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# Guilt as a Mediator in the Relationship between Transgression Severity and Transgressors' Feelings of Forgiveness in Romantic Relationships

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GUILT AS A MEDIATOR IN THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN TRANSGRESSION  
SEVERITY AND TRANSGRESSORS' FEELINGS OF FORGIVENESS IN ROMANTIC  
RELATIONSHIPS

by

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Submitted in Partial Fulfillment  
of the requirements for the degree of  
Bachelor of Arts  
in  
Honours Psychology

Faculty of Arts and Social Science

Huron University College

London, Canada

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HURON UNIVERSITY COLLEGE

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## Abstract

The present study examined guilt as a possible mediator between transgression severity and feelings of forgiveness in transgressors. First-year university students who were currently in a relationship were randomly assigned to describe a minor or a major transgression that they had committed against their romantic partner. They then filled out a questionnaire that assessed their feelings and expressions of guilt following the transgression, their perceptions of how their partner responded to the transgression, and finally how forgiven they felt by their partner. The results did not support the hypothesis of guilt as a mediator between transgression severity and feelings of forgiveness. However, it was found that participants perceived more constructive responses from their partners than destructive ones following the transgression. Implications of the findings are discussed.

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## Introduction

Forgiveness is an integral part of interpersonal relationships. It is inevitable in close relationships that individuals will hurt and be hurt by someone close to them. Whereas a vast amount of forgiveness research exists, one limitation is the strong focus on the victim's perspective at the expense of examining factors from the transgressor's perspective. Ample studies have been conducted showing specific variables that can make a victim more likely to forgive (e.g., Kachadourian, Fincham, & Davila, 2004) and various ways a victim can go about communicating forgiveness to the perpetrator (e.g., Waldron & Kelley, 2005), but very little research has looked at factors that might make a transgressor more likely to seek forgiveness. This is problematic as there are two sides to the forgiveness process, and perpetrator factors can affect whether or not the transgression is successfully resolved through forgiveness. The existing research on transgressors to date has focused on how individual difference variables and feelings expressed by the transgressor affect the likelihood of forgiveness seeking. For example, it has been found that individuals high in narcissism and high in self-monitoring who transgressed against a partner or friend are significantly less likely to seek forgiveness from the victim (Howell, Dopko, Turowski, & Buro, 2011). Nevertheless, the lack of sufficient studies focusing on transgressors in the forgiveness literature is a problem because forgiveness is an interpersonal process, and understanding both the victim and transgressor perspectives is crucial to understanding the variables that affect this process in meaningful ways.

Although one globally-accepted definition of forgiveness has not yet been agreed upon, many have speculated about exactly what forgiveness entails. Despite the lack of an agreed-upon definition for forgiveness, most proposed definitions suggest that forgiveness involves a change in the way a victim feels about the transgressor sometime after the transgression occurred (Kachadourian et al., 2004). For example, McCullough, Worthington, and Rachal (1997) define

forgiveness as occurring when one becomes "decreasingly motivated to retaliate against an offending relationship partner, decreasingly motivated to maintain estrangement from the offender, and increasingly motivated by conciliation and goodwill for the offender, despite the offender's hurtful actions" (p. 321). Kirkup (1993) described forgiveness as a "positive response to wrongdoing, in both intention and deed", where a wrongdoing is defined as an "action that harms or humiliates another person, whether deliberately or accidentally", and a positive response is defined as "one that is neither abusive nor neglectful, but loving" (p. 79).

The factors that affect whether or not this process takes place are of interest to many forgiveness researchers. One of the most commonly-studied variables of interest in research on both transgressors and victims has been the severity of the transgression. Previous findings all suggest that transgression severity is a significant predictor of both forgiveness and forgiveness seeking. From the victim perspective, more-severe transgressions are related to a decreased desire to forgive (Boon & Sulsky, 1997). Whereas most researchers use participants' subjective measures of transgression severity, these results have also been replicated when objective measures of transgression severity are employed and even when both measures are used simultaneously (Fincham, Jackson, & Beach, 2005). From the perspective of the transgressor, more-severe transgressions lead to an increased motivation to seek forgiveness from the victim (Riek, 2010).

### **Emotional Responses of Perpetrators**

To understand why more-severe transgressions is associated with a greater propensity toward forgiveness seeking is something that requires more research. Previous research has looked at several emotions and behaviours that transgressors display following a transgression. The results from these studies suggest that different emotional states may influence the likelihood of one seeking forgiveness. These findings may be explained by the transgressor wanting to



