reported in Kelley's (1998) inductive analysis of forgiveness narratives. Respondents rated the extent to which their partner used a given behavior during the forgiveness episode (e.g., "They explained the circumstances"; "They told me they were sorry."). A rating of 1 indicated "very slight use," 4 indicated "moderate use," and 7 indicated "very extensive use." A rating of zero indicated the behavior was not used. We assessed extensiveness of use because forgiveness-seeking behavior is likely to be used over time, as the episode unfolds, rather than as a single act. Extensiveness ratings communicated the relative importance of the behavior within the episode.

To answer *RQ1*, we identified the common factors underlying the apparently diverse set of self-reported forgiveness-seeking behaviors. Principal components analysis with zero factors specified was used initially to estimate the number of common factors that should be retained. Examination of the initial eigenvalues revealed that five had values larger than one (64% of the variance accounted for) and the scree plot indicated a significant break between the fifth and sixth factors. We rotated five factors using the varimax method and examined factor loadings. Items that failed to load above 0.50 or had multiple high loadings (less than 0.20 difference between factors) were eliminated from subsequent analyses.¹ Ultimately, a five-factor model, including 18 of the original 28 forgiveness-seeking items was retained for interpretation (see Table 1).

Relational change

H1–H3 concerned the associations between measures of forgiveness-seeking communication and subsequent relationship change. Relationship change was operationalized with two different types of measures. First, participants directly assessed relationship changes "due to" the forgiveness episode, on scales ranging from -3 (a large amount of negative change) to 0 (no change) to $+3$ (a large amount of

Table 1 Forgiveness-Seeking Items, Factor Loadings, Scale Reliabilities and Means¹

Items ²	Loading	Alpha
I. Explicit acknowledgment (mean = 4.9)		0.90
They apologized	0.86	
They told me they were sorry	0.85	
They told me they felt badly	0.79	
They took responsibility for what they had done	0.67	
They asked directly for forgiveness	0.64	
II. Nonverbal assurance (mean = 4.5)		0.79
They looked me straight in the eyes	0.73	
They gave me a hug	0.72	
They were especially nice to me	0.71	
I could see in their face that they wanted the situation to be resolved	0.65	
III. Compensation (mean = 2.4)		0.75
They tried more than once to get forgiveness from me	0.80	
They tried indirect attempts to get forgiveness and then more direct strategies	0.80	
They told me they would do whatever I wanted	0.67	
They brought me a gift or did something for me	0.62	
IV. Explanation (mean = 4.8)		0.73
They explained the reasons for why they had offended me	0.84	
They explained the circumstances that surrounded the situation	0.79	
They discussed the offense with me	0.62	
V. Humor (mean = 0.71)		0.88
They tried to get me to see the humor of what had happened	0.94	
They joked about the situation	0.93	

Notes: ¹Items are based on Kelley's (1998) qualitative study. Some items are slightly abbreviated for space. Loadings are based on the analysis of all 28 original items. Mean is based on a 0 (no use) to 7 (very extensive use) scale. ²Sample non-loading items: "They had someone else tell me"; "They cried"; "I could just tell they were ready to be forgiven"; "They told mutual friends so it would get back to me"; "they told me it would never happen again".

positive change). A similar measure has been used reliably in previous studies of relationship change (e.g., Afifi et al., 2001). Participants rated changes on the dimensions of trust, information sharing, emotional closeness, shared activity, sharing feelings, touch, time together, feeling of affection, and time spent talking. Responses to these items were highly intercorrelated (Cronbach's $\alpha = 0.96$) suggesting that all dimensions changed in similar ways. A single summative measure of change was created.

