Communicating Forgiveness in Friendships and Dating Relationships
Andy J. Merolla

Retrospective accounts of transgression and forgiveness situations in ongoing friendships and dating relationships were coded based on Kelley’s (1998) three forms of forgiveness granting (direct, indirect, and conditional). Across the sample, indirect forgiveness was reported most frequently, followed by direct and conditional forgiveness. Forgiveness-granting tendencies varied by relationship type, as friends reported more instances of indirect forgiveness than did dating partners, and dating partners reported more instances of conditional forgiveness than did friends. For both relationship types, transgressions of increasing severity and blameworthiness tended to be forgiven indirectly or conditionally. An additional focus of this study was ongoing negative affect (ONA) that persists after forgiveness has been communicated to a transgressor. ONA was salient for about 22% of participants, was positively related to transgression severity and was negatively related to relational satisfaction. Conditional forgivers reported higher levels of ONA than did direct or indirect forgivers.

Keywords: Communication; Conflict; Forgiveness; Friendship; Romantic Relationship

Given forgiveness is believed to be a critical component of successful interpersonal relationships (McCullough, Rachal, Sandage, Worthington, Brown, & Hight, 1998) and good mental and physical health (Witvliet, Ludwig, & Vander Laan, 2001), it is surprising some elements of the forgiveness process have received such scant research attention. Very little is known, for instance, about how forgiveness is communicated in close relationships and the variables linked to various forms of forgiveness granting (Exeline & Baumeister, 2000; Kelley, 1998; Waldron & Kelley,
The present study offers three research goals aimed at shedding light on forgiveness granting in friendships and dating relationships.

The first goal of this study is to explore the frequencies with which dating partners and close friends employ three forms of forgiveness-granting communication identified by Kelley (1998): (a) direct forgiveness, (b) indirect forgiveness, and (c) conditional forgiveness. The second goal is to examine how victims’ perceptions of transgression severity and transgressor blameworthiness are linked to forgiveness-granting communication as past research has repeatedly demonstrated severity and blameworthiness are salient components of the forgiveness process (e.g., McCullough, Fincham, & Tsang, 2003; Waldron & Kelley, 2005).

Finally, considering that forgiveness is both an intrapersonal (Thompson et al., 2005) and interpersonal (Kelley, 1998) process, the third goal of this study is to explore the degree to which individuals experience negative affect after they communicate forgiveness to another person. Although forgiveness is conceptualized as involving the release of negative affect (e.g., anger, resentment), individuals sometimes express forgiveness (i.e., as a speech act) without abandoning negative emotionality (Enright & Fitzgibbons, 2000). As Younger, Piferi, Jobe, and Lawler (2004) found, 45% of their participants reported experiencing negative affect or grudges after communicating forgiveness to a transgressor. The current study examines the prevalence and correlates (e.g., severity, blameworthiness, relational satisfaction) of ongoing negative affect (ONA) following forgiveness granting.

**Interpersonal Forgiveness**

Several definitions of forgiveness have been forwarded over the years, making it difficult to find a consensus definition amongst scholars (Enright & Fitzgibbons, 2000). My goal here, then, is to briefly identify some common themes in recent social scientific forgiveness scholarship.

Forgiveness is most often conceptualized and examined from victims’ perspective, rather than transgressors’ (Thompson et al., 2005). Forgiveness, moreover, is often said to be a constructive relational process involving the release of negative affect attributed to transgressors’ hurtful actions (Younger et al., 2004). A motivation-based view of forgiveness characterizes it as the lessened motivation to seek revenge and avoidance from a transgressor along with an increased motivation to seek relational repair (McCullough et al., 1998). Recent studies suggest forgiveness is motivated by factors such as relational commitment, love, empathy, fear of losing one’s partner, and emotional involvement (Kelley, 1998; Younger et al., 2004).

The extant literature on forgiveness focuses largely on why individuals forgive and the subsequent effects of forgiveness on individual and relational well-being. The literature, in contrast, offers limited insight into how individuals forgive (Waldron & Kelley, 2005). In reviewing past forgiveness research, Waldron and Kelley concluded, “All of these studies have in common an emphasis on the individual feelings and cognitions associated with forgiveness, rather than communicative behaviors used to provoke, express, or manage them” (p. 724).
Kelley (1998) suggested that in order to more fully understand the forgiveness process, researchers must focus on the “dynamics of communicating forgiveness in daily interactions” (p. 270). Kelley’s analysis of forgiveness narratives remains one of the only studies to date examining communication aspects of forgiveness. Kelley’s work indicates individuals forgive in three ways. The first form is direct forgiveness in which forgivers clearly and plainly tell offenders they are forgiven (i.e., “I forgive you”), often in the context of discussion about the transgression. Kelley stated, “Direct strategies included discussing the nature of the issue and the forgiver telling the offender that he or she understands” (p. 263).

The second form is indirect forgiveness, whereby individuals do not explicitly tell others they are forgiven; rather, forgiveness is “just understood” (Kelley, 1998, p. 264). When indirectly forgiving, the forgiver uses tactics such as humor, nonverbal displays (e.g., hug, eye contact), or acting “back to normal” around the transgressor. Indirect forgiveness is believed to be a conflict minimization strategy, used when “preservation of the relationship is more important than rectifying the relational transgression” (Waldron & Kelley, 2005, p. 738).