escape a negative emotional state by earning the forgiveness of the victim. For example, it has been demonstrated that rumination following a transgression increases one's motivation to seek forgiveness, and that this rumination increases with transgression severity (Riek, Luna, & Schnabelrauch, 2014). Rumination, being an unpleasant experience for the transgressor, may increase his or her desire to seek forgiveness from the victim. Another possible emotion experienced by transgressors is shame, in which transgressors may believe that they are bad people because of their actions. Shame has been shown to increase prosocial behaviour in some contexts, though the majority of shame research focuses entirely on the negative consequences of shame (De Hooge, Breugelmans, & Zeelenberg, 2008). Whereas a number of emotions have been tested, feelings of guilt following a transgression seem to play the most important role. Previous research has demonstrated that guilt increases feelings of empathy for another person (Tangney, 1991). When people experience empathy, it can increase their motivation to relieve another person's suffering and, as a result, can lead to a greater tendency to seek forgiveness (Batson, Ahmad, & Tsang, 2002). In addition, empathy can also foster a greater sense of responsibility for the repercussions of one's own actions (Tangney, 1991). For example, in one study, participants who felt guilty after recalling an event in which they had upset someone reported a greater desire to offer an apology to the victim (Baumeister, Stillwell, & Heatherton, 1995). This finding was later replicated in a context in which transgression severity was taken into account. Guilt served as a mediator between transgression severity and a tendency to forgive, with more-severe transgressions leading to greater feelings of guilt in the transgressor, ultimately resulting in a greater tendency to seek forgiveness (Riek, 2010). It is important, however, to differentiate guilt from shame. Guilt involves a negative emotional response following one's own actions, whereas shame is concerned with a negative perception of oneself as a whole (Tangney & Dearing, 2002). This distinction is important because previous research

has noted that whereas guilt acts as a mediator for transgression severity and forgiveness seeking, shame does not (Riek et al., 2014). One reason that shame might not be correlated with forgiveness seeking is that unlike guilt, shame is often accompanied by an externalization of responsibility (Tangney, Wagner, Fletcher, & Gramzow, 1992). Without feelings of responsibility, forgiveness seeking is unlikely. Guilt might result after a transgression because transgressors feel that they have endangered a relationship that they feel satisfied with and that they wish to preserve (Allen, Babin, & McEwan, 2012). In order to salvage the relationship, transgressors might engage in different sorts of behaviours to communicate their guilt and their desire for forgiveness with the victim. Due to the link between transgression severity and guilt demonstrated in previous research, more-severe transgressions should, as a result, lead to greater feelings of guilt and a greater propensity toward forgiveness seeking.

It is evident that guilt arises when one partner is responsible for hurting another, but the way that guilt is expressed can vary between individuals. Common ways to express guilt following a relational transgression are apologizing for, mollifying, and/or justifying the offense (Vangelisti & Sprague, 1998), as well as avoiding the victim and denying feelings of guilt (Guerrero, Andersen, & Afifi, 2001). From this research, four different expressions of guilt have been proposed. *Apology-concession* expressions typically involve the transgressor directly apologizing to the victim. *Explanations-justifications* expressions involve transgressors attempting to explain why they did what they did, as well as making an effort to justify the action. *Appeasement* expressions involve a transgressor doing extra nice things for the victim, or perhaps acting in an excessively pleasant fashion. Finally, *denial-withdrawal* involves the transgressor denying any feelings of guilt for the transgression and pulling away from the partner (Allen et al., 2012). Transgressors who feel excessively guilty about a transgression would likely

demonstrate higher degrees of these behaviours, though which behaviour, specifically, is likely to depend on the individuals in question.

### **Perceptions of Forgiveness**

Whereas factors increasing the likelihood of forgiveness and forgiveness seeking have been examined extensively, to date there exists no study examining how forgiven by the victim a transgressor feels. As guilt appears to mediate the relationship between transgression severity and forgiveness seeking, as well as transgression severity and granting forgiveness, it is likely that guilt also plays a role in individuals' perception of how much their partner has forgiven them. The Exit-Voice-Loyalty-Neglect (EVLN) scale was developed to measure how people might react to dissatisfaction or a conflict in their relationship (Rusbult, Zembrodt, & Gunn, 1982). *Exit* behaviours are those that are done in an attempt to destroy the relationship, or out of the desire by one to leave the relationship. *Voice* behaviours are those involving talking about the problem with the partner, or seeking a compromise solution for the transgression. *Loyalty* behaviours are those in which the partner awaits a resolution to the conflict while still maintaining hope and desire for the relationship. Finally, *neglect* behaviours are those involving the avoidance of both the problem and the partner in a way that will likely result in the deterioration of the relationship. These response tendencies differ on two dimensions. The first dimension is constructiveness/destructiveness. Voice and loyalty behaviours are described in the literature as more constructive problem-solving behaviours because they promote conflict resolution and positive growth in the relationship. Exit and neglect behaviours, on the other hand, are seen as more destructive problem-solving behaviours because they tend to lead to relationship decline and promote further conflict (Rusbult, Johnson, & Morrow, 1986). The second dimension is passivity/activity. Exit and voice responses are active responses as their purpose is to make a change to the relationship, while loyalty and neglect responses are passive

responses as they serve to maintain the current status of the relationship (Rusbult, Farrell, Rogers, & Mainous, 1988). Though it has not been examined in previous research, it is possible that guilt may affect a transgressor's perception of his or her partner's behaviour following a transgression. In other words, those who have committed more severe transgressions and, thus, feel more guilt, may feel less forgiven by their partners and perceive that their partners are engaging in more exit or neglect behaviours as a response to the transgression. Conversely, individuals who experience less guilt might perceive much more constructive behaviours, such as voice and loyalty behaviours. These behaviours fit the suggested definitions of forgiveness (e.g. McCullough et al., 1997).

