

**To Forgive or to Forget? The Forgiveness Process in Older Adulthood**

by

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## Abstract

The ability to navigate transgressions in romantic relationships is imperative for both their quality and longevity, making forgiveness a critical process for all couples. However, the forgiveness process has the potential to change throughout a couple's time together, as developmental changes that occur later in the lifespan have the potential to influence both how it is enacted and received by older spouses. To understand the complexities of the forgiveness process and how it is associated with marital functioning later in life, the current paper will draw upon a sample of 64 higher-functioning, well-educated older married couples. Our findings revealed that older husbands and wives utilize several different successful avenues to enact forgiveness that are associated with better marital functioning (marital satisfaction, intimacy, and trust) both concurrently and a year later. Older husbands and wives also utilized behaviors such as retaliation that are associated with poorer marital functioning both concurrently and a year later. These findings help us better understand the forgiveness process in older adult marriages and in turn have the potential to shape interventions in marital therapy that capitalize on older adults' strengths.

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## Introduction

Conflict is inevitable in intimate relationships. Since conflict is inevitable, it is vital that partners in intimate relationships find ways to move past transgressions to preserve the relationship. One way to resolve these types of relational conflicts is through forgiveness. Forgiveness is characterized as overcoming a psychological trauma (Gordon & Baucom, 1998), whereby the victim changes their motivation by decreasing their negative emotions while also increasing their positive emotions towards the transgressor once again (Fincham, 2000; Fincham & Beach, 2002; Fincham, Beach, & Davila, 2004; Fincham, May, & Beach, in press). Partners in romantic relationships often cite forgiveness as a critical factor contributing to the success of their romantic relationship (Fenell, 1993; Fincham, 2000; Fincham & Beach, 2001), a conclusion supported by work highlighting its array of short-and long-term benefits for the partners and their relationship. For example, forgiveness has benefits such as bringing couples together (McCullough, Worthington, & Rachal, 1997), fostering intimacy, and increasing commitment (Finkel, Rusbult, Kumashiro, & Hannon, 2002), which all have the potential to enhance marital quality (Fincham & Beach, 2007).

Although forgiveness is imperative to the success of marital relationships (Fenell, 1993; Fincham, 2000; Fincham & Beach, 2001), most of the research to date has focused on newlyweds and young and middle-aged adults—leaving a gap in the literature as to how forgiveness takes places in longer-term marriages and older adults. In light of the numerous developmental changes that occur later in the lifespan (e.g., enhanced emotion regulation, decreased negative affect; Charles, 2010; Charles & Carstensen, 2007), the forgiveness process

has the potential to be very different in older adults. Looking within this population could potentially shed light on how older adults handle forgiveness within their marriages and how it may be different in the late life stage. Such findings could be beneficial for therapists and clinicians to understand that the way transgressions and conflict are dealt with later in life could be very different due to the life stage. Although these strategies may vary in later life they have the potential to be just as effective. To understand how forgiveness could be different in older adults, it is logical to see how older adults handle other emotional situations since handling transgressions have the potential to be emotionally charged occurrences.

To understand how older adults handle transgressions within their marital relationships, the current study draws upon Charles's (2010) model of strength and vulnerability integration (SAVI) to understand how the strengths and vulnerabilities in later adulthood affect emotional regulation within the context of the forgiveness process. Per this framework, older adults have different strategies for achieving individual and relational well-being compared to adults in other life stages. More specifically, these strategies that accompany old age help adults curtail and avoid negative emotions while also increasing and maintaining positive emotions – which happen to both be critical pieces of the forgiveness process in close relationships (Charles, 2010; Fincham 2000; Fincham & Beach, 2002; Fincham et al., 2004; Fincham et al., in press).

Accordingly, the current study utilizes the theoretical framework SAVI (Charles, 2010) to understand how older adults manage transgressions and therefore forgiveness within their marital relationship in a sample of 64 higher-functioning older couples and explores the links between these forgiveness approaches and concurrent and future marital functioning (marital satisfaction, intimacy, trust). Based on the SAVI model, it is hypothesized that older spouses will

likely use strategies to maximize their emotional well-being and enhance their marital functioning. This would include trying to avoid negative emotions and experiences that accompany a transgression (e.g., anger, retaliation, seeking revenge) and seeking out positive emotions and experiences (e.g., happiness, satisfaction, intimacy). Therefore, through these emotion regulation strategies, older adults will likely show different patterns of forgiveness within their marriages compared to findings from previous work examining younger couples. More specifically, older adults may try to avoid the negativity that results from a transgression through their emotion regulation strengths and lessons learned from previous experiences. This difference may point to an altered understanding and recommendations for the handling of conflict in later-life marriages. Using strengths that come from old age (e.g., emotion regulation) may help older adults navigate transgressions and therefore the forgiveness process, which can potentially enhance marital satisfaction. It is imperative to understand how forgiveness works within older adults' marriages to not only help couples who are struggling but to understand more about the construct and process itself.