The third way individuals forgive is with conditions. When forgiving with conditions (referred to here as conditional forgiveness), individuals tell the transgressor he or she is forgiven, but with stipulations attached. For example, one respondent in Kelley’s (1998) study stated she forgave her partner, but added, “we both knew that there was the stipulation that he stay off the booze” (p. 264). Conditional forgiveness is used when individuals desire relational repair yet want to make it explicitly clear to transgressors that repeated behavior will not be tolerated (Waldron & Kelley, 2005).

Kelley’s (1998) analysis of forgiveness in friendships, dating, and family relationships revealed that, across the three relational forms, direct forgiveness was used most commonly (63% of the time), followed by indirect (43%) and conditional (15%) forgiveness; note these percentages have a sum greater than 100% because some narratives were coded as involving more than one forgiveness type. Waldron and Kelley (2005) further explored the frequencies with which individuals employ the forgiveness types in the context of adult romantic relationships. Unlike Kelley, who coded open-ended forgiveness accounts, Waldron and Kelley assessed forgiveness granting with a Likert-type index. Waldron and Kelley’s measure asked participants to rate (on an 8-point scale) the extent to which they enacted the forgiveness forms in a recent forgiveness situation.

Consistent with Kelley (1998), Waldron and Kelley (2005) found direct forgiveness (which was split into two categories called discussion and explicit forgiveness) was the most frequently used forgiveness type. Counter to Kelley, however, Waldron and Kelly found conditional forgiveness was the second most commonly used type, far ahead of indirect forgiveness (composed of two categories, minimizing and nonverbal display). Based on the two studies just described, it is predicted in this study that direct forgiveness will again be the most frequently reported type of forgiveness.
across the relational forms. However, because the aforementioned studies reported inconsistent findings regarding the relative commonness of indirect and conditional forgiveness, a research question is posed regarding the frequencies of these forgiveness types. The discrepancy in findings between indirect and conditional forgiveness usage could be attributable to methodological (i.e., open-ended coding vs. Likert-type index) or sample variations between the aforementioned studies. The current investigation therefore attempts to clarify the general usage pattern of the forgiveness types.

Results consistent with Kelley (1998) or Waldron and Kelley (2005) will serve to buttress the validity of these authors’ findings and perhaps lend support to a consistent forgiveness-type usage pattern. Inconsistent results, however, may demonstrate the limited cross-sample generalizability of forgiveness-type frequency estimates, as frequency of enactment, in and of itself, may simply fail to capture the dynamic nature of forgiveness-granting communication. Instead, as discussed later, insight into forgiveness granting may be best ascertained in light of relational (e.g., relationship type) and contextual (e.g., transgression characteristics) factors. Given the dearth of research on forgiveness granting, however, the following hypothesis and research question should, at the very least, further elucidate the utility of Kelley’s typology for analyzing real-life forgiveness episodes.

H1: Individuals will report direct forgiveness more frequently than either indirect or conditional forgiveness.

RQ1: With what frequency will individuals report using indirect and conditional forgiveness-granting communication?

Forgiveness Communication among Friends and Dating Partners

Even though friendships and dating relationships are similar in that both are voluntarily maintained, important differences exist between the relational forms that potentially affect their forgiveness granting motivations and tendencies (Kelley, 1998). Notable differences exist, for instance, between friends’ and romantic partners’ experiences and management of relational conflict. Friends not only engage in less conflict than romantic partners (Davis & Todd, 1982) but also tend to manage conflict differently. Friends, for instance, relative to romantic partners, are prone to conflict avoidance following transgressions (Fehr, 1996), and friends often view avoidance as the most appropriate means of conflict management (Canary, Cupach, & Messman, 1995). In sum, as Fehr put it:

[W]hen anger and conflict occur in friendship, it appears that the most common response is to bury one’s head in the sand . . . friends generally opt for the path of least resistance and avoid directly dealing with conflict issues. (p. 165)

Due to their inclination towards conflict avoidance, friends should be more likely than daters to enact indirect forgiveness following transgressions because indirect forgiveness is indicative of conflict minimization (Waldron & Kelley, 2005), whereby the victim and transgressor let “bygones be bygones” without explicit discussion of the events (Exeline & Baumeister, 2000).
Direct forgiveness, in contrast, should be more frequently used by daters because
direct forgiveness is marked by discussion of the transgression and its potential
meaning to the relationship (Waldron & Kelley, 2005). Kelley (1998) suggested trans-
gressions may be particularly meaningful in the context of dating because transgres-
sions can often signal the need for reevaluation of the relationship. Dating partners
may have more room for relational de-escalation than friends following transgres-
sions and may need to explicitly discuss transgressions in order to best approximate
the appropriate level of commitment to the relationship (Foley & Fraser, 1998).
Frank discussion about transgressions, moreover, may be necessary for the long-term
stability of dating relationships since unresolved conflict can produce serial arguing
(K. L. Johnson & Roloff, 2000).