### **The Present Study**

The present study was designed to fill a gap in forgiveness research by examining how transgression severity and feelings of guilt influence how forgiven the transgressor feels. Individuals in romantic relationships were asked to recall a time when they hurt their partners within the past month, and were randomly assigned to think about either a minor or major transgression. They were also told that the transgression should be an event they felt partially responsible for. They were then asked to indicate their feelings of guilt, how they expressed their guilt, their perceptions of their partners' behaviour following the transgression, and how forgiven they felt by their partners. Based on findings from previous studies, it was hypothesized that individuals who were thinking about a major transgression that they were partially responsible for will experience higher levels of guilt than those who are thinking about a minor transgression. Similarly, it was expected that those who were thinking about a major transgression will experience lesser feelings of forgiveness from their partner than those who were thinking about a minor transgression. Therefore, those thinking about a major transgression might perceive more destructive behaviours (i.e., exit and neglect) from their partners and less constructive behaviours

(i.e., voice and loyalty) compared to those who are thinking about a minor transgression. It was also expected that feelings of guilt will act as a mediator in this relationship between transgression severity and feelings of forgiveness.

## **Method**

### **Participants**

A total of 39 participants ( $M = 18.61$  years,  $SD = 0.94$  years, range = 18-21 years) were recruited for this study. An approximately even proportion of males and females were used, with 51% of the participants being female. All participants were recruited from an introductory psychology course at Huron University College. The participants were compensated for their participation with a research credit, which contributes to their final mark in the course. In order to be eligible for the study, participants had to be in a romantic relationship for at least one month. On average, participants had been in a relationship with their partner for about 1 year ( $M = 12$  months,  $SD = 3$  months, range = 1 month to 62 months). Twenty-seven participants reported that they were dating steadily; six were dating regularly; four were dating casually; and one was in a friendship. Thirty-seven participants reported that neither they nor their partner date others; one reported that he dates others but his partner does not; and one reported that both he and his partner date other people.

### **Materials & Procedure**

This study was administered online using Qualtrics, an online survey software. Participants accessed the survey through a link that was provided by the researcher. Prior to starting the survey, participants were instructed to type their initials and the last three digits of their student number in the space provided. This was done to ensure that all participation credits were awarded properly. They were also instructed to confirm that they were in a quiet area and free of distractions. Participants then answered a series of demographic questions, which

included their age and gender, as well as some questions about their relationship, including the length, status, and exclusiveness of their relationship. Participants then typed their partner's initials into the space provided. This was done to confirm that participants were thinking about their partner over the course of the survey.

Next, participants answered a short version of the Perceived Relationship Quality Components Inventory (PRQC; Fletcher, Simpson, & Thomas, 2000). This inventory was used to assess the quality of participants' relationship with their partner. The PRQC assessed six components of romantic relationships: satisfaction, commitment, intimacy, trust, passion, and love. In the full version of the inventory, each component is assessed by three items. However, given the length of the overall questionnaire, a short version of this inventory was administered in which each component is assessed using one item, and the items were selected based on the recommendation of Fletcher and his colleagues. Each item was measured on a 7-point scale, ranging from 1 (*not at all*) to 7 (*extremely*). The internal consistency of the items was reliable (Cronbach's  $\alpha = .83$ ). The mean of the scores from the six PRQC items was calculated to create a composite measure of relationship quality.

Next, participants were randomly assigned to either think about a minor transgression or a major transgression that occurred sometime in the past month. Participants were instructed to nominate a transgression that they felt at least partially responsible for. The instructions were identical in both conditions, with the exception of the use of the word *minor* or *major* to describe the transgression, and were presented as follows:

Describe a **minor/major** incident that occurred in the past month in which you hurt, offended, were in conflict with, or upset your romantic partner. You should feel that you are at least partially responsible for this incident. Please provide as much detail as you are comfortable providing.

Participants were then instructed to answer two open-ended questions: “How did the transgression you described make you feel?” and “Why do you feel responsible for the transgression you described?” These questions were asked with the intent of having the participants think in more detail about the incident they described.

Participants were then asked to indicate their thoughts and feelings about their relationship with their partner and the incident that they described while completing the State Shame and Guilt Scale (SSGS; Marschall, Sanftner, & Tangney, 1994). The SSGS is a 15-item measure with five items devoted to each of the three subscales: pride (e.g., “I feel good about myself”), shame (e.g., “I feel like I am a bad person”), and guilt (e.g., “I feel bad about something I have done”). Each item was measured on a 7-point scale, ranging from 1 (*not at all*) to 7 (*very strongly*). Reliability analyses for each subscale were acceptable. Cronbach’s alpha for the pride, shame, and guilt subscales was .78, .77, and .87 respectively. Therefore, a mean score was calculated for each of the subscales. Guilt is the main emotion of interest, but a score was also calculated for shame and pride for exploratory analyses.