A second set of measures involved the calculation of difference scores. Participants provided evaluations of their relationships on the dimensions of satisfaction, quality, stability and intimacy for three points in time: immediately before the forgiveness transgression (Time 1), immediately after the transgression was committed (Time 2), and immediately after forgiveness was granted to the offender (Time 3). The differences between Time 2 and Time 3 were most relevant to the hypotheses. The correlation matrix for these measures revealed that quality, satisfaction, and stability

were highly correlated (correlations ranged from 0.71 to 0.81). As such, we averaged the difference scores on these three items to create a composite measure of change in relationship quality. The intimacy measure was only weakly correlated with the others (correlations ranged from 0.09 to 0.24), so it was allowed to stand alone in subsequent analyses. This decision is supported by the results of Principle Axis factor analysis of the four items. It yielded a one-factor solution with the first three items loading at 0.89 or above. The intimacy items loaded at only 0.30.

Severity of the relational transgression

RQ2 concerned the relative contributions of transgression severity to relationship change. Three items measured the perceived severity of the relational transgression, a major factor in conceptual models of forgiveness (Worthington & Wade, 1999): (1) "At the time they occurred, how severe did you consider the other person's actions?" (2) "At the time they occurred, how damaging did you consider these actions to your relationship with the person?" (3) "At the time they occurred, how threatening to your relationship were these actions?" Because the items were highly correlated ($\alpha = 0.87$), the measures were averaged for statistical analyses ($M = 4.1$, $SD = 1.0$).

Results

Forgiveness-Seeking Communication

To answer RQ1, results of the factor analysis were interpreted in light of the existing forgiveness literature and the loading patterns reported in Table 1. The first factor included five items describing apology and remorse, as well as direct requests for forgiveness. As a group, these items acknowledged the harm caused by the transgression and took responsibility for it. We labeled this factor *explicit acknowledgment*. The second factor, labeled *nonverbal assurance*, included four items describing eye contact, hugs, facial expressions, and "being especially nice." The third factor included several items indicating that the offended partner expended considerable and sustained effort in seeking forgiveness. Multiple attempts and offering gifts defined this four-item factor, which we called *compensation*. Three items explained reasons and circumstances for the offending behavior, a category we called *explanation*. Finally, a fifth factor was labeled *humor*, because it included two items describing attempts to make light of the situation. Cronbach's α statistics for the five factors, respectively, were 0.90, 0.79, 0.75, 0.73, and 0.88. Summative measures were created for each type of communication.

Relationship Change

H1–H3 concerned the relationship of forgiveness seeking with outcome measures. These hypotheses were based on the assumption that relationships changed over the course of the forgiveness episode. To test this assumption, we took the preliminary step of examining mean scores on the global measure of relationship quality before the transgression ($M = 11.8$, $SD = 2.1$), immediately after the transgression ($M = 6.2$, $SD = 1.3$), and after forgiveness was granted ($M = 9.9$, $SD = 1.8$). Within subjects t -tests indicated that satisfaction dropped significantly after the transgression, $t(185) = 15.34$, $p < 0.01$, and then increased significantly after forgiveness, $t(185) = 12.51$, $p < 0.01$. Post-transgression satisfaction remained below original levels, $t(185) = 7.51$, $p < 0.01$, but these numbers suggest that relationships recovered substantially after forgiveness.

Having established that positive relationship change was experienced *after* the transgression, our next step was to determine which types of forgiveness-seeking communication were associated with specific types of change. Table 2 reports correlations for the five communication measures and (1) participants' self-reported relationship change, (2) difference scores for the global measure of relationship quality, and (3) difference scores on the measure of intimacy. The approaches of explicit acknowledgement ($r = 0.23$) and nonverbal assurance ($r = 0.23$) were significantly and positively correlated with perceived relationship change, as well as the difference score for relationship intimacy ($r = 0.20$, $r = 0.25$, respectively). The compensation approach was also positively correlated with the difference score for intimacy ($r = 0.26$). Regression results are reported below.