In addition to dating partners experiencing more conflict and being less conflict
avoidant than friends, dating partners tend to hold one another to higher standards
of conduct (Sprecher & Regan, 2002). Dating partners should therefore enact
conditional forgiveness more frequently. In short, daters may possess a greater need
to forgive while simultaneously “drawing a line in the sand,” whereby criteria are
established for exiting or remaining in the relationship. To investigate these predic-
tions, the following hypotheses are posed:

H2: Indirect forgiveness will be more frequently used by friends than by dating
partners.
H3: Direct forgiveness will be more frequently used by dating partners than by
friends.
H4: Conditional forgiveness will be more frequently used by dating partners
than by friends.

Transgression Severity and Transgressor Blameworthiness

Transgression severity is defined as the level of negative affect victims experience
following a relational offense, whereas transgressor blameworthiness is victims’ percep-
tion of transgressors’ level of responsibility or intent with which they committed an
offense. Past studies have revealed these variables are highly salient throughout the
forgiveness process (Bennett & Earwaker, 1994; McCullough et al., 2003). Boon
and Sulsky (1997) argued one’s willingness to forgive is often based on perceived
degree of severity and blameworthiness.

Consistent with Waldron and Kelley’s (2005) findings, it is hypothesized that
severe transgressions are more likely to be forgiven directly or conditionally as
opposed to indirectly. Whereas direct and conditional forgiveness involve explicit
discussion about transgressions, indirect forgiveness reflects conflict minimization.
Thus, indirect forgiveness should be less appropriate for use than the other forgive-
ness types following severe transgressions, which are often marked by intense hurt
and anger, and can produce significant relational conflict (McCullough et al., 1998).
Considering, however, Waldron and Kelley’s sample was comprised of romantic
partners only (and not friends), and given the authors used different methods than
the current study (i.e., they used a Likert-type index whereas this study utilizes
open-ended coding), the current study attempts to not only replicate Waldron and Kelley’s results but also to extend the extant forgiveness-granting communication literature.

Despite scholars’ positioning of transgressor blameworthiness as a critical variable in forgiveness research, no previous studies have examined how forgiveness-granting communication is related to blameworthiness. One can speculate, though, that because blameworthy transgressions, like severe ones, are painful, victims may be inclined to use direct and conditional forgiveness (more so than indirect forgiveness) to deter repeat offenses (Vangelisti & Young, 2000). Moreover, according to McCullough et al. (2003), high levels of responsibility attribution can motivate victims to directly confront transgressors, indicative of direct and conditional forgiving.

H5: As transgressions increase in severity, friends and dating partners will be more likely to use direct or conditional forgiveness than indirect forgiveness.

H6: As transgressions increase in blameworthiness, friends and dating partners will be more likely to use direct or conditional forgiveness than indirect forgiveness.

Ongoing Negative Affect

Although it might be expected that victims would only communicate forgiveness after overcoming negative affect (McCullough et al., 1998), this is not always the case (Enright & Fitzgibbons, 2000). As mentioned earlier, recent research by Younger et al. (2004) demonstrates as many as 45% of individuals harbor resentment after communicating forgiveness, suggesting many individuals experience ongoing negative affect (ONA) following forgiveness granting.

For the purposes of this study, ONA is conceptualized as negative affect experienced by victims that persists after they communicate forgiveness to a transgressor. ONA is different than transgression severity as severity represents negative affect experienced at the time of (or in close temporal proximity to) the transgression, and prior to forgiveness granting. The study of ONA acknowledges that forgiveness can be expressed with varying degrees of sincerity. Victims can tell their transgressors they are forgiven even if the victims’ have not fully experienced forgiveness and the concomitant abandonment of negative affect (Enright & Fitzgibbons, 2000). Thompson et al. (2005) suggest forgiveness requires cognitive (i.e., reappraising a transgression), emotional (i.e., replacing negative with positive affect), and behavioral (i.e., communicating forgiveness) activity. When individuals experience ONA after having communicated forgiveness, they likely engaged in the behavioral components of forgiveness without the cognitive and emotional components. Based on many scholars’ work (e.g., Enright & Fitzgibbons, 2000; Hope, 1987), individuals who experience ONA likely have not “truly” forgiven their transgressor as true forgiveness is incompatible with ONA. In other words, forgiveness, in its purest form, is marked by victims’ release of anger, hostility, and ill will towards the transgressor. At best, the experience of ONA may reflect temporary forgiveness (see McCullough et al., 2003).

Issues related to ONA following the communication of forgiveness have not received much research attention; thus many questions exist with regard to ONA’s
prevalence and correlates. ONA is predicted to most readily occur following severe
and blameworthy transgressions, as these transgressions can leave lasting impressions
involving negative emotionality (Witvliet et al., 2001). ONA may also be related to
the way in which forgiveness is communicated, though it is difficult to predict pre-
cisely how. Based on Enright and Fitzgibbons’s (2000) work, ONA is hypothesized to
be higher for conditional forgivers than indirect or direct forgivers. This is because
conditional forgiveness, which is somewhat similar to what Enright and Fitzgibbons
identify as restitutional or compensation forgiveness, can leave individuals unfulfilled
and prone to persistent negativity.