## Literature Review

Forgiveness is something often cited by partners in romantic relationships as one of the most important factors contributing to the longevity of their relationship (Fenell, 1993). Not surprisingly, it is also one of the most important factors in maintaining positive and fulfilling relationships (Fincham, 2009). Despite forgiveness being cited as a critical factor in the success of romantic relationships (Fenell, 1993; Fincham, 2000; Fincham & Beach, 2001), the role that forgiveness plays in romantic relationships and its conceptualization have only begun receiving theoretical and empirical attention in the past decade.

Forgiveness is a process whereby an individual, the victim, experiences a change in motivation towards the transgressor, or the person that hurt them, based on their own free will. This motivational change by the victim includes letting go of any negative feelings about the perpetrator or the experience of hurt (Fincham et al., in press). Recently, the definition of forgiveness has added a second dimension, such that scholars now believe that forgiveness entails two distinctly different parts where the victim must work through the negativity due to the offense while *also* increasing positive feelings towards the transgressor (Fincham, 2000; Fincham & Beach, 2002; Fincham et al., 2004). Thus, an important consideration of forgiveness, especially within the context of intimate relationships, is that it is a performative process (Fincham, Hall, & Beach, 2005). This means that forgiveness is an ongoing action that is continually being processed by the person in the relationship who was hurt. After the wrongdoing is committed, the victim must repeatedly work through the negative emotions of

anger, hurt, and resentment while also trying to increase positive feelings of happiness, love, and appreciation for their partner once again.

This performative process of forgiveness is enacted through a few different methods, some of which are more beneficial than others. Fincham et al. (2004) defined forgiveness as having three dimensions: benevolence, retaliation, and avoidance. Benevolence is considered a positive dimension of forgiveness and avoidance and retaliation are two different negative dimensions of forgiveness. Benevolence involves increasing the positive feelings towards the transgressor by wanting to reconcile with the partner or accepting his or her flaws. Retaliation is defined by wanting to make things “even” or hurt their partner in a similar manner. Per Fincham et al.’s (2004) work, avoidance is demonstrated in three separate ways. The first two ways are how avoidance is described and the third way is the manner in which it is actually measured. The first way in which avoidance is described is the victim overcoming the poor self-view that comes with the poor treatment by the transgressor. The second way in which avoidance is described is not wanting to accept that as the transgressor, you have a negative self-view due to the emotional and psychological pain you have caused the victim. However, the way forgiveness is actually measured per Fincham et al.’s (2004) work is the victim literally avoiding the transgressor (e.g., “I withdrew from my partner”).

There are two caveats here worth noting about the avoidance piece of the forgiveness process. First, how Fincham and colleagues (2004) conceptualize and measure avoidance is somewhat different. The measure they developed only captures ways the victim literally avoided the transgressor (e.g., “I didn’t want to have anything to do with her/him”). Also, within the avoidance measure developed and used by Fincham et al. (2004), there is variability in how

avoidance is conceptualized. More specifically, there appear to be both passive and active types of avoidance being assessed. Simply withdrawing from your partner may be more passive, whereas giving them the cold shoulder could be a more active means of avoiding the transgressor. Furthermore, what is avoided seems to be different in these two situations. In avoiding coming to terms with the hurt you have caused, the individual appears to be avoiding the problem or the transgression, whereas withdrawing or giving the cold shoulder appears to be an act of avoiding the person. Avoiding the person versus avoiding the problem could be characteristics of two very distinct coping strategies. Avoiding the person could indicate that the victim does not feel ready to forgive or repair the relationship. Avoiding the problem could indicate that the victim would rather bypass the transgression to maintain the positivity in the relationship. These strategies of avoidance have two completely different goals.

As complex as the forgiveness process appears to be, it is not surprising to note that forgiveness has several similar constructs, though it should not be considered synonymous with denial, condoning, pardon, forgetting, or reconciliation (Fincham et al., 2005). Forgiveness is a separate construct that is intentional, unconditioned, and a voluntary act that includes working through the emotional pain the transgressor has caused (Fincham et al., 2005). This means the victim purposely decides to acknowledge the offense and then grant forgiveness after thinking and working through the emotional difficulty the offense has caused. Forgiveness has the potential to provide closure to a transgression, which in turn, can lead to reconciliation within the relationship (Braithwaite, Selby, & Fincham, 2011). Although forgiveness does not always necessarily lead to reconciliation, this two-step process is crucial to the success of romantic relationships. Unforgiven transgressions have the potential to lead to conflicts later in the

relationship, which could likely create deleterious interaction cycles within partners' communication (Fincham et al., 2004). Forgiveness also opens up the opportunity for trust to begin again, which is another critical component to romantic relationships. Ultimately, forgiveness is a mechanism in intimate relationships that repairs wrongdoings and allows the relationship to continue flourishing.

### **Forgiveness in Marriage**

Unfortunately – or perhaps fortunately depending on the outcome – opportunities for forgiveness abound within close relationships, as a characteristic of being in an intimate relationship is encountering events where one or both partners eventually feel hurt, betrayed, disappointed, or mistreated in the relationship (Fincham et al., 2006). These instances can be particularly difficult to navigate and the intimacy of the relationship adds to the confusion and complexity of trying to repair a wrongdoing (Fincham & Beach, 2013). The ability to suppress, regulate, and navigate through the negative affect that comes after a transgression is vital to maintaining the satisfaction and longevity of the relationship. Therefore, forgiveness is fundamental to the functioning and stability of the marital relationship.