Transgression Severity

RQ2 concerned the relative contributions of the transgression severity and communication measures. A hierarchical regression clarified the contributions of the communication measures, with transgression severity entered at Step 1 and the communication measures entered as a block at Step 2. Table 3 reports the relevant Beta weights and t statistics for these regression models.

Table 2 Correlations between Forgiveness-Seeking Approaches, Perceived Relationship Change, and Difference Scores for Relationship Quality and Intimacy

Approach	Perceived change	Quality	Intimacy
Explicit acknowledgment	0.23*	0.07	0.20*
Nonverbal assurance	0.23*	0.05	0.25*
Explanation	0.10	0.00	0.11
Compensation	0.00	0.11	0.26*
Humor	-0.03	-0.11	-0.11

Notes. *Indicates one-tailed significance at $p < 0.05$.

Table 3 Hierarchical Regression Analyses Predicting Relationship Change from Transgression Severity and Forgiveness-Seeking Communication

	Perceived change			Quality difference score			Intimacy difference score		
	B	t	R ²	B	t	R ²	B	t	R ²
Model 1									
Step 1			0.05**			0.05**			0.03**
Severity	-0.22	3.1*		0.21	2.9*		0.18	2.4*	
Step 2			0.12**			0.06			0.13
Explicit acknowledgment	0.23	1.8		0.03	0.3		0.01	0.1	
Nonverbal assurance	0.17	1.8		0.02	0.2		0.17	1.7	
Compensation	-0.09	1.1		0.06	0.7		0.15	1.8	
Explanation	-0.05	0.6		-0.04	-0.4		0.01	0.1	
Humor	-0.05	0.7		-0.08	1.1		-0.10	1.4	
Model 2									
Step 1			0.05**			0.04**			0.03**
Severity	-0.23	3.2*		0.21	2.9*		0.18	2.4*	
Step 2			0.09**			0.05			0.11**
Tactic index	0.19	2.7		0.07	0.97		0.27	3.8*	

Notes: *t statistic is significant at $p < 0.05$; **F-change is significant for each step, $p < 0.01$; Tactic index is the sum of each individual's scores on the forgiveness seeking measures that correlated positively with relationship change measures.

When the *perceived relationship change* measure was used as the dependent variable, the transgression severity variable significantly improved model fit, F Change (1,182) = 9.9, $p < 0.01$. The addition of the five communication measures also improved the model significantly, F Change (5,176) = 3.0, $p < 0.01$. When the difference score for *relationship quality* was used as the dependent variable, the transgression severity measure improved model fit, F Change (1,182) = 8.5, $p < .01$. However, the communication measures did not account for significant additional variance, F Change (5, 177) = 0.57, *ns*. When the difference score for *relationship intimacy* was used as the dependent variable, the transgression severity measure improved model fit, F Change (1,183) = 6.0, $p < 0.01$. The addition of the communication measures also improved the model significantly, F Change (5, 177) = 3.7, $p < 0.01$. Adjusted R^2 for the three models (at Step 2) were 0.12, 0.06, and 0.13 respectively.

We presumed that relational recovery might be enhanced if the offending partner used multiple, rather than just one, of the forgiveness-seeking approaches showing positive correlations in Table 2. To test this "potency" assumption, we created a forgiveness seeking index for each participant by adding their scores on each of the four approaches (humor was excluded). This measure reflects an individual's tendency toward extensive use of the forgiveness tactics associated with positive outcomes. A second regression analysis was conducted. The severity measure was again entered at step one, and the communication index was entered at step 2. As indicated in Table 3,

results for this second regression model were similar but statistical significance of the *t* statistics was more pronounced. Apparently, forgiveness-seekers who reported extensive use of all four tactics (combined) had more success in creating positive relationship change.

