Vengefully ever after?

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Humans devote vast resources—time, money, emotional investment, and the like—to establishing and maintaining romantic relationships. Spending these resources on the pursuit of love is frequently wise, as involvement in a satisfying romantic relationship is among the most powerful predictors of happiness and health (Cohen et al., 2000; Myers, 2000).

Unfortunately, those very relationships that can make life so wonderful can also cause devastation, despair and outrage. My Northwestern University undergraduates reported recently on upsetting behaviours their partner had enacted over the preceding two weeks. One male student, for example, recounted an incident in which his girlfriend ‘told me my faults in a really mean way and [made me] feel [horrible] about them’.

Given how distressing it is to be the victim of partner transgressions, what makes people get beyond this initial distress and forgive? The answer to this question, which is the focus of the present article, is consequential for two reasons: (a) partner transgressions are nearly inevitable in long-term romantic relationships (Holmes & Peplau, 1988); and (b) when contrasted with experiencing vengeance, finding one’s way to forgiveness is associated with enhanced interpersonal harmony (Fincham et al., 2004), healthier physiological functioning (Witvliet et al., 2001), reduced negative affect (Worthington & Scherer, 2004), and fewer negative physical health symptoms (Toussaint et al., 2001). Despite these positive correlates of forgiveness, however, victims frequently have difficulty getting beyond the retaliatory and vengeful gut-level impulses that partner transgressions frequently provoke (Rusbult et al., 2005).

Throughout the centuries, forgiveness has enjoyed extensive attention from philosophers and theologians, but very little attention from empirical social scientists (see McCullough, Sandage et al., 1997). The past 10 to 20 years, however, have witnessed an explosion of scientific research aimed at discerning what predicts forgiveness. We now know, for example, that victims are especially likely to forgive if they: (a) experience empathy for the perpetrator (McCullough, Worthington, et al., 1997), (b) attribute low levels of blame or responsibility to the perpetrator (Fincham, 2000; McCullough et al., 2003), and (c) do not ruminate as much over the transgression (McCullough et al., 2007; Palea et al., 2005). Complementing such empirical investigations, conceptual analyses help to build a strong theoretical foundation for forgiveness research (e.g. Exline et al., 2003; McCullough et al., 1998; Rusbult et al., 2005), and a recent handbook volume on forgiveness research provides a broad and important overview of the field (Worthington, 2005a). In short, the scientific study of forgiveness is flourishing.

My goal in the present article is not to provide a comprehensive overview of the forgiveness literature, but rather to review three different programmes of research my colleagues and I have recently conducted as illustrative examples of current forgiveness research. Each of these three programmes investigates a different predictor of forgiveness in romantic relationships. The first predictor, relationship commitment, is a relationship-specific variable that has been...
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established as an important instigator of diverse relationship-promoting processes (Rusbult et al., 2001). The second predictor, narcissistic entitlement, is a personality variable relevant to the way individuals perceive interpersonal circumstances in which one individual might owe something to another (Raskin & Terry, 1988). And the third predictor, beliefs in romantic destiny, is also a personality variable, but one that applies specifically to beliefs about how romantic relationships are supposed to function (Knee, 1998).

Relationship commitment

In a first series of studies, we examined the role of relationship commitment in promoting forgiveness (Finkel et al., 2002). Relationship commitment refers to individuals’ psychological attachment to, long-term orientation toward, and intent to persist in a given relationship (Arriaga & Agnew, 2001). In one study – the first to use experimental procedures to manipulate commitment to a current relationship partner – we devised a priming manipulation in which we randomly assigned research participants to experience a temporary increase or decrease in their commitment to their current relationship partner (Finkel et al., 2002). The logic behind this priming manipulation was that individuals tend to experience some degree of day-to-day and moment-to-moment fluctuation in their relationship commitment, fluctuation that should be sensitive to experimental manipulation. Participants in both conditions answered five open-ended questions relevant to their partner and their relationship. Those in the high-commitment priming condition responded to items such as ‘What is the number one reason why it would be nice to grow old with your partner?’ and ‘Describe two ways in which you feel that your life has become linked to your partner’. Those in the low-commitment priming condition responded to items such as ‘Describe one of the activities that you enjoy engaging in when your partner is not around’ and ‘Describe two ways in which you are independent of your partner’.