It is also hypothesized that ONA will be negatively related to relational satisfaction
because ONA (as discussed above) may reflect the experience of untrue, or “pseudo-
forgiveness” (Enright & Fitzgibbons, 2000). In the absence of true or complete
forgiveness, negativity surrounding transgressions may fester, weakening relational
ities and perceptions of relational quality (McCullough et al., 1998).

RQ2: To what extent will participants report experiencing ongoing negative affect?
H7: Ongoing negative affect will be positively related to transgression severity.
H8: Ongoing negative affect will be positively related to transgressor blame-
worthiness.
H9: Ongoing negative affect will be higher for conditional forgivers than for
direct or indirect forgivers.
H10: Ongoing negative affect will be negatively related to relational satisfaction.

Method
Participants

Participants were 268 (56% women, 44% men) undergraduates enrolled in two
communication courses at a large midwestern university. Participants ranged in
age from 18 to 46 years (M = 20.90, SD = 2.75). Students received extra credit for
completing the questionnaire, which contained both open-ended and scaled items
pertaining to a specific forgiveness situation. Respondents were given the option to
report on either a current romantic relationship (n = 135) or a current friendship
(n = 133). Four of the 268 participants did not complete the entire questionnaire
and were therefore excluded from analyses, leaving 264 participants (132 dating
partners and 132 friends). Mean relationship length was 1.84 years (SD = 1.74,
range = .08 to 10) for daters and 7.73 years (SD = 5.88, range = .17 to 22) for
friends.

Procedure and Instrumentation

At the outset of the questionnaire, respondents were asked to think of a recent time in
which they forgave their current romantic partner or a close friend. Respondents then
thoroughly described the incidents and answered a series of questions. Friends’
reports were coded into 10 inductively derived transgression categories: flirted/slept
with a love interest (21.3%), inconsiderate or obnoxious behavior (18%), lying
(11.5%), cancelled plans (14.8%), broke a promise (9.8%), hurtful statements (8.2%), drunken behavior (4.9%), failed to keep in touch (4.9%), physical violence (4.9%), and other (1.6%). Dating partners’ reports were coded into seven categories: lying (20.9%), hurtful statements (18.6%), infidelity (18.6%), inconsiderate or obnoxious behavior (18.6%), lack of quality time (14%), wrongful accusation (4.7%), and other (4.7%).

Forgiveness-granting communication
After describing the transgression, respondents reported in detail how they communicated forgiveness. The descriptions were coded by the author into one of Kelley’s (1998) three forgiveness types (direct, indirect, and conditional). To check the reliability of the author’s classifications, an independent coder coded a random 25% of the data. Reliability was measured with percentage agreement and Scott’s pi. Percentage agreement was 92%, 89%, and 82% for direct, indirect, and conditional forgiveness, respectively. Scott’s pi, which adjusts reliability estimates to account for chance agreement among coders, was .76, indicating adequate reliability (Baxter & Babbie, 2004). The author and the coder negotiated disagreements until consensus was reached.

Transgression severity
Respondents reported their level of agreement with six statements involving negative affect associated with their initial reaction to the transgression (e.g., I felt anger, I felt hurt). Responses were gathered with a 5-point Likert-type scale ranging from strongly agree to strongly disagree. An additional question asked respondents to rate the transgression on a scale of 1–10, with 1 being not severe at all and 10 being very severe. Because two different metrics were used for this measure, all scores were standardized into z-scores prior to summation. Principal axis factor analysis (PAFA) with direct oblimin rotation was conducted to examine the dimensionality of the scale. PAFA and analysis of scree plots revealed a one-factor solution with an eigenvalue of 2.37 and 47% variance accounted for. The index was found to be adequately reliable ($z = .72$, $M = .026$, $SD = 3.41$).

Transgressor blameworthiness
Blameworthiness was assessed with a modified version of Fincham and Bradbury’s (1992) Relationship Attribution Measure (RAM). The RAM has two dimensions, the causal dimension and the responsibility-blame dimension. In the present study, the three questions from the responsibility-blame dimension were used; however, the items were slightly modified to reference actual transgressions rather than hypothetical ones. Responses were gathered with a 5-point Likert-type scale ranging from strongly agree to strongly disagree. For the purposes of the current investigation, the blameworthiness index obtained a reliability coefficient of .65 ($M = 10.78$, $SD = 2.54$).
Ongoing negative affect
A seven-item index asked respondents to report the amount of negative affect they still felt (i.e., at the time of data collection) regarding the transgression for which they communicated forgiveness. Participants were instructed to think about their current feelings as opposed to their initial reactions to the transgression. Similar to the transgression severity index, the ONA measure asked respondents to rate their level of agreement on a 5-point Likert-type scale with statements referencing current negative affect (e.g., I feel frustration, I feel anger). The question “On a scale of 1–10 (1 = doesn’t bother me at all, 10 = bothers me a lot), how much does the event still bother you?” was also used. All item scores were standardized prior to summation. PAFA with direct oblimin rotation and scree plot analysis revealed a one-factor solution with an eigenvalue of 3.98. This factor accounted for 57% variance. The ONA index obtained an alpha of .88 (M = −.03, SD = 5.26).