Discussion

Our study makes three contributions to a dialogue previously conducted by theologians, researchers, and therapists, about the role of forgiveness processes in relationship restoration (e.g., Fincham & Beach, 2002; Hargrave, 1994). First, the nature of forgiveness-seeking communication is clarified by results indicating that at least five distinct communicative approaches are used. Second, we establish that forgiveness-seeking communication is associated with relational consequences. In particular, the approaches of explicit acknowledgment, nonverbal assurance, and compensation were associated with positive relationship change after a transgression. Third, as expected, transgression severity was significantly associated with negative relational change. Importantly however, communicative effects remain after transgression severity is controlled for.

Forgiveness Seeking Communication

RQ1 concerned variations in forgiveness-seeking communication. Starting with a list of behaviors derived from Kelley's (1998) forgiveness narratives, we located five preliminary categories of forgiveness-seeking behavior. As expected, some have conceptual similarities to those reported in previous research. For example, the cluster of behaviors we labeled *explicit acknowledgment*, includes apology and expressions of remorse. These are similar to the "concessions" reported in the research on account-making (Cody & McLaughlin, 1990). However, this cluster displayed distinctive elements as well, most notably an explicit request that the partner forgive the transgression (as opposed to simply waiting for forgiveness to transpire). Several theorists have commented that forgiveness involves a renegotiated relationship between the partners (e.g., Fincham & Beach, 2002; Hargrave, 1994) in addition to a simple admission of guilt. The item describing the request for forgiveness is consistent with this conceptualization, because it acknowledges that the forgiveness process cannot be completed without the partner's consent.

Recent applications of face-management theory prove useful in explaining why respondents rated these behaviors similarly (see Afifi et al., 2001). Concessions of guilt and apologies communicate that the aggrieved partner bears little or no responsibility for the relational transgression (relieving any possible threat to positive face). The request for forgiveness grants autonomy to the aggrieved partner, allowing him or her to decide whether forgiveness is appropriate (supporting negative face). These behaviors, associated with the *explicit acknowledgment* factor, may legitimize the wronged partner's emotional response to the transgression, an important

psychological step in the forgiveness process (Gordon et al., 2000). In any case, respondent ratings indicate that this form of forgiveness-seeking behavior is used extensively, as indicated by the mean scores presented in Table 1.

Several nonverbal approaches to forgiveness seeking loaded on a factor we called *nonverbal assurance*. As a group they may communicate a sense of emotional authenticity and assurance of the partner's good will. In the context of forgiveness seeking, behaviors like eye contact and hugs may indicate that the offender is "truly" repentant or honestly committed to restoring the relationship. As suggested by Emmers and Canary (1996), relational transgressions create uncertainty about the relational future. Assurances may serve the purpose of soothing emotional distress of the partner during a time of emotional upheaval, while increasing confidence that the transgression is unlikely to be repeated. Assurance has been a common theme in the relationship maintenance literature as well Canary & Stafford (1992). It was among the most extensively used forgiveness-seeking tactics reported by our respondents.

A third general approach to forgiveness seeking we labeled *explanation*. These behaviors are familiar due to their prominence in the literature on interpersonal accounting (Cody & McLaughlin, 1990). Explanations offer explanatory details, motives, or reasons. Explanations can help the offender save face, but they also reduce uncertainty about the circumstances surrounding the transgression. In forgiveness-seeking situations, they may help the offended partner "make sense" of the offense and gauge its seriousness. Was it intentional? Were there mitigating circumstances? This kind of sense-making helps the offended partner decide whether or not to forgive and/or pursue relationship restoration (Gordon et al., 2000).

We note that one item loading on the explanation factor described the transgressor's attempts to "discuss" the offense. Kelley (1998) categorized this type of interactive behavior with his "direct" forgiveness strategies, because it directly acknowledged the transgression. However, our statistical results clarify that discussion is linked more closely with the sense-making process than it is to direct requests for forgiveness. It may be that discussion is a preliminary move, one that helps the parties decide whether explicit requests for forgiveness are called for and, if so, how to proceed.