An important distinction to forgiveness in marital relationships that may be separate from other instances of forgiveness is the importance of the increase of positive affect toward a partner after a transgression has occurred (Braithwaite et al., 2011). Successful intimate relationships are built upon the absence of or regulating negative emotions (e.g., anger, hurt, sadness, resentment) and the simultaneous presence and fostering of positive emotions (e.g., happiness, love, appreciation). For satisfying, long-term marriages, couples have to outweigh the negativity with about five times as much positivity (Gottman, 1993). Due to the negativity having a larger

impact than positivity in the relationship, for every one negative interaction (e.g., criticism, eye rolling) there should be five positive interactions (e.g., physical affection, doing a good deed for your partner) as a counterbalance. Therefore, it would make sense that with respect to forgiveness in the context of marriage, there not only needs to be the absence of negative affect, but the intense increase of positive affect toward a partner after a transgression for a marriage to be fulfilling and satisfying (Braithwaite et al., 2011; Fincham, 2000).

Furthermore, the increase in positive affect after a transgression could shape how spouses interpreted the transgression itself. Attributions, defined as explanations or understandings individuals make about other's behaviors or actions, occur in intimate relationships to understand events (Bradbury & Fincham, 1990). Marital satisfaction is a large contributing factor to how spouses make attributions (Bradbury & Fincham, 1990). For example, Bradbury and Fincham (1990) found that more maritally distressed spouses showed a more rigid attributional style. Couples with a rigid attributional style tended to consistently blame their partner or their relationship across situations, whether it was an event that was in the couples' control or out of the couples' control or a minor or major transgression. Despite the circumstances, these couples would usually blame their partner or relationship. Also, they were more likely to believe that their partners were intentional with their hurtful actions (Gottman, 1979). In contrast, spouses in non-distressed marriages showed a more flexible attributional style in which they were able to consider each negative event separately and specifically, instead of having a particular style or pattern of making attributions (Bradbury & Fincham, 1990).

Given the highly satisfied nature of the current sample, it is likely that these couples will make attributions based on each transgression separately. Since each transgression is taken in to

consideration individually, forgiveness or overlooking is more likely to happen instead of one typical, rigid, negative attributional style. It is likely that these couples will make more positive attributions about transgressions (e.g., this was an isolated incident, this was unintentional) due to their high marital satisfaction, which may potentially lead to successful forgiveness or overlooking the transgression. These factors set couples up to have more opportunities to enact forgiveness or overlook transgressions due to perceiving each transgression individually and creating positive attributions about transgressions instead of one predominant pattern of attributing behavior.

Forgiveness within the marital context is so crucial because of how it positively benefits the couples' relationship. There are benefits to the intimate relationship immediately after the transgression as well as benefits that last later into the relationship. For example, shortly after a transgression is committed against a partner, forgiveness has the potential to decrease the will to fight against and distance oneself from the transgressor while also increasing benevolence towards the transgressor (McCullough et al., 1997). As to how frequently such forgiveness takes place, Finkel and colleagues (2002) found that the more an individual wanted to maintain their intimate relationship, the more these individuals tended to forgive transgressions for the sake of preserving the intimate relationship.

Not surprisingly, forgiveness is also correlated with marital quality over the longer-term (Fincham & Beach, 2007), though the direction appears to be gender-specific. More specifically, the researchers found a bidirectional pattern for women, whereby the more forgiveness women exhibited, the higher they rated their marital quality. The higher women rated their marital quality, the more forgiveness they exhibited. In contrast, men demonstrated a unidirectional

pattern, whereby higher ratings of marital quality led to men reporting more forgiveness.

Fincham and Beach (2007) thought the difference in patterns might be due to the different ways men and women approach relationships. Women tend to be more in tune with the relationship and relationship difficulties than men are. Therefore, women may take it more upon themselves to fix the relationship difficulties, which might lead to more forgiveness and thus a bidirectional pattern ensues. Furthermore, McNulty (2008) found forgiveness related to marital quality amongst couples who were satisfied with their marriage. More specifically, partners who engaged in more forgiveness were also more satisfied with their marriages, reported engaging in fewer negative behaviors, and had less severe marital problems. Therefore, in marriages that are considered emotionally healthy and satisfying, forgiveness appears to positively impact marital quality.

Not surprisingly, spouses with long-term marriages (e.g., on average 19 years) who expressed more benevolence or good will towards their partner regarding forgiveness also reported more marital satisfaction over the next several months (Paleari, Regalia, & Fincham, 2005). Molden and Finkel (2010) found that individuals in romantic relationships who wanted to advance the relationship forward to achieve more out of the relationship had a positive association between how much trust the individual had in their partner and their readiness to forgive them. For individuals who wanted to advance the romantic relationship, trust was a strong factor influencing the likelihood of forgiveness. The authors note that a potential benefit of advancing the relationship forward is the possibility of experiencing more intimacy in the relationship. Predictably, the more committed romantic couples are (e.g., longer-term marriages), the stronger the link tends to be between trust and intimacy (Larzelere & Houston, 1980).