Relational satisfaction
Dating partner satisfaction was measured with a modified version of the Quality Marriage Index (Norton, 1983). This six-item instrument, originally developed for married individuals, has been found to adequately assess dating partner satisfaction (α = .94, M = 29.60, SD = 5.21). Items include, “Our relationship is strong” and “My relationship with my partner makes me happy.” Friendship satisfaction was measured with A. J. Johnson’s (2001) four-item friend satisfaction scale (α = .77, M = 16.58, SD = 2.81), which includes items such as, “I am generally satisfied with this friendship” and “There is little I would change about this friendship to make me more satisfied.” Both satisfaction measures used 7-point Likert-type scales ranging from strongly disagree to strongly agree.

Results
Frequency of Forgiveness-Granting Communication Types
H1 and RQ1
H1 predicted direct forgiveness would be reported more frequently than indirect or conditional forgiveness. RQ1 asked about the frequency with which individuals report using indirect and conditional forgiveness. Counter to H1, and in response to RQ1, results revealed the highest number of respondents reported using indirect (123, 47%), followed by direct (111, 42%) and conditional forgiveness (30, 11%). A χ² test revealed the differences between direct and indirect forgiveness usage were not statistically significant (χ²[1] = .62, p = .47). Additional χ² tests indicated participants used indirect and direct forgiveness significantly more frequently than conditional forgiveness (χ²[1] = 56.53 and χ²[1] = 46.53, respectively, ps < .001). See Table 1 for examples and frequencies of the forgiveness-granting types.
Differences in Forgiveness Granting by Relationship Type

H2, H3, and H4

H2 predicted indirect forgiveness would be more frequently used by friends (52%) than by dating partners (42%); this hypothesis was not supported, though it approached statistical significance ($\chi^2[1] = 2.57, p = .07, V = .10$). H3 predicted direct forgiveness would be more frequently used by daters (42%) than by friends (42%); this hypothesis was not supported ($\chi^2[1] = .02, p = .50, V = .01$). H4 predicted conditional forgiveness would be more frequently used by daters (16%) than by friends (7%); this hypothesis was supported ($\chi^2[1] = 5.42, p < .02, V = .14$).

Forgiveness Types and Severity

H5

This hypothesis predicted as transgressions increase in severity, individuals will be more likely to forgive directly or conditionally than indirectly. The hypotheses were examined with a 3 (forgiveness granting behavior: direct, indirect, or conditional) \times 2 (relationship type: dating vs. friend) ANOVA. Results revealed a nonsignificant main effect for severity by forgiveness type, $F(2, 249) = 1.43, p = .24$, partial $\eta^2 = .01$. A significant main effect was found for relationship type, $F(1, 249) = 5.27, p < .02$, partial

---

Table 1  Examples of Forgiveness Granting Types as well as Percentages by Relationship Type and Total Sample

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Forgiveness Type and Examples</th>
<th>Dating Partners</th>
<th>Friends</th>
<th>Total Sample</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Direct—“We talked about the situation and then I told her she was forgiven”;</td>
<td>42.4%</td>
<td>41.7%</td>
<td>42.0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“I let him know by saying that I forgave him so they have no doubts.”</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Indirect—“I forgave him by acting the way we did before the event took place”;</td>
<td>41.7%</td>
<td>51.5%</td>
<td>46.6%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“I took him out for a couple of beers”;</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“A strangely female thing—I gave her a tampon when for months I wouldn’t give her the time of day”;</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“I asked her to go to the mall and it was understood that I wasn’t mad anymore.”</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Conditional—“I told him [he was forgiven] but he had to promise to change his ways”;</td>
<td>15.9%</td>
<td>6.8%</td>
<td>11.4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“I said I would forgive him if he gave me my money back”</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“If she promised to never do it again, I said I’d forgive her. She did, so I did.”</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

---

Communicating Forgiveness 123
such that dating partners ($M = .63, SD = 3.42$) perceived the transgressions they reported to be more severe than did friends ($M = -.57, SD = 3.30$).

A significant interaction effect was also obtained, $F(2, 249) = 3.70, p < .03$, partial $\eta^2 = .03$. Further exploration of this interaction suggested a significant relationship between transgression severity and forgiveness type for dating partners, $F(2, 124) = 4.73, p < .01$, partial $\eta^2 = .07$, but not for friends, $F(2, 125) = .38, p = .69$, partial $\eta^2 = .01$. Consistent with H5, a planned contrast was conducted comparing the use of direct and conditional forgiveness to the use of indirect forgiveness (note this test was performed for dating partners only due to the aforementioned nonsignificant findings regarding forgiveness type for friends). Results did not support H5, $F(1, 124) = 2.68, p = .20$, partial $\eta^2 = .02$. Instead, further comparisons revealed as transgressions increased in severity, dating partners tended to express indirect ($M = 1.49, SD = 3.25$) or conditional ($M = 1.27, SD = 4.44$) forgiveness more than direct ($M = -.39, SD = 2.94$) forgiveness, $F(1, 124) = 7.95, p < .006$, partial $\eta^2 = .06$. No significant difference was found between indirect and conditional forgiveness. See Table 2 for a list of means and standard deviations.