In order to assess the expression of guilt, participants were instructed to indicate the extent to which they engaged in four guilt behaviours: apology-concession (“Said I’m sorry”), explanations-justifications (“Told my partner the reason(s) why I did what I did”), appeasement (“Did extra nice things for my partner”), and denial-withdrawal (“Denied responsibility for the incident”; reverse-scored). These behaviours were taken from a study by Allen et al. (2012). Each item was measured on a 7-point scale ranging from 1 (*I did not do this*) to 7 (*I did this*). There were, thus, a total of four items in the assessment. The mean of these four items were calculated to create a composite measure of expressions of guilt (Cronbach’s  $\alpha = .81$ ).

The exit-voice-loyalty-neglect (EVLN; Rusbult, 1987) measure was used to assess how participants’ perceived their partner’s behaviour following the transgression. Participants were

instructed to indicate the reactions of their partner to the transgression that they had described by rating how much their partner demonstrated certain behaviours. The EVLN is a 28-item measurement assessing four subscales with each item measured on a 7-point scale, ranging from 1 (*not at all*) to 7 (*very much*). The mean score from each subscale was calculated, with each subscale consisting of seven questions. The scale used in this study was adapted from the original measure, which required participants to report the extent to which they engaged in each of the response tendencies. The purpose of the EVLN in the current study is to assess participants' perceptions of their partners' behaviour. *Exit* measures the likelihood that the partner wishes to end the relationship (e.g., "Thought about ending the relationship"; Cronbach's  $\alpha = .90$ ). *Voice* measures how often the partner openly discusses the transgression (e.g., "Talked to you about what is upsetting them"; Cronbach's  $\alpha = .59$ ). *Loyalty* measures the likelihood of the partner remaining devoted to the relationship (e.g., "Patiently waited for things to improve"; Cronbach's  $\alpha = .54$ ). *Neglect* measures how often the partner avoids and ignores the relationship following the transgression (e.g., "Treated you badly"; Cronbach's  $\alpha = .84$ ).

To assess feelings of forgiveness following the transgression, participants were instructed to think about their thoughts and feelings surrounding the incident they described. One item was used to assess how forgiven the participant feels by the victim: "To what extent do you feel that your partner has forgiven you?" This question was answered on a 7-point scale, ranging from 1 (*not at all*) to 7 (*fully*).

To ensure that the transgression severity manipulation worked, and to ensure that participants met the criteria for the transgression that they nominated, participants ended the survey with two questions pertaining to the transgression they described: "How much of the incident you wrote about do you think was your fault?" and "How serious do you think your offense was?" The former was measured on a 7-point scale, ranging from 1 (*not my fault at all*) to



7 (*completely my fault*), and the latter was measured on a 7-point scale ranging from 1 (*not at all serious*) to 7 (*very serious*). At the end of the online survey, participants were presented with a debriefing letter.

## Results

### Preliminary Analysis

**Exclusions.** After reading through the responses of the participants, it was noted that one participant was not in a relationship, three participants did not nominate a transgression, and one participant left the survey blank. Therefore, those five participants were excluded from the analysis, leaving the final sample consisting of 34 participants ( $M = 18.65$  years old,  $SD = 0.95$ , range = 18-21 years, 52.9% male). There were 14 participants in the minor transgression condition and 20 participants in the major transgression condition.

**Relationship quality and length.** A one-way between-subjects ANOVA was conducted to ensure that relationship quality or the length of the relationship did not differ between the two conditions. The ANOVA demonstrated that those instructed to describe a major transgression ( $M = 5.63$ ,  $SD = 0.93$ ) did not differ significantly in perceived relationship quality from those instructed to describe a minor transgression ( $M = 5.89$ ,  $SD = 1.04$ ),  $F(1, 32) = .619$ ,  $p = .437$ , partial  $\eta^2 = .019$ . A second ANOVA revealed that those instructed to describe a major transgression ( $M = 15.45$ ,  $SD = 15.37$ ) did not differ significantly in relationship length in months from those instructed to describe a minor transgression ( $M = 9.07$ ,  $SD = 8.14$ ),  $F(1, 32) = 2.004$ ,  $p = .167$ , partial  $\eta^2 = .059$ . Therefore, there were no differences between the two conditions in terms of relationship quality and relationship length.

**Manipulation check.** A one-way between-subjects analysis of variance (ANOVA) was conducted to test the effectiveness of the transgression severity manipulation. The results showed that those instructed to describe a major transgression ( $M = 2.95$ ,  $SD = 1.23$ ) did not differ

significantly on perceived transgression severity from those instructed to describe a minor transgression ( $M = 2.79$ ,  $SD = 1.19$ ),  $F(1, 32) = .150$ ,  $p = .701$ , partial  $\eta^2 = .005$ . Although the means are in the expected direction, the manipulation was not strong enough to elicit a significant difference between the two conditions.