After answering one of these sets of open-ended priming questions, participants reported on the degree to which they would forgive a series of 12 hypothetical partner transgressions, such as ‘Your partner lies to you about something important’ and ‘Your partner flirts with a classmate’. Results revealed that those participants who experienced the high-commitment prime were significantly more likely to report that they would forgive their partner’s transgressions than were those who experienced the low-commitment prime. Both a cross-sectional survey study and a prospective diary study in which participants reported on all upsetting partner behaviour over a two-week period replicated this association of high relationship commitment with bolstered forgiveness tendencies. This association was robust despite evidence that highly committed individuals were more likely than their less committed counterparts to be hurt and upset following their partner’s transgressions (Finkel et al., 2002).

Narcissistic entitlement

My colleagues and I then began exploring whether certain personality characteristics are associated with stronger versus weaker forgiveness tendencies. We initiated this foray by exploring forgiveness among individuals who were high versus low in narcissistic entitlement, a personality trait characterised by expectations of special treatment and a preoccupation with defending one’s rights (Exline et al., 2004). Transgressions engender an interpersonal debt, with the perpetrator owing something to the victim; in a sense, victim forgiveness

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forgiveness represents the cancellation of this debt (Worthington, 2003). We hypothesised that individuals who were high (versus low) in narcissistic entitlement would be especially unforgiving because such individuals (a) readily perceive that others owe them debts, (b) believe those debts to be especially large, (c) make sure to collect on those debts rather than cancelling them without full recompense, and (d) place sufficient value on self-respect and ‘saving face’ that they may well view forgiveness as a sign of weakness.

We assessed narcissistic entitlement with the six-item subscale of a standardised, forced-choice measure of narcissism (Raskin & Terry, 1988). For example, participants indicated which of the following two statements more accurately describes them: ‘I will never be satisfied until I get all that I deserve’ (entitled response) and ‘I take my satisfactions as they come’ (nonentitled response).

Across six studies employing cross-sectional, experimental, and longitudinal procedures, results revealed that individuals who were high (versus low) in narcissistic entitlement exhibited weak tendencies toward forgiveness; in other words, they were especially vengeful (Exline et al., 2004). In addition, this effect was robust beyond the effects of many potential confounds, including perpetrator apology and amends, relationship closeness and commitment, transgression severity, time since the transgression, victim religiosity and victim self-esteem.

**Destiny beliefs and attachment anxiety**

After establishing this link between narcissistic entitlement and (lack of) forgiveness, my colleagues and I began exploring how a different personality variable – beliefs in romantic destiny – would be associated with forgiveness (Finkel et al., 2007). In contrast to our work on relationship commitment and on narcissistic entitlement, however, we hypothesised that beliefs in romantic destiny would predict forgiveness not through a main effect, but rather as part of an interaction effect involving attachment anxiety. Destiny beliefs – sometimes called soulmate beliefs (Faniuk et al., 2002) – refer to the view that romantic relationships are or are not ‘meant to be’ (Knee & Canevello, 2006). Such beliefs are typically assessed with a self-report instrument measuring participants’ agreement with statements such as ‘potential relationship partners are either compatible or they are not’ and ‘potential relationship partners are either destined to get along or they are not’ (Knee et al., 2003).

Strong destiny theorists generally believe in the long-term stability of their current relationship impressions. In other words, they tend to evaluate and diagnose ‘the compatibility of a potential romantic partner and the future success of the relationship from whatever information is immediately available’ (Knee & Canevello, 2006, p.161). My colleagues and I expected that such individuals would be especially likely to analyse their current cognitive and emotional experiences following partner transgressions and to assume that these experiences would be diagnostic of what they can expect in the future.

We predicted that individuals who held strong destiny beliefs and experienced attachment anxiety, which is characterised by feelings of relational uncertainty and the need for reassurance, would be especially unforgiving following partner transgressions. Attachment anxiety is accompanied by acute concerns about rejection and the tendency to catastrophise the anticipated future consequences of relationship difficulties (Campbell et al., 2005). Individuals who are experiencing attachment anxiety are likely to assume that their current relationship insecurities will persist long into the future to the degree that they believe in romantic destiny. This pessimistic long-term perspective will likely predict diminished tendencies toward forgiveness.