### Table 2 Means and Standard Deviations of Transgression Severity, Transgressor Blameworthiness, and Ongoing Negative Affect by Forgiveness Type, Relationship Type, and Total Sample

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Dating partners ($n = 132$)</th>
<th>Friends ($n = 132$)</th>
<th>Total sample ($N = 264$)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Transgression severity</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>$M$</td>
<td>−.39</td>
<td>1.48</td>
<td>1.27</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>$SD$</td>
<td>2.94</td>
<td>3.25</td>
<td>4.44</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Blameworthiness</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>$M$</td>
<td>9.84</td>
<td>11.07</td>
<td>11.91</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>$SD$</td>
<td>2.48</td>
<td>2.52</td>
<td>2.36</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ongoing negative affect</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>$M$</td>
<td>−.24</td>
<td>.99</td>
<td>3.17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>$SD$</td>
<td>5.07</td>
<td>5.30</td>
<td>5.23</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note. Severity and ongoing negative affect means and standard deviations are based on standardized scores.

$\eta^2 = .02$, such that dating partners ($M = .63, SD = 3.42$) perceived the transgressions they reported to be more severe than did friends ($M = -.57, SD = 3.30$).

### Forgiveness Types and Blameworthiness

**H6**

Transgressions of increasing blameworthiness were predicted to be forgiven directly or conditionally as opposed to indirectly. A 3 (direct, indirect, or conditional forgiveness) $\times 2$ (dating vs. friend) ANOVA tested this prediction. Results of the ANOVA revealed a significant main effect for transgressor blameworthiness by forgiveness type,
\( F(2, 258) = 8.07, \ p < .001 \), partial \( \eta^2 = .06 \), a nonsignificant main effect for relationship type, \( F(1, 258) = .35, \ p = .56 \), partial \( \eta^2 = .001 \), and a nonsignificant interaction effect between relationship type and forgiveness type, \( F(2, 258) = .26, \ p = .77 \), partial \( \eta^2 = .002 \). Planned contrasts were used to compare the use of direct and conditional forgiveness to the use of indirect forgiveness (tests included both friends and dating partners). Results of the contrasts did not support H6, \( F(1, 261) = .08, \ p = .77 \), partial \( \eta^2 = .001 \). Similar to the results for severity, further tests indicated that as blameworthiness increased, individuals were more likely to express indirect (\( M = 11.11, \ SD = 2.40 \)) or conditional (\( M = 11.93, \ SD = 2.12 \)) forgiveness than direct (\( M = 10.10, \ SD = 2.62 \)) forgiveness, \( F(1, 261) = 17.21, \ p < .001 \), partial \( \eta^2 = .06 \). No significant difference existed between indirect and conditional forgiveness.

**Ongoing Negative Affect**

**RQ2**
This question asked if participants would report experiencing ONA. To answer this question, the item “How much does this event still bother you?” was analyzed. Respondents were asked to rate this question on a scale of 1–10 with 10 representing “bothers me a lot” and 1 being “doesn’t bother me at all” (\( M = 3.57, \ SD = 2.41 \)). This 1–10 scale serves as an indicator of low to high ONA, in which 5 can be considered the theoretic midpoint. Although one could use the mean score of 3.57 as the midpoint, 5 was used to ensure conservative estimates. Scores above 5 (i.e., 6–10) were determined to indicate moderate to high ONA. Results suggest approximately 22% of the respondents experienced moderate to high ONA. About 9% of respondents reported 5 for this question, while approximately 61% reported between 1 and 4. These results suggest about one-fifth of the respondents were experiencing at least moderate ONA. No significant differences were found between friends’ and dating partners’ responses to this item, \( t(253) = 1.62, \ p = .11 \).

**H7, H8, and H10**
These hypotheses predicted ONA would be positively related to severity (H7) and blameworthiness (H8), and negatively related to relational satisfaction (H10). To test these hypotheses, two hierarchical multiple regressions were conducted (one regression for friends, and one for dating partners). Separate regressions were utilized because friends and dating partners completed different satisfaction measures. Save the different measures of satisfaction, both regressions were set up identically.

When studying forgiveness, time can be a critical variable (McCullough et al., 2003). In this study, it is plausible ONA lessens over time, which is why length of time since the transgression’s occurrence served as the control variable in the regression analyses. On average, the reported transgressions occurred about one year ago (\( M = 1.1, \ SD = 1.03 \)) for friends and about six months ago (\( M = .49, \ SD = .60 \)) for dating partners. For both regressions, time was entered on the first step, severity,
The full regression model for friends, including time, severity, blameworthiness, and satisfaction was significant, $F(4, 127) = 17.34, p < .001$, and predicted approximately 35% variance in ONA ($R = .59, R^2 = .35$). Time since the transgression occurred was a significant, negative predictor ($\beta = -.26$, semi-partial $r = -.25$, $p < .001$), suggesting ONA decreases over time for friends. Consistent with H7, results revealed unique variance in ONA was significantly predicted in the positive direction by severity ($\beta = .48$, semi-partial $r = .47$, $p < .001$), and, consistent with H10, in the negative direction by satisfaction ($\beta = -.18$, semi-partial $r = -.17$, $p < .02$). Although blameworthiness and ONA shared a significant zero-order correlation ($r = .17$, $p < .05$), blameworthiness did not predict unique variance in ONA ($\beta = .09$, semi-partial $r = .09$, $p = .23$); thus, results fail to support H8.