Examples of minor transgressions described by participants included cancelling plans with his or her partner to spend time doing something else, and forgetting to return his or her partner's call. Examples of major transgressions included lying to his or her partner about where he or she was, and kissing another person despite agreement over being in closed relationship.

**Perceived transgression responsibility.** A one-way between-subjects ANOVA revealed that those instructed to describe a major transgression ( $M = 4.60$ ,  $SD = 1.82$ ) did not differ significantly on perceived transgression responsibility from those instructed to describe a minor transgression ( $M = 4.71$ ,  $SD = 2.05$ ),  $F(1, 32) = .029$ ,  $p = .865$ , partial  $\eta^2 = .001$ . Thus, no differences in perceived transgression responsibility were observed between the two conditions.

### **Primary Analyses**

**Forgiveness measures.** To test whether the transgression manipulation had an effect on the four response tendencies, a repeated measures ANOVA was conducted with transgression severity (major vs. minor) as the between-subject variable, and activity of the response (active vs. passive) and constructiveness of the response (constructive vs. destructive) as the within-subjects variables. The results indicated a significant effect of constructiveness,  $F(1, 29) = 53.87$ ,  $p = .000$ , partial  $\eta^2 = .650$ , showing that participants perceived significantly more constructive than destructive responses from their partners. However, there was also a significant interaction between activity and constructiveness of the response,  $F(1, 29) = 15.40$ ,  $p = .000$ , partial  $\eta^2 = .347$ . Post-hoc tests of the simple effects, with a Bonferroni adjustment for multiple comparisons, indicated that participants perceived significantly less active destruction (exit) than passive

destruction (neglect),  $F(1, 29) = 4.35, p = .046$ , partial  $\eta^2 = .131$ . Participants also perceived more active constructiveness (voice) than passive constructiveness (loyalty) from their partners,  $F(1, 29) = 9.88, p = .004$ , partial  $\eta^2 = .254$ . No other significant effects were observed. A graph depicting the findings are presented in Figure 1.

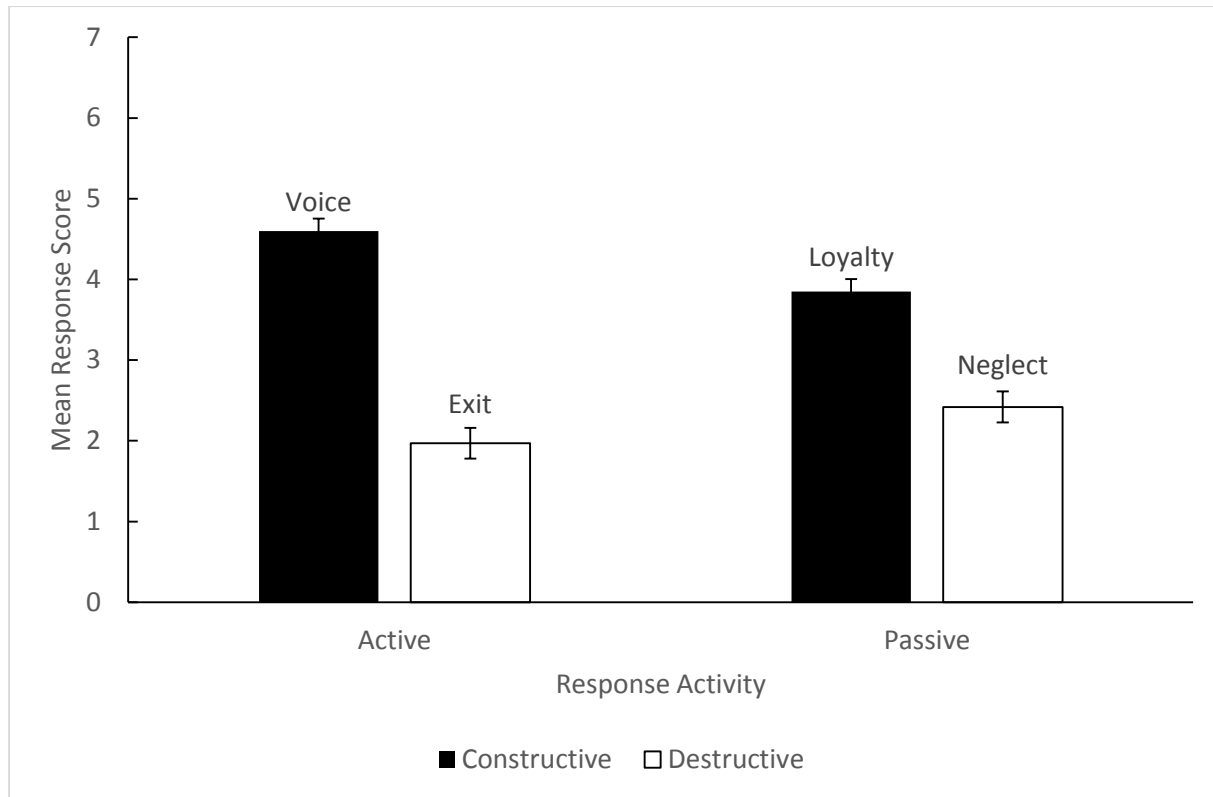
A one-way between-subjects ANOVA revealed that those who were instructed to describe a major transgression ( $M = 5.15, SD = 1.63$ ) did not differ significantly on feelings of forgiveness from those instructed to describe a minor transgression ( $M = 6.00, SD = 1.18$ ),  $F(1, 32) = 2.778, p = .105$ , partial  $\eta^2 = .080$ .