Furthermore, given that trust is a significant piece to intimacy (Larzere & Houston, 1980), the amount of intimacy in the marital relationship is likely related to the amount or likelihood of forgiveness. Once again, the increase of good will, regulation of negative emotions, and experience of trust and intimacy seem to play important roles in facilitating forgiveness in long-term marriages. These factors appear to make older adults well suited to enact these behaviors when practicing forgiveness within their marriages.

### **Forgiveness in Later-Life Marriages: Theoretical and Empirical Considerations**

As noted, forgiveness is critical to the success of marital relationships (Fenell, 1993; Fincham, 2000; Fincham & Beach, 2001). A key factor in the success of forgiveness is for partners to have the ability to suppress, regulate, and navigate through negative emotions, especially following transgressions. Recent theoretical work suggests that older adults may be particularly well-equipped to handle these types of emotional situations (e.g., interpersonal relationships, strategies for emotion regulation, negative experiences and memories), which suggests that older adults may be better able to engage in forgiveness within their marriages.

To understand why older adults may be better able to handle transgressions within their intimate relationships, the current study draws upon Charles's (2010) model of strength and vulnerability integration (SAVI), as this theoretical framework depicts how the strengths and vulnerabilities in later adulthood impact emotion regulation. SAVI explains how with age, comes different methods of appraisals, behaviors, and attentional strategies in order to achieve better emotional well-being. Strategies that generally come with old age not only help adults avoid and curtail negative emotions, they help with increasing and sustaining positive emotions. Since older adults have strengths in emotion regulation, it would make sense that the way they enact

forgiveness within their intimate relationships would capitalize on these strengths. Older adults would most likely handle transgressions and therefore forgiveness with strategies that increase their emotional well-being by suppressing their negative emotions and increasing their positive emotions. More specifically, SAVI builds upon Socioemotional Selectivity Theory (SST), which theorizes that older adults are keenly aware of the limited time they have left to live. Due to this awareness, they focus on maintaining positive, emotionally fulfilling relationships (Carstensen, Isaacowitz, & Charles, 1999). To ensure optimal intimacy within their closest relationships, older adults limit their social circles to only include people who are important, emotionally fulfilling, and meaningful (e.g., romantic partners, immediate family members).

The unique – and perhaps most relevant – extension of the SST model for the purposes of the current study is that the SAVI model suggests that the accumulated experiences of older adults gives them unique advantages not available to young or middle aged adults (Charles, 2010). Older adults have had more time and opportunities to practice emotion regulation. With these opportunities, older adults have learned effective ways to navigate and handle both their positive and negative emotions. Furthermore, using lessons learned from the past, older adults are able to intentionally increase their happiness and decrease their sadness, which leads to higher emotional well-being. As to how this might shape their forgiveness, older adults may be more aware of when to let transgressions go in order to minimize their sadness. In fact, Birditt and Fingerman (2005) found that older adults appear better at “picking their battles” when it comes to their interpersonal relationships. To deal with transgressions in relationships, older adults tend to use strategies such as waiting things out or not doing anything about the problem or transgression. This is probably due to what older adults have learned through living their lives

and the realization that they are running out of time and would rather be positive. By just letting things go or “picking their battles”, older adults may be able to sidestep the process of forgiveness all together.

It is important to note, however, that Charles (2010) states along with the strengths older adults have, they are not uniformly advantaged. Although older adults have acquired greater emotion regulation skills over the years, they tend to have a reduced ability at controlling their physiological arousal when confronted with stressors. If older adults are physiologically aroused it can take them significantly longer to regulate and recover from the arousal, which may be very stressing to their bodies physically. Due to this reduced ability to control their bodies’ physical reaction to perhaps a negative emotional event (e.g., feeling betrayed by a romantic partner), older adults employ age related strengths (i.e., emotion regulation skills) instead in order to maintain their well-being. Overlooking transgressions may be a vital skill that helps older adults deal with their vulnerabilities and lessen their physiological arousal at this point in their lives. Sometimes, this skill may even be necessary to preserve older adults’ health.

The conscious avoidance of negative emotional events that older adults employ contributes to their satisfaction with their intimate relationships. Older adults try to avoid even the exposure to possible negative experiences (e.g., negative emotional experiences; Charles, 2010). For example, in discussing tactics older adults use to solve conflicts with their friends, Blanchard-Fields, Chen, and Norris (1997) found older adults try to avoid the conflict and put their attention elsewhere (e.g., positive aspects of the relationship) in order to maintain their relationship intimacy. Older adults even recommend this approach to others as one of the best strategies to solve conflicts (Charles, Carstensen, & McFall, 2001). By wanting to maximize

positive experiences and feelings, especially in the wake of a conflict or transgression, older adults may be more willing to look beyond the hurt, sadness, and anger to focus on preserving intimacy. With this goal in mind, this could lead older adults to not consider forgiveness as a strategy to mend the hurt, because they would not think there was anything to forgive their partner for in the first place.