In a first study, participants reported on...
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and health.
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with the following measure: 'I need a lot of
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investigating naturally occurring partner
tendencies of individuals in the attachment
romantic destiny. In contrast, the forgiveness
that they adhered strongly to beliefs in
attachment security prime was designed to
activate cognitive representations of certainty
and safety (e.g. 'child protected today felt
' become 'the child felt protected'). To
minimise suspicion, several of the five-word
sequences were fillers that were related
neither to anxiety nor to security.
Results revealed that destiny beliefs
and the attachment prime interacted as
hypothesised to predict forgiveness.
Specifically, individuals in the attachment
anxiety condition exhibited diminished
tendencies toward forgiveness to the degree
that they adhered strongly to beliefs in
romantic destiny. In contrast, the forgiveness
tendencies of individuals in the attachment
security condition were not diminished by
strong beliefs in romantic destiny.
This same pattern of results emerged
in a prospective longitudinal study
investigating naturally occurring partner
transgressions over a six-month period. This
follow-up study revealed that destiny beliefs
and naturally occurring elevations in
attachment anxiety (assessed 14 times
during the course of the study as agreement
with the following measure: 'I need a lot of
reassurance that my partner cares about me')
interacted as hypothesised to predict
forgiveness, not only immediately following
the transgression, but also when predicting
change over time in forgiveness. This destiny
beliefs x attachment anxiety interaction
effect was robust beyond the effects of many
potential confounds, including relationship
closeness and commitment, transgression
severity, time since the transgression, trait
attachment anxiety and trait forgiveness
tendencies. Additional analyses revealed that the destiny beliefs x
attachment anxiety interaction effect was mediated – both cross-sectionally and
longitudinally – by trust in the partner. It appears that strong destiny theorists
experiencing elevated attachment anxiety following partner transgressions are prone
toward concluding that they cannot trust
their partner, and this distrust, in turn,
renders them unlikely to forgive.

Challenges facing forgiveness researchers
As discussed above, the scientific study of
forgiveness is advancing rapidly. Still, given
how new this field is, it is perhaps not
surprising that forgiveness researchers face
a number of substantial challenges, two of
which I address here.

One challenge is generating a consensual
definition of forgiveness (see Worthington,
2005b). Scholars agree that forgiveness is a
process by which the victim experiences a
reduction over time in negativity toward the
perpetrator regarding a given transgression.
They disagree, however, about whether
these reductions in negativity happen largely
within the victim (i.e. changes in emotions
and cognitions) or between the victim and
the perpetrator (i.e. changes in their
interactions). To a large extent, scholars’
preferred definition of forgiveness is
influenced by whether they study
forgiveness dynamics within an existing
relational bond or among strangers
(Worthington, 2005b). Regardless, the field
of forgiveness research will become more
coherent if scholars can reach definitional
consensus.

A second challenge facing forgiveness
researchers is how to conduct rigorous
experimental investigations that do not
violate ethical codes of conduct. From a
scientific perspective, it would be wonderful
to develop a laboratory paradigm in which
investigators could study the forgiveness
process among individuals whose romantic
partner has severely betrayed them at the
laboratory session. The obvious problem
here is that it is unethical for scientists to
interfere with participants’ romantic lives in
a way that could (a) cause serious emotional
distress during the laboratory session, or (b)
adversely influence the relationship once
participants leave the laboratory. Forgiveness
scholars have developed experimental
interventions to provide insight into the
psychological processes underlying
forgiveness (e.g. Finkel et al., 2002;
McCullough, Worthington et al., 1997),
but exposing participants to a high-impact
transgression from their romantic partner
has proven more challenging. This challenge
might not be solvable, so forgiveness
scholars likely will have to continue
complementing low-impact laboratory
transgressions with both observational and
self-report procedures that provide insight
into the severe transgressions individuals
experience in the natural course of their
relationships.

Implications for intervention?
In this article, I reviewed recent research
suggesting that relationship commitment,
narcissistic entitlement, and destiny beliefs
(in conjunction with attachment anxiety)
predict forgiveness tendencies. That some
of this research has employed experimental
manipulations raises the intriguing
possibility that it can be adapted for clinical
interventions. Certain individuals are
chronically unhappy (and their
relationships function poorly) because
they are plagued by a generally vengeful
orientation in response to partner
transgressions. Perhaps enrolling these
individuals in interventions designed to
promote relationship commitment or
attachment security – or to decrease
narcissistic entitlement – could help them
overcome their vengeful tendencies and
achieve the relationship-fulfilment and life
satisfaction that otherwise would be
elusive.

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