Finally, a correlation among the different indicators of forgiveness was conducted. The exit and neglect subscales both showed significant negative correlations with the feelings of forgiveness measure, while the voice subscale showed a significant positive correlation with feelings of forgiveness. Therefore, perceptions of partners' responses were associated with feelings of forgiveness. Table 1 presents all of the correlations among the forgiveness measures.

**Feelings and expressions of guilt.** In order to examine the effect that transgression severity had on feelings of guilt, a one-way between-subjects ANOVA was conducted. It revealed that those who were instructed to describe a major transgression ( $M = 4.07, SD = 1.44$ ) did not differ significantly on feelings of guilt from those instructed to describe a minor transgression ( $M = 3.50, SD = 1.68$ ),  $F(1, 32) = 1.128, p = .296$ , partial  $\eta^2 = .034$ .<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> For exploratory purposes, a one-way ANOVA was conducted to examine whether there are any effects of the transgression severity on feelings of pride and shame. For feelings of pride, there was no difference between those who were instructed to describe a major transgression ( $M = 2.84, SD = 1.10$ ) compared to those instructed to describe a minor transgression ( $M = 3.17, SD = 1.32$ ),  $F(1, 32) = .638, p = .430$ , partial  $\eta^2 = .020$ . The results for feelings of shame, revealed that those who were instructed to describe a major transgression ( $M = 3.13, SD = 1.33$ ) did not differ significantly in feelings of shame from those instructed to describe a minor transgression ( $M = 2.54, SD = 1.38$ ),  $F(1, 32) = 1.554, p = .222$ , partial  $\eta^2 = .046$ .



*Figure 1.* Mean response scores on the EVLN.

Table 1

*Correlations and Reliabilities of Dependent Variables*

	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
1. Guilt	<i>.873</i>	<i>.292*</i>	.193	.192	.257	.016	-.097
2. Expressions of guilt		<i>.813</i>	-.198	.232	.008	-.151	.094
3. Exit			<i>.902</i>	-.180	.089	<i>.543**</i>	<i>-.411**</i>
4. Voice				<i>.593</i>	<i>.332*</i>	<i>-.528**</i>	<i>.442**</i>
5. Loyalty					<i>.542</i>	-.262	.213
6. Neglect						<i>.839</i>	<i>-.684**</i>
7. Feelings of forgiveness							–

*Note.* Italicized values on the diagonal represent coefficient alpha internal consistency estimates. Values above the diagonal represent correlations among variables \* $p < .05$ . \*\* $p < .01$ , 1-tailed.

In order to examine the relationship between transgression severity and expressions of guilt, a one-way between-subjects ANOVA was conducted. The results showed that those who were instructed to describe a major transgression ( $M = 5.65$ ,  $SD = 1.29$ ) did not differ significantly in expressions of guilt from those instructed to describe a minor transgression ( $M = 5.48$ ,  $SD = 2.02$ ),  $F(1, 32) = .088$ ,  $p = .769$ , partial  $\eta^2 = .003$ .

Neither the scores on the SSGS nor the scores on the expressions of guilt scale correlated significantly with the forgiveness measures. All correlations for the dependent variables are presented in Table 1.

**Mediation analysis.** A mediation analysis was not conducted as there was no relation between: (a) the independent variable and the dependent variable (i.e., transgression severity and forgiveness), (b) the independent variable and the mediator (i.e., transgression severity and feelings of guilt, and (c) the mediator and the dependent variable (i.e., feelings of guilt and forgiveness).

## Discussion

Results from the present study showed that participants perceived significantly more constructive responses from their partner than they did destructive responses. Furthermore, participants perceived less active destructive (exit) responses than passive destructive (neglect) responses. The reverse was seen in constructive responses, with participants perceiving more active constructive (voice) responses than passive constructive (loyalty) responses. These findings could be explained by the participant sample, which consisted of individuals who were still in a relationship with the partner whom they had transgressed against. Because constructive responses promote conflict resolution in a relationship, it makes sense for these participants to be perceiving such responses from their partner. Active responses involve an attempt to make some sort of change to the relationship, whether it be constructive or destructive. In the case of the

voice response, participants are perceiving that their partners were attempting to make a positive change in the relationship. If, for example, they perceived more exit responses, then it is unlikely that the relationship would have continued. With neglect responses, the participants might have perceived this as their partner simply being reasonably upset by the transgression, as opposed to actively trying to discontinue the relationship.