Supporting this assertion is work suggesting that the way that older adults even appraise the initial events and interactions are more positive. In general, older adults asked to recall memories from the past, discussed more positive memories than neutral or negative memories (Carstensen & Mikels, 2005; Mather & Carstensen, 2005). When older adults discuss areas of strife they tend to reflect on the conversation more positively (Story, Berg, Smith, Beveridge, Henry, & Pierce, 2007), even though they were discussing negative content. This falls in line with how older adults might handle forgiveness. If they usually look back on areas of strife and contention with positivity, they will probably not even feel the need to consider forgiveness as an option. Once again, older adults will most likely practice this strategy by bypassing the need for forgiveness within their marital relationship because they attune to the positive over the negative.

Based on these emotional regulation strategies, it is likely that older adults may exhibit different patterns of forgiveness in their marriages than have been previously seen in samples of younger couples (e.g., Fincham & Beach, 2002; McNulty, 2008) and that these different patterns may have both short- and long-term implications for how they view their marriages overall. Such a statement is supported by the more general strategies older adults use in other areas of their life: trying to avoid negative experiences, recalling more positive memories, and using passive problem solving strategies to maintain the positivity in the relationship (Blanchard-Fields et al.,

1997; Birditt & Fingerman, 2005; Carstensen & Mikels, 2005; Mather & Carstensen, 2005; Charles, 2010). These general, passive strategies aim at preserving the relationship, which in turn likely contributes to these couples having greater marital satisfaction. All of this evidence points to older adults enacting forgiveness within their marital relationship differently, as they directly overlook the transgression to preserve the relationship and therefore do not even see a need to enact forgiveness. Thus, the goal of the current study is to explore if older adults tend to overlook the forgiveness process in the wake of a transgression.

### **Current Study**

Due to the inevitability of transgressions within close relationships and the vital need to move past them (Fenell, 1993), it is essential to understand the forgiveness process. However, although forgiveness happens throughout the course of the marital relationship, it may change. More specifically, the process most likely looks differently in older adults due to employing strategies of emotional regulation to decrease negative affect while also increasing positive affect – perhaps the most critical component to the forgiveness process for intimate relationships. To understand the process of forgiveness later in life, we seek to answer the following questions: 1) How do older adults deal with transgressions within their marital relationship?; 2) Are different approaches to handling transgressions differentially linked to current and future marital functioning?; and 3) Are there gender differences in how older adults deal with transgressions within their marital relationships?

Our hypotheses are based on the principles of two theories—SAVI (Charles, 2010) and SST (Carstensen et al., 1999), which both theorize how older adults use age-related strengths to increase their emotional well-being. For the first question, we hypothesize that based on the

forgiveness literature (Fenell, 1993; Fincham & Beach, 2001; Fincham, 2009), couples that engage in the forgiveness process will utilize more benevolence, utilize avoidance less often than benevolence, and engage in retaliation the least. Based on the gerontological literature on the socio-emotional aspects of aging (Carstensen et al., 1999; Charles, 2010), we hypothesize that many couples may report no transgression even occurred. By not acknowledging any transgressions to forgive, thereby seemingly bypassing the forgiveness process all together, they may be focusing instead on preserving the intimacy within their relationship.

For the second question, we hypothesize that those who did not report a transgression will have higher marital satisfaction, intimacy, and trust than those that reported a transgression. This will be due to employing age-related strengths of attending to the positive aspects of their relationship to increase intimacy and regulating negative emotions (Carstensen et al., 1999; Birditt & Fingerman, 2005; Charles, 2010). We also predict that of those who do report a transgression, utilizing more benevolence will be linked to both one's own and one's partner's higher marital satisfaction, intimacy, and trust. Avoidance will be less strongly but still positively linked to both partners' marital satisfaction, trust, and intimacy due to handling the transgression by decreasing or avoiding negative affect towards the transgressor (Fincham, 2000; Fincham & Beach, 2002; Fincham et al., 2004). Finally, we predict that both engaging in retaliation will be linked to lower marital satisfaction, intimacy, and trust for both spouses at Time 1 and Time 2 likely due to the lack of emotional regulation (Carstensen et al., 1999; Charles, 2010).

Finally, for the third question, we hypothesize that men will be more likely to not report a transgression than women. We also hypothesize that women will be more likely to engage in both benevolence and retaliation, whereas men will be more likely to engage in avoidance. This

hypothesis is consistent with Fincham and Beach's (2007) speculation that women are more attuned to the relationship than men are, leading women to pay more attention to relationship difficulties than do men.

## Method

### Participants

Sixty-four couples (64 wives and 64 husbands) were used from the Marriage and Retirement Study (PI: Amy Rauer). The Marriage and Retirement Study investigated positive features of marriage in older adulthood (including forgiveness) and how these positive features related to individual and relationship well-being. Recruitment occurred from the surrounding community in the Southeastern region of the United States through community organizations. The couples had to be married, partially retired (i.e., working less than full time), and have the ability to drive to the research center on-campus.