The full regression model for dating partners, including time, severity, blameworthiness, and satisfaction was significant, $F(4, 127) = 16.48, p < .001$, predicting about 34% variance in ONA ($R = .59, R^2 = .34$). Unlike in the friend model, time was not a significant predictor of ONA ($\beta = -.12$, semi-partial $r = -.12$, $p = .11$). Unique variance in ONA was significantly and positively predicted by severity ($\beta = .48$, semi-partial $r = .43$, $p < .001$), thus supporting H7, and significantly and negatively predicted by dating partner satisfaction ($\beta = -.22$, semi-partial $r = -.21$, $p < .005$), thus supporting H10. Despite a significant zero-order correlation ($r = .36$, $p < .001$), blameworthiness once again did not predict unique variance in ONA ($\beta = .13$, semi-partial $r = .12$, $p = .11$); therefore, H8 was not supported. In sum, for both friends and dating partners, the regression results supported H7 and H10, but not H8. Table 3 provides the across-sample correlations between all of the variables in the regression models.

**H9**

ONA was also predicted to be higher for conditional forgivers than for direct or indirect forgivers. To test H9, a 3 (direct, indirect, or conditional forgiveness) × 2

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1.</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>.29**</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>–</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>.53**</td>
<td>.26**</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>–</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>–</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>–</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>–</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>–</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>–</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>–</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>–</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>–</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note. ** $p < .001$, * $p < .05$. ONA = ongoing negative affect. Because friends and dating partners completed separate satisfaction measures, no correlation is reported between friend and dater satisfaction.
(dating vs. friend) ANOVA was conducted. Results of the ANOVA revealed a significant main effect for ONA by forgiveness type, $F(2, 249) = 5.17, p < .006$, partial $\eta^2 = .04$, a nonsignificant main effect by relationship type, $F(1, 249) = 2.24, p = .14$, partial $\eta^2 = .01$, and a nonsignificant interaction effect between relationship type and forgiveness type, $F(2, 249) = .203, p = .82$, partial $\eta^2 = .002$. Results of planned contrasts supported H9, such that conditional forgivers ($M = 2.96, SD = 5.23$) reported significantly higher ONA than direct ($M = .82, SD = 5.38$) or indirect ($M = .03, SD = 4.92$) forgivers, $F(1, 249) = 8.76, p < .003$, partial $\eta^2 = .03$. No significant differences for ONA were found between direct and indirect forgivers.

Discussion

This study revealed that the way in which forgiveness is communicated is linked to several factors, including relationship type (dating vs. friend), transgression severity, transgressor blameworthiness, and ONA. With regard to ONA, it appeared to be salient for about 22% of participants and was linked to transgression severity, relational satisfaction, and forgiveness-granting communication.

Across the sample, participants reported indirect forgiveness granting most frequently (47%), followed by direct (42%) and conditional (12%) forgiveness. These results are inconsistent with H1 (which predicted direct forgiveness would be used most) and are discrepant from both Kelley’s (1998) and Waldron and Kelley’s (2005) findings insofar as indirect forgiveness was reported as the second most frequent form by Kelley and the third most frequent form by Waldron and Kelley. The lack of consistency in these forgiveness-granting studies with regard to forgiveness-type frequency does not challenge the validity of previous findings or the forgiveness typology but rather speaks to the dynamic nature of forgiveness in close relationships. Indeed, it is likely that frequency estimates of the forgiveness-granting types, outside of contextual factors, such as relationship type and transgression characteristics, provide only basic, descriptive, and perhaps sample-specific, insight into forgiveness-granting communication. In the remainder of this discussion, then, I focus on these more dynamic, contextual issues, highlighting how the present findings contribute to the extant literature and guide continued research.

Conditional forgiveness (i.e., offering forgiveness with stipulations), though the least used forgiveness type overall, was used significantly more often by dating partners (16%) than friends (7%). Conditional forgiveness may be more common amongst daters because of the relatively high level of effort required to maintain dating relationships as well as dating partners’ expectations for exclusivity—one usually has one romantic partner but many friends (Davis & Todd, 1982). In the context of dating, transgressions may not be worth forgiving unless the transgressing partner first agrees to change her or his ways. Based on these results, researchers should continue to explore the many interesting research avenues regarding the motivations and consequences of conditional forgiveness in close relationships. One especially interesting route is the incidence of chronic conditional forgiveness, whereby
transgressors are conditionally forgiven repeatedly for offenses, such as infidelity or substance abuse (see, e.g., Exline & Baumeister, 2000; Le Poire, 1994).

Unlike conditional forgiveness, indirect forgiveness was found to be used more often by friends (52%) than daters (42%), though the difference only approached statistical significance (i.e., $p = .07$). While not statistically significant, these results suggest the plausibility of a trend regarding forgiveness in adult friendship, wherein friends prefer indirect forgiveness following transgressions due to a desire to de-emphasize the seriousness of transgressions in the relationship (Fehr, 1996). Also, keeping in mind many of the friendships in this study were long-term bonds lasting several years ($M = 7.73$), it is possible that considerable mutual understanding has been fostered in these friendships (Duck, 1994), making forgiveness more likely to go unsaid. Based on these speculations, additional research can explore specific ways in which relational histories are manifested in forgiveness expressions and expectations. Issues concerning indirect forgiveness are further discussed later.