These findings extend previous research by considering feelings of forgiveness in the transgressor. It is evident that there are certain patterns of perceived response tendencies that emerge across transgressors. There was a significant positive correlation between voice responses and feelings of forgiveness, as well as significant negative correlations between exit/neglect responses and feelings of forgiveness. This pattern might be more self-serving in nature, as interpreting their partner's behaviour in a constructive way might allow them to reduce the guilt that they feel. It is, perhaps, a way for the transgressors to forgive themselves for what they did and how it affected their relationship. Researchers have described a concept of pseudo self-forgiveness, which involves the transgressor's minimization of harm done in order to relieve the negative emotions attached to the wrongdoing, as admitting responsibility for a major transgression might foster ostracization (Woodyatt & Wenzel, 2013). As these individuals still continued their relationship, it might have been more beneficial for them to perceive more constructive (i.e., voice and loyalty) responses because such responses were related to higher perceptions of forgiveness from their partners.

It was hypothesized that guilt would be a mediator in the relationship between transgression severity and feelings of forgiveness following a transgression. Previous research shows support for a link between transgression severity and feelings of guilt (e.g., Riek, 2010). However, the results of the present study did not support this finding, and thus the hypotheses for this were not supported. In the current study, transgression severity did not seem to affect the

amount of guilt that the transgressor feels, which is not consistent with past findings. Feelings and the expressions of guilt did not differ significantly between the two conditions. The absence of significant findings might be due to methodological differences between the present study and previous studies that have examined this relation. While participants in those studies were also instructed to describe a time when they hurt someone, it was not a requirement that they still be in a relationship with that person. There might be some fundamental differences between those who remained in a relationship despite the transgression, and those who might no longer be in that relationship. Also, the manipulation in this study was ineffective, and as such, significant findings with respect to transgression severity were not observed, thus the potential mediating relationship of guilt could not be determined.

### **Limitations and Future Directions**

One major limitation of the present research is the transgression severity manipulation. The manipulation was very subtle with only the words “minor” and “major” differing between the two experimental conditions. It may not have been clear to participants what was meant by a “minor” or a “major” transgression, which allowed them to use their own interpretation of the terms. In addition, participants may have simply described a transgression that was most salient to them. If this was the case, then the transgressions that were reported may have all been major transgressions as minor transgressions may have already been forgotten. Therefore, future research should include a description of what minor and major transgressions necessitate.

Another issue related to the transgression severity manipulation is the placement of the manipulation check. The placement of this check within the survey might have been problematic due to its distance from the manipulation. In the survey, the manipulation was presented near the beginning of the survey. However, participants were instructed to answer a large series of questions before they answered the manipulation check question, which asked them to report how



severe they felt that the transgression actually was. By the time participants arrived at this question, the transgression they wrote about may have no longer been as fresh in their minds, especially considering the scales in the survey required them to look at the situation from both their own perspective and from the perspective of the victim of the transgression. As a result, participants might have changed their opinion about the transgression while answering the questions in between. For example, when participants answered the EVLN questions, they might have come to the realization that their partners did not view the transgression in the same way as they had viewed then, and felt better about the transgression in the end. This might be because the survey questions forced participants to think about the transgression and about their partners' reactions in more depth and in different ways in comparison to how they were thinking about it immediately after it occurred. Furthermore, the feelings that participants had about the transgression at the beginning of the survey might have become less intense by the end of the survey because of the temporal distance from their initial description of the event. As such, the placement of the manipulation check item was not ideal.

There were also a number of criteria that participants had to meet in order to be eligible to participate in this study. For example, it was required that participants be in a relationship for at least one month and that they experienced either a minor or major transgression, which they felt responsible for, sometime in the past month. Due to the large number of criteria, many participants might have struggled to find something to write about, and therefore were not able to follow all of the instructions. Perhaps the time limit for when the transgression occurred should have not been included, as many of the participants were in relationships that were only a few months old. In this case, it is unlikely that they have many transgressions to talk about, especially major transgressions. It is also plausible that most participants described the first transgression that came to mind, which was most salient to them. And as such, these transgressions may have

been more severe in nature. In the future, the time at which the transgression occurred should be controlled for as transgressions that occurred further in the past might be described as less severe due to time dampening the feelings associated with the transgression; or, transgressions that happened further away, and that are salient enough for the participants to recall, might be more severe. As a result, time may have confounded the relationship between transgression severity and feelings of forgiveness.

The use of first-year university students as participants may have led to problems and issues with generalizability. The beginning of a post-secondary education is a time of great change and stress in students' lives. Consequently, it can be a time of unstable romantic relationships, as well as the possibility of long-distance relationships. On average, the relationships in this study lasted one year, meaning they likely began dating before the first year of university. Many participants did mention that they were in a long-distance relationship, which seemed to contribute to a common theme of transgressions described (e.g., "my partner has not been making time to visit me"). Furthermore, a large percentage of first-year university students live in dormitories, where living in close quarters with others of the preferred sex might encourage individuals to break the rules previously established in their relationships, such as cheating. It has previously been estimated that 65 to 75 percent of college students have been unfaithful in their relationships (Shackelford, LeBlanc, & Drass, 2000). Therefore, the use of first-year university students may not be a representative or appropriate sample as their relationships might be more unstable on average, and results may not be generalizable to the greater population. However, the present study assists in helping to understand romantic relationships in first-year university students, which might provide valuable insight into the effects that variables specific to this population have on feelings of forgiveness, such as increased feelings of stress or feelings of instability.