The average age of wives was 69.5 years ( $SD = 7.5$ ; range = 56-89) and 71.7 years ( $SD = 8.00$ ; range = 59-93) for husbands. Fifty of the couples (78%) were in their first marriage and had been married on average for 42.4 years ( $SD = 14.97$ ; range = 7-68). For wives, 60 (93.8%) were European American, 3 (4.7%) were African American, and 1 (1.6%) were Asian American. For husbands, 61 (95.3%) were European American, 3 (4.7%), and were African American. For education, wives 25 (39.9%) had post-college education, 15 (23.4%) had a college degree, 14 (21.9%) attended some college, 9 (14.1%) had a high school diploma, 1 (1.6%) attended some high school. For education, husbands 36 (56.3%) had post-college education, 17 (26.6%) had a college degree, 6 (9.4%) attended some college, 3 (4.7%) had a high school diploma, 1 (1.6%) attended some high school. The couples' average income reported was \$85,875 ( $SD = \$64,074$ ; range = \$9,000-\$500,000) and the average overall wealth (i.e. income, pensions, IRAs, and property) was \$1,077,093; range = \$9,500-8,500,000). Fourteen (28.6%) couples had at least one

spouse working currently for pay and 35 (71.4%) couples were retired full time. On average couples reported having 2.6 children ( $SD= 1.28$ ; range = 0-6). In 14 (28.6%) couples, at least one spouse reported having a religious affiliation with 96% of them reporting Christianity as their religion.

At Wave 2 of the study, 55 (86%) of the 64 original couples completed the follow-up questionnaires. Attrition analyses showed that there were no significant differences between the couples that participated in Wave 1 and those that remained and participated in Wave 2 related to forgiveness, intimacy, trust, and marital satisfaction.

### **Procedures**

At Wave 1, the couples participated in a two to three-hour interview at the research laboratory on-campus. During the interview, couples took part in several interaction tasks (e.g., problem-solving task, health support task). After the interview was over, each husband and wife were given a questionnaire packet to finish and mail back to the laboratory within two weeks. The questionnaire included assessments for forgiveness and marital satisfaction, which are the focus of the current study. Every couple who turned in the questionnaire received a \$75 compensation for their participation at Wave 1. During Wave 2, couples, who consented to participate again, received questionnaires. Once the questionnaires were returned, couples received \$45 compensation for their participation.

### **Measures**

**Forgiveness.** The participants answered the Marital Forgiveness Scale – Event (Fincham et al., 2004) to measure their experience of forgiveness within their marriage during the last 12 months. First, the participants were asked to briefly describe a situation “when you felt the most

wronged or hurt by your partner” in an open-ended response. Directly after the response, the participants rated “how much hurt or upset did you experience when this event happened?” on a scale of one to nine, with one being more positive (e.g., “very little hurt”) and nine being more negative (e.g., “most hurt ever felt”). Next, the participants answered a nine-item questionnaire on a 6-point Likert scale. Higher scores indicated that participants agreed strongly with the statement about forgiveness. The nine items tapped into three different subscales within forgiveness: benevolence (3 items; e.g., “I soon forgave my partner”; T1  $\alpha = .88$  for wives;  $.56$  for husbands), avoidance (3 items; e.g., “I didn’t want to have anything to do with her/him”;  $\alpha = .75$  for wives;  $.78$  for husbands), and retaliation (3 items; e.g., “I found a way to make her/him regret it”;  $\alpha = .53$  for wives;  $.71$  for husbands<sup>1</sup>). As a potential control we also examined problem severity. Two independent coders, using transcripts of the transgressions reported in the open-ended response, coded for problem severity. The reliability between the two coders was  $\alpha = .89$

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<sup>1</sup> Due to the low reliability of some of the forgiveness subscales (e.g., retaliation for wives  $\alpha = .53$ ), we employed a number of approaches to strengthen these subscales. First, we completed a visual inspection of the data to search for any anomalies or errors, but none were found. Second, for each subscale of forgiveness, we dropped a recommended item off the scales, but this only slightly improved the reliabilities and was inconsistent across spouses. Third, we conducted Principle Component Analyses to investigate if the items were loading onto the hypothesized subscales. These analyses provided support, albeit weak, for the theorized three-factor structure of forgiveness. In light of these analyses, we proceeded with original forgiveness subscales.

for wives; .89 for husbands and the correlation was  $r = .81, p < .001$  for wives and  $r = .81, p < .001$  for husbands.

**Marital satisfaction.** Couples' marital satisfaction was measured using the 24-item Marital Satisfaction Questionnaire for Older Persons (Haynes, Floyd, Lemsky, Rogers, Winemiller, Heilmen, Werele, Murphy, & Cardone, 1992). This questionnaire addressed areas that were specific to older adults (e.g., "How satisfied are you with your spouse's physical health?") and general areas about marriage (e.g., "How satisfied are you with the time you with your spouse spend doing recreational activities?"; T1  $\alpha = .92$  for wives; .93 for husbands; T2  $\alpha = .90$  for wives; .95 for husbands). The items were summed, such that higher scores indicated greater satisfaction.