The forgiveness-seeking tactics we labeled "compensation" involve persistence, willingness to comply with the partner's wishes, and investment of resources by the offender. The redressing of face threat may be one motive for such behavior, as a certain amount of groveling may be required of the offender as compensation for pain or embarrassment caused to the partner. By offering to "do whatever I [the offended party] wanted," offenders granted their partners considerable autonomy in determining the future of the relationship. Of course, compensatory behaviors, including gifts, may signal the offender's willingness to reinvest in the relationship's future—his or her commitment to restoring equity (see Canary & Stafford, 1992). This finding indicates that equity-based approaches to forgiveness-seeking require additional consideration in future studies. However, our participants did not extensively report compensatory behavior. The relatively low mean scores on this

measure suggest that equity considerations may be less important in the forgiveness process than acknowledgement of harm, assurance, and explanation.

Finally, although humorous approaches to forgiveness seeking were identified in Kelley's qualitative (1998) study, they were reported here as rarely used. One explanation may involve the relational context. Kelley's sample included friends and family members, whereas ours is focused exclusively on romantic partners. In romantic relationships, where the emotional stakes are particularly high, humorous responses may be viewed as a relatively tactless failure to recognize the emotional harm caused by one's behavior. Presumably humor is used to lighten the partner's mood, divert attention away from the offense, or reframe the situation. However, this failure to fully acknowledge the emotional damage caused by the transgression may stall the forgiveness process (Gordon et al., 2000).

In sum, our investigation of *RQI* resulted in a working taxonomy of forgiveness-seeking approaches. We find the relatively high scale reliabilities and the interpretability of the factors to be encouraging signs, but verification with additional samples is needed. We also note that some of the tactics reported in Kelley's (1998) study (e.g., using a third party as a conduit for forgiveness requests) receive minimal attention here, because they did not correlate well with other items. We encourage future researchers to avoid the temptation to limit the range of tactics they study. On the other hand, the five categories that did emerge are consistent with past research on related relational processes (e.g., relationship repair, account-making) and they are easily interpretable. We hope to refine them in subsequent studies.

Relationship Change

H1–H3 concerned the influence of forgiveness-seeking approaches on relationship change. As a preliminary step, we established that measures of relationship quality rose substantially after forgiveness was granted, a result that supports the restorative role of forgiveness in romantic relationships. Results indicated that the approaches of explicit acknowledgment and nonverbal assurance were significantly and positively associated with self-reported changes in relationship quality as well as the measure of improvement (difference score) in relational intimacy. The compensation measure was also positively associated with post-transgression improvement in intimacy.

Unlike the perceived change and intimacy improvement scores, the improvement score for relationship quality was not significantly associated with forgiveness seeking tactics. This measure is a difference score computed from reports of stability, satisfaction, and quality immediately after the offense and immediately after forgiveness was communicated. One explanation is that these global dimensions of relationship quality are relatively impervious to change, particularly in relationships with a fairly long history. A related explanation is that global evaluations of relationship quality take longer to recover after a severe offense. Given that the transgressions occurred an average of 12 months earlier, the partners may still be

negotiating the relational consequences of the event. In any case, our results confirm that relationship change should be operationalized with multiple measures.

Earlier, we drew on face-management, uncertainty reduction, and rules perspectives to explain how interpersonal communication might help partners perform the three forgiveness tasks articulated by therapists (Gordon et al., 2000). It appears to us that behaviors exhibiting face-management characteristics were most associated with positive relationship changes, a finding consistent with *H1*. In particular, the *explicit acknowledgment* factor includes behaviors that threaten the positive face of the transgressor while granting the offended partner the power to offer forgiveness. When the offending partner was perceived to use this type of behavior extensively, the aggrieved partner reported more post-transgression relationship recovery. We note that some behaviors loading on the *compensation factor* also appear to redress face threat. Compensation was positively associated with improvements in self-reported intimacy. We would argue that, when combined, explicit acknowledgment and compensation approaches recognize, and offer restitution for, the emotional and relational damage associated with the offense. This may be the first task in the forgiveness process, although such efforts may persist as other forgiveness tasks are performed.