The present study also casts new light on the link between forgiveness-granting communication and transgression severity and blameworthiness. Findings suggest direct forgiveness may be relegated for use following less severe and blameworthy transgressions. Indeed, counter to predictions, transgressions perceived as severe (found for dating partners only) and blameworthy (found for both dating partners and friends) were more likely to be forgiven conditionally or indirectly as opposed to directly. Conditional forgiveness may have been expressed following severe and blameworthy transgressions due to victims’ desire to communicate intolerance for repeated offenses. Waldran and Kelley (2005) speculated that romantic partners employ conditional forgiveness to negotiate tension between the desire to facilitate relational repair and the desire to display disapproval for the offense. The tension between repair and disapproval may be especially salient after transgressions if victims are committed to their relationship, yet fear the offense will recur (Vangelisti & Young, 2000).

Although Waldran and Kelley (2005) found indirect forgiveness was relatively rare in response to severe transgressions, the present results suggest indirect forgiveness is frequently enacted following severe and blameworthy transgressions. These results are in apparent contradiction to Waldron and Kelley’s speculation that indirect forgiveness is “too ambiguous or unassertive” following severe transgressions (p. 739). Instead, indirect forgiveness may serve multiple functions in relationships beyond conflict minimization. Finer-grained analyses of forgiveness discourse may reveal heretofore unidentified subcategories of indirect forgiveness that better capture its myriad forms. Upon reflection, it makes sense that indirect forgiveness can be appropriate and effective following various types of transgressions from the perspective that communication is situated (i.e., shaped by context) and rhetorical (i.e., multifunctional) (see, e.g., Goldsmith, 2004). Teasing apart the intricacies of indirect forgiveness represents another research direction ripe for continued investigation.

This study also examined negative affect following forgiveness granting (i.e., ONA). ONA was most salient for victims of severe transgressions. Severity, it seems, not only shapes how forgiveness is granted (Waldran & Kelley, 2005) but also the likelihood forgivers will fully release the negative affect stemming from transgressions (Witvliet et al.,
One potentially problematic relational consequence of ONA is lowered relational satisfaction. This is based on the negative association between ONA and satisfaction for both friends and daters. However, given the cross-sectional nature of this study, it is also plausible lowered satisfaction instigates ONA. Future studies utilizing longitudinal designs or causal modeling (e.g., structural equation modeling) can help identify the causal pattern of associations between transgressions, ONA, and relational quality.

As predicted, ONA was linked to the manner in which forgiveness was communicated, such that conditional forgivers reported higher ONA than did direct or indirect forgivers. This finding appears to support Enright and Fitzgibbon’s (2000) contention that conditional styles of forgiveness reflect a lower grade of forgiveness, wherein forgivers may not have fully overcome the transgression; this type of forgiving may leave victims “stuck in their anger” (p. 56). ONA, moreover, may be especially problematic for dating partners given the nonsignificant relationship between daters’ ONA and time since the transgression. If daters’ ONA does not lessen over time at a rate comparable to friends’, it is plausible ONA plays a more significant long-term role in romantic relationships than friendships. Alternatively, these results could indicate the link between time and ONA is nonlinear for dating partners, whereby negative affect ebbs and flows over time (see McCullough et al., 2003). Keep in mind, however, the transgressions reported by dating partners were, on average, more recent than those reported by friends. This could indicate the existence of a temporal threshold that must be passed before ONA begins to subside.

One of the most significant components of forgiveness is a cognitive reframing of transgressions as less severe (Thompson et al., 2005). When individuals experience ONA, it is plausible they did not sufficiently enact these cognitive reframing processes or experienced their effects only fleetingly (McCullough et al., 2003). Reasons individuals are driven to communicate forgiveness without necessarily experiencing it may include guilt, moral obligation, pressure to forgive from friends/family, and structural commitments (see M. P. Johnson, 1999). Over time, insincere forgiveness offerings may undermine relational continuity and quality, and perhaps even physical and mental health. Though at this point these conclusions are speculative, they can be utilized to guide future research. Further understanding of these issues necessitates investigations exploring forgiveness as a psychological, physiological, and communicative experience (Kelley, 1998).

Limitations and Future Research

The use of retrospective data is a limitation because of potential recall inaccuracies or biases. Researchers can employ diary techniques to help alleviate this issue. Also, because dating relationships and friendships can serve different functions across the lifespan (Canary et al., 1995), future research should incorporate more diverse samples. Forgiveness granting should also be explored in relation to transgressors’ communication as it can attenuate victims’ reaction to relational offenses (Bennett & Earwaker, 1994). Indeed, given forgiveness is, in part, an interactive process between close relational partners, research should consider
the interdependence of victims’ and transgressors’ communication throughout the forgiveness process.

Note

[1] Only three respondents reported what could be viewed as the use multiple forgiveness types; thus, the decision was made to use the individual as the unit of analysis and assign a single type to each participant’s account. For those three participants who reported multiple forgiveness types, the most dominant type was coded, which in each case was direct forgiveness.

References