**Intimacy.** Spouses' intimacy was measured using the Lemieux and Hale's (1999) 6-item intimacy scale. On a 7-point Likert scale, spouses rated how much intimacy they shared in their relationship with their partner (e.g., "My partner and I share personal information with one another"; T1  $\alpha = .87$  for wives; .74 for husbands; T2  $\alpha = .82$  for wives; .82 for husbands). Higher scores indicated more intimacy shared in the relationship.

**Trust.** Lastly, spouses' level of trust was measured using the 8-item Dyadic Trust Scale (Larzelere & Huston, 1980). A 7-point Likert scale was used to measure how much each spouse stated they trusted each other (e.g., "I feel that I can trust my partner completely"; T1  $\alpha = .73$  for wives; .88 for husbands; T2  $\alpha = .73$  for wives; .85 for husbands). Higher scores indicated more trust in their spouse.

### **Plan of Analysis**

First, for all of the study variables we examined the descriptive statistics (i.e., mean, standard deviation, range, skewness). Next, we conducted paired samples *t*-tests to examine gender differences in all the study variables. Then, chi-square tests were conducted to examine if husbands and wives differed in their likelihood of reporting a transgression. Then, we examined preliminary correlations between the study variables. Next, we conducted independent samples *t*-tests to compare those who completed the first open-ended question of the forgiveness questionnaire (i.e., “Briefly describe a situation “when you felt the most wronged or hurt by your partner”) and those that did not complete the first open-ended question for husbands and wives.

To test how different approaches to handling transgressions can be differentially linked to current and future marital functioning, we used a series of hierarchical linear regressions to explain the variations of marital functioning based on both spouses self-reported forgiveness behaviors at Time 1. First, we examined husbands’ concurrent reports of marital satisfaction. In Step 1, we included husbands’ own reports of problem severity as a control. In Step 2, we included husbands’ benevolence, avoidance, and retaliation. In Step 3, to examine cross-spouse influence, we included wives’ benevolence, avoidance, and retaliation. Next, we examined husbands’ reports of marital satisfaction at Time 2. In Step 1, we included husbands’ own reports of problem severity and marital satisfaction at Time 1 as controls. In Step 2, we included husbands’ benevolence, avoidance, and retaliation. In Step 3, to examine cross-spouse influence, we included wives’ benevolence, avoidance, and retaliation. We repeated this procedure for husbands’ intimacy and trust at Time 1 and Time 2. We next repeated this entire series of regressions for wives. Their own problem severity was used as a control and their own forgiveness behaviors were entered in Step 2 and their husbands’ in Step 3.

## Results

### **Preliminary Analyses**

Table 1 includes descriptive statistics for the full sample. Paired samples *t*-tests indicated no gender differences on any of the study variables at Time 1 or Time 2. Paired samples *t*-tests revealed some differences between Time 1 and Time 2. Wives' marital satisfaction significantly declined from Time 1 to Time 2,  $t(54) = 5.02, p < .01$ . Wives' intimacy declined from Time 1 to Time 2,  $t(54) = 2.06, p < .05$ . Wives' trust declined from Time 1 to Time 2. Husbands' trust marginally declined from T1 to T2,  $t(54) = 1.82, p = .08$ .

Next, we examined correlations to explore the links between forgiveness and marital satisfaction, intimacy, and trust (see Table 1). First, within-spouse correlations revealed that husbands' benevolence significantly and negatively correlated with husbands' retaliation and avoidance. Husbands' avoidance significantly and positively correlated with retaliation. Husbands' marital satisfaction significantly and positively correlated with husbands' trust and intimacy at Time 1 and Time 2 and marital satisfaction only at Time 2. Husbands' trust significantly and positively correlated with husbands' intimacy at Time 1 and Time 2 and trust at Time 2. Within-spouse correlations further revealed that husbands' benevolence was significantly positively correlated with husbands' marital satisfaction, intimacy, and trust at Time 1 and marginally positively correlated with husbands' marital satisfaction at Time 2, though not intimacy or trust at Time 2. Husbands' avoidance significantly and negatively correlated with husbands' marital satisfaction, intimacy, and trust at Time 2, but not at Time 1. Husbands'

retaliation significantly and negatively correlated with husbands' intimacy, and trust at Time 1 and Time 2, but only husbands' marital satisfaction at Time 2.

Looking next at within-spouse correlations for wives, wives' avoidance significantly and positively correlated with wives' retaliation. In contrast to husbands, wives' benevolence did not correlate with wives' avoidance or retaliation. Wives' marital satisfaction significantly and positively correlated with wives' trust and intimacy at Time 1 and Time 2 and marital satisfaction at Time 2. Wives' benevolence significantly and positively correlated with wives' intimacy at Time 1 and Time 2 but only wives' marital satisfaction and trust at Time 2. Wives' benevolence marginally and positively correlated with wives' marital satisfaction at Time 1. Wives' avoidance significantly and negatively correlated with wives' marital satisfaction and trust at Time 2, but not intimacy. Wives' retaliation significantly and negatively correlated with wives' marital satisfaction only at Time 2, nor was it correlated with trust or intimacy at either time point.