Uncertainty reduction is presumably important in the sense-making stage of the forgiveness process (Gordon et al., 2000), as suggested by *H2*. In our results, the effects of uncertainty reduction behavior were mixed. For example, the communication of nonverbal assurance likely has the effect of reducing uncertainty about the offender's sincerity and his or her commitment to improved behavior. The correlational data confirm that nonverbal assurance was associated with positive relationship change. In contrast, explanation, another kind of uncertainty reduction behavior, was frequently used, but not systematically connected with relationship change measures. Perhaps in the forgiveness process, verbal explanations of some kind are offered by all but the most recalcitrant offenders. Therefore, the mere use of explanation is a poor indicator of the offender's commitment to improved relational behavior. Future research should determine if the *quality* of the explanation is a better predictor of positive relationship changes. In any case, our data suggest that the sense of assurance that comes in part from the offender's nonverbal displays, is more directly correlated with positive relationship change.

Finally, the role of rules-related behaviors in predicting relationship change (*H3*) was harder to assess, because those behaviors loaded on multiple factors, or simply failed to load at all. For example, the item "they told me it would never happen again" appears to affirm the legitimacy of relationship rules, but it failed to load with other items. As mentioned above, some of the behaviors associated with our *explicit acknowledgment* factor can be interpreted as efforts to redress rule violations (cf., Metts, 1994). These were associated with positive relational changes. Acknowledgment of rule violations may be a necessary first step if relational agreements are renegotiated later in the forgiveness process. However, the one item that communicated a willingness to comply with new rules ("... they said they would do

whatever I wanted”) loaded on the compensation factor. This willingness to comply seems more an acknowledgment of the wounded partner’s right to decide the fate of the relationship than it is a willingness to abide by relational agreements. Thus we conclude that support for *H3* is weak. One explanation comes from Kelley (1998), whose results suggest that the setting of new relational rules is the prerogative of the forgiver rather than the forgiveness seeker. Studies of forgiveness-granting communication may reveal more widespread use of rule-setting communication.

In sum, we attempted to link, in a preliminary way, the psychological requirements of forgiveness to three theoretically distinctive forms of communication. This effort helped us build conceptual bridges between communicative and psychological perspectives on forgiveness. The study was not designed as a test of the superiority of face-management, uncertainty reduction, or rules-based explanations. The multi-functional nature of most communicative acts makes interpretation of such behaviors perilous without extensively consulting both parties to the act. However, given these qualifications, we do interpret the results as tentative evidence for the utility of face-management perspectives in explaining patterns of forgiveness-seeking behavior. Extensive efforts to manage and redress threats to the partner were associated with partner-reported improvements in the relationship. More generally, our results indicate that the manner in which an offender seeks forgiveness has relationship consequences.

Transgression Severity

The regression results indicate that transgression severity was associated with significant and negative perceptions of relationship change. Based on past findings and common sense, this result is unsurprising. However, when severity was controlled for, measures of forgiveness-seeking communication still accounted for significant amounts of variance in two of the three measures of relationship change. This result answered *RQ2*. Further, it confirms the recent speculation of forgiveness researchers that interpersonal responses to serious transgressions are an important, albeit not fully understood, component of the forgiveness process in personal relationships (e.g., Fincham & Beach, 2002). Our results are somewhat consistent with those reported by Kelley (1998) who found that for some partners, the explicit seeking and granting of forgiveness could help the relationship recover from even severe transgressions. In other words, the relational effects of transgressions that might seem “unforgivable” may still be attenuated by communication after the event.