Finally, some issues arose with the materials used in the present study. A major problem was the poor reliability of the voice and loyalty subscales of the EVLN. The poor internal consistency of the scale might have been due to the modifications that were made to it. Originally, the EVLN scale involved the victims of a transgression reporting how they responded to the transgressor. In the present study, the EVLN was administered to the transgressors, who were asked to report the responses that they perceived from the victim. Therefore, the modified version of the EVLN might not have been measuring the same thing as the original EVLN. It might have been difficult for participants to think about their partners' responses, especially when they are focused on themselves.

The use of self-report measures in general, coupled with the temporal distance between when the transgression occurred and when the participant filled out this survey, is problematic. Emotional experiences are often ephemeral in nature, and thus fading over time. Therefore, participants had to report on their past emotional experience, rather than present emotional experiences. Previous studies have demonstrated that emotion can impair memory (Hurlemann et al., 2005), which is why phenomena such as memory repression exist. Therefore, participants might not be accurately remembering previous transgressions, and they might especially find it difficult to retrieve the feelings or expressions of guilt that were attached to those experiences.

There are multiple ways of extending the present study. This study did not include married couples. It would be interesting to compare feelings of forgiveness in dating and married couples following a transgression as previous research has shown that they differ in the way that they communicate forgiveness to their partner (Sheldon, Gilchrist-Petty, & Lessley, 2014) and how likely they are to forgive their partner (Kachadourian et al., 2004). Also, it is likely that married couples have been together for longer, and perhaps even feel more committed to their partner as it is more difficult to leave a marriage than it is to leave a dating relationship.

Therefore, they are likely to have more experience with the way their partner behaves, how they communicate forgiveness, and how they seek forgiveness. As such, when one partner hurts the other, the transgressors may know how their partner will react and how to seek forgiveness. They may also feel less guilty about committing the transgression and have less negative perceptions of their partner's behaviour because they have likely been in a similar situation before. As a result, married couples might perceive more forgiveness from their partners than those in dating relationships.

As discussed earlier, future research could look at differences between proximal romantic relationships and long-distance romantic relationships, as the latter appears to present a unique set of transgressions that may be resolved in different ways. Similarly, individuals in long-distance relationships might feel less guilty after transgressing against their partner due to the fact that they cannot fully see their partners' reactions to the transgression in the same way that those who are not in long-distance relationships can. This relationship would be interesting to investigate in relation to feelings of forgiveness, and as a possible reason why 60% of individuals in long-distance relationships blame distance as the reason why the relationship ended (Van Horn et al., 1997).

The area of forgiveness in general, as well as the specific areas addressed in the present study, have implications in the field of counselling psychology, notably in empathy training. Empathy training involves teaching individuals to recognize the emotional responses of others, as well as to display emotions effectively in social situations (Teding van Berkhout & Malouff, 2016). Empathy plays a large role in forgiveness seeking (Mitchell, 2003). This may be due to guilt, as an increased understanding of what the victim is feeling can make a person feel considerably worse about something they have done. The application of forgiveness research to empathy training has been mentioned before; however, the present study offers a new

perspective. If greater feelings of guilt are related to lower feelings of forgiveness, then there are potentially new problems with respect to the transgressor that could be addressed in therapy. Previous research has found that feeling unforgiven by other people directly affects the number of depressive symptoms and the amount of rumination one experiences (Ingersoll-Dayton, Torges, & Krause, 2010). This could potentially be due to the amount of guilt that one experiences following a transgression, as guilt has consistently been shown to mediate the relationship between transgressing and rumination (Riek, 2010). As a result, it is important to realize some of the negative effects that this approach might have on a transgressor, and that perhaps other approaches should be taken in these situations, such as self-forgiveness in order to alleviate some of the guilt associated with the transgression.

## **Conclusion**

Although the current study is not without limitations, the findings still contribute to the forgiveness literature by examining the forgiveness process from the perspective of the transgressor, especially from transgressors who are still in a relationship with their romantic partner. Overall, the results from the present study demonstrate that after transgressing against their partners, individuals perceive more voice than loyalty, and less exit than neglect responses from their partner. Therefore, individuals perceive their partners as actively trying to repair rather than destroy the relationship. These findings suggest that when people transgress against their romantic partners, they tend to have fairly positive perceptions of their partner's behaviour, which is related to feeling more forgiven by their partner. However, further research is needed to understand the forgiveness process from the perspective of perpetrators' and how their perceptions affect their partner's decisions to forgive.

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