Kelley (1998) also reported that some respondents experienced *stronger* relationships after the forgiveness episode, not just partial recovery. In our study, at one year past the transgression, on average, couples had not returned to original levels of relationship quality. This may indicate the processual nature of forgiveness and reconciliation processes. An offense serious enough to require forgiveness may cause breaches of respect and trust that take years to fully repair. That fact that Kelley’s sample included relatively few romantic relationships, may also explain the

difference in results. Transgressions may be more damaging and forgiveness less potent when the relationship is romantic. Another possibility is that some of our respondents considered forgiveness and relationship reconciliation to be different matters. Religious beliefs or a need to release negative emotions, more than relational motives, may have led these respondents to seek forgiveness. In these cases, forgiveness may have facilitated individual more than relational recovery. Nevertheless, these preliminary results lend support to the work of researchers and clinicians who have given forgiveness a prominent role in therapeutic settings.

In conclusion, this study supports the idea that the communicative act of seeking forgiveness has at least partially restorative effects on romantic relationships. Those seeking to repair a relationship after a major mistake should find some solace in these results. The communicative behaviors one uses to seek forgiveness may have positive effects on the partner's perceptions of the post-transgression relationship. In particular, explicit acknowledgment of the harm caused by one's behavior and the use of appropriate nonverbal displays are starting points for the repair effort.

We acknowledge that our results are limited by the self-reported and retrospective nature of our data, although we took several steps to increase and confirm the accuracy of participant recall. Looking back at past events, offended partners could provide biased reports of the forgiveness-seeking behaviors used by their mates. For example, it may be ego protecting or socially desirable to report that a partner apologized prior to being forgiven. On the other hand, we value partner ratings as an alternate to reports of one's own forgiveness-seeking behavior.

We also note that the variables we measured represent only a small part of the very complex forgiveness process. The amount of variance accounted for by our measures was modest. In addition, we have yet to examine potentially important components of the process. For example, in this particular study we have not considered the motives of the partners. Why was the offense committed? Why did the offender seek forgiveness? We did provide evidence of the quality of these relationships prior to the transgression, but pre-transgression relationship quality requires additional analysis.

We did not fully consider the effects of time in our cross-sectional analysis, noting only that the offenses had occurred on average one year prior to the reports we collected. At present, we can only speculate about the sequencing of forgiveness-seeking tactics as the process unfolds. A longitudinal design would be useful in this regard. We have argued, with Gordon et al. (2000), that communicators must address emotional issues before moving to the tasks of sense-making and planning for the relational future. However, it seems likely that these steps overlap such that certain kinds of communication serve multiple purposes at one point in time. All of this makes clear that much research remains to be done on the very rich and apparently consequential relational phenomenon of forgiveness.

Notes

- [1] Detailed factor analysis statistics are available from the first author. Non-loading items are listed at the bottom of Table 1.
- [2] We entered the transgression severity variable first, then entered the forgiveness-seeking measures as a block.

References

- Affifi, W., Falato, W., & Weiner, J. (2001). Identity concerns following a serious relational transgression: The role of discovery method for the relational outcomes of infidelity. *Journal of Social and Personal Relationships, 18*, 291–308.
- Backman, C. W. (1985). Identity, self-presentation, and the resolution of moral dilemmas: Towards a social psychological theory of moral behavior. In B. R. Schlenker (Ed.), *The self and social life* (pp. 261–289). New York: McGraw-Hill.
- Canary, D. J., & Stafford, L. (1992). Relational maintenance strategies and equity in marriage. *Communication Monographs, 59*, 243–267.
- Cody, M. J., & McLaughlin, M. L. (1990). Interpersonal accounting. In H. Giles & W. P. Robinson (Eds.), *Handbook of language and psychology* (pp. 227–255). Chichester, UK: John Wiley.
- Dindia, K. (2003). Definitions and perspectives on relational maintenance communication. In D. J. Canary & M. Dainton (Eds.), *Maintaining relationships through communication: Relational, contextual, and cultural variations* (pp. 1–30). Mahwah, NJ: Erlbaum.
- Dindia, K., & Baxter, L. (1987). Strategies for maintaining and repairing marital relationships. *Journal of Social and Personal Relationships, 4*, 143–158.
- Enright, R. D., & The Human Development Study Group (1991). The moral development of forgiveness. In W. J. Kurtines & J. Gerwitz (Eds.), *Handbook of moral behavior and development* (Vol. 1, pp. 123–152). Hillsdale, NJ: Erlbaum.
- Emmers, T. M., & Canary, D. J. (1996). The effect of uncertainty reducing strategies on young couples' relational repair and intimacy. *Communication Quarterly, 44*, 166–182.
- Emmers-Sommer, T. M. (2003). When partners falter: Repair after a transgression. In D. J. Canary & M. Dainton (Eds.), *Maintaining relationships through communication: Relational, contextual, and cultural variations* (pp. 185–208). Mahwah, NJ: Erlbaum.
- Exline, J. J., & Baumeister, R. F. (2000). Expressing forgiveness and repentance: Benefits and barriers. In M. C. McCullough, K. I. Pargament & C. E. Thoresen (Eds.), *Forgiveness: Theory, research, and practice* (pp. 133–155). New York: Guilford Press.
- Fincham, F. D., & Beach, S. R. (2001). Forgiveness in close relationships. In F. Columbus (Ed.), *Advances in psychology research* (Vol. 7, pp. 163–197). Huntington, NY: Nova Science.
- Fincham, F. D., & Beach, S. R. (2002). Forgiveness in marriage: Implications for psychological aggression and constructive communication. *Personal Relationships, 9*, 239–251.
- Gordon, K. C., Baucom, D. H., & Snyder, D. K. (2000). The use of forgiveness in marital therapy. In M. C. McCullough, K. I. Pargament & C. E. Thoresen (Eds.), *Forgiveness: Theory, research, and practice* (pp. 203–227). New York: Guilford Press.
- Hargrave, T. D. (1994). Families and forgiveness: A theoretical and therapeutic framework. *The Family Journal: Counseling and Therapy for Couples and Families, 2*, 339–348.
- Kelley, D. L. (1998). The communication of forgiveness. *Communication Studies, 49*, 255–271.
- McCullough, M. F., & Worthington, E. L., Jr. (1994). Encouraging clients to forgive people who have hurt them: Review, critique, and research prospectus. *Journal of Psychology and Theology, 22*, 3–20.
- McCullough, M. E., Worthington, E. L., & Rachal, K. C. (1997). Interpersonal forgiving in close relationships. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology, 73*, 321–336.

- McCullough, M. C., Hoyt, W. T., & Rachal, C. K. (2000). What we know (and need to know) about assessing forgiveness constructs. In M. C. McCullough, K. I. Pargament & C. E. Thoresen (Eds.), *Forgiveness: Theory, research, and practice* (pp. 203–227). New York: Guilford Press.
- Metts, S. (1994). Relational transgressions. In W. R. Cupach & B. H. Spitzberg (Eds.), *The dark side of interpersonal communication* (pp. 17–34). Hillsdale, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates.
- Newell, S. E., & Stutman, R. K. (1991). The episodic nature of social confrontation. In J. A. Anderson (Ed.), *Communication yearbook 14* (pp. 359–392). Newbury Park, CA: Sage.
- Worthington, E. L., Jr., & DiBlasio, F. A. (1990). Promoting mutual forgiveness within the fractured relationship. *Psychotherapy, 27*, 219–223.
- Worthington, E. L., & Wade, N. G. (1999). The psychology of forgiveness and unforgiveness and implications for clinical practice. *Journal of Social and Clinical Psychology, 18*, 385–418.

Copyright of *Communication Quarterly* is the property of Eastern Communication Association and its content may not be copied or emailed to multiple sites or posted to a listserv without the copyright holder's express written permission. However, users may print, download, or email articles for individual use.