Between-spouse correlations showed husbands' and wives' benevolence significantly and positively correlated. Husbands' benevolence marginally and negatively correlated with wives' retaliation. Husbands' benevolence significantly and positively correlated with wives' marital satisfaction and trust, but only at Time 1 and did not correlate with wives' intimacy at either time point. Husbands' avoidance significantly and negatively correlated with wives' marital satisfaction but only at Time 2. Husbands' avoidance was marginally negatively correlated with wives' intimacy and trust but only at Time 2, as well. Husbands' retaliation significantly and negatively correlated with wives' marital satisfaction and intimacy but only at Time 1 and there was no link to trust. Wives' avoidance marginally and negatively linked to husbands' marital

satisfaction. Between-spouse correlations further revealed that husbands' and wives' marital satisfaction, intimacy, and trust all significantly and positively correlated at Time 1 and Time 2.

Lastly, correlations revealed a significant negative correlation for the control variable of husbands' problem severity for husbands' marital satisfaction at Time 1 and trust at Time 2. It also revealed marginal negative correlations for husbands' problem severity and husbands' marital satisfaction and intimacy at Time 2 and trust at Time 1. Wives' problem severity did not correlate with her own reports of forgiveness or marital functioning at either wave.

### **How Many Couples Reported Transgressions and Does it Matter?**

We next examined participants' report of transgressions. First, we found that 24 (38%) husbands and 25 (39%) wives reported a transgression. We conducted a chi-square test to determine if couples were similar in their likelihood of reporting a transgression. The chi square test revealed there was a marginally significant difference such that there was a slightly less consensus than expected (e.g., both partners said no transgression took place).

Next, we examined whether marital functioning differed based on whether or not spouses reported a transgression. Independent samples *t*-tests revealed no differences in marital functioning at either Time 1 or Time 2 for husbands and wives based on whether or not they reported a transgression. These findings suggest that those who report transgressions in their marital relationship do not differ in marital functioning (marital satisfaction, intimacy, and trust) from those spouses who do not report transgressions.

### **Are Forgiveness Strategies and Marital Functioning Concurrently Linked?**

Hierarchical linear regression analyses examined the unique contributions of individual and spousal forgiveness approaches to Time 1 marital satisfaction, controlling for problem

severity (see Table 2). Looking first at husbands' Time 1 marital satisfaction, the final, full model explained a marginally significant amount of variance ( $R^2 = .45$ ). A few forgiveness behaviors emerged as unique predictors of husbands' Time 1 marital satisfaction. The more severe transgressions husbands experienced and the more avoidant behaviors their wives used, the less satisfied husbands were with their marriages. Looking at wives' Time 1 marital satisfaction, the final, full model explained a significant amount of variance ( $R^2 = .57$ ). A few forgiveness behaviors emerged as unique predictors of wives' Time 1 marital satisfaction. The more benevolent behaviors wives used, the more satisfied they were with their marriages. Furthermore, the more avoidant behaviors wives used and the more retaliation their husbands used, the less satisfied wives were with their marriages.

Next, we used hierarchical linear regression analyses to examine the unique contributions of individual and spousal forgiveness approaches to Time 1 intimacy, again controlling for problem severity (see Table 3). Looking first at husbands' Time 1 intimacy, the final, full model explained a marginally significant amount of variance ( $R^2 = .45$ ); however, there were no unique predictors. Additionally, wives' intimacy was not predicted by their own or their husbands' forgiveness behaviors.

Finally, we examined the unique contributions of individual and spousal forgiveness approaches to Time 1 trust, controlling for problem severity (see Table 4). Looking first at husbands' Time 1 trust, the final, full model explained a marginally significant amount of variance ( $R^2 = .41$ ). The more benevolent behaviors their wives used, the more husbands reported trusting their wives. In contrast, wives' trust was not predicted by her own or her husbands' forgiveness behaviors.

### **Do Forgiveness Strategies Predict Later Marital Functioning?**

Next, we conducted a series of hierarchical linear regression analyses to examine the unique contributions of individual and spousal forgiveness approaches to Time 2 marital satisfaction, controlling for both problem severity and Time 1 marital satisfaction (see Table 5). Husbands' changes in marital satisfaction were not predicted by his own or his wives' forgiveness behaviors. However, wives' Time 2 marital satisfaction final, full model explained a significant amount of variance ( $R^2 = .86$ ). A few forgiveness behaviors appeared as unique predictors of wives' Time 2 marital satisfaction. First, marital satisfaction at Time 1 strongly predicted later marital satisfaction. Second, problem severity was a positive predictor of change in marital satisfaction, such that wives reported increased marital satisfaction the more severe the transgression. Looking at the forgiveness behaviors, wives' own retaliation behaviors predicted decreased marital satisfaction a year later. Additionally, husbands' use of avoidance behaviors predicted decreased marital satisfaction. However, wives also reported decreased satisfaction with their marriages if husbands reported engaging in more benevolent behavior a year earlier.

Next, we examined the unique contributions of individual and spousal forgiveness approaches to Time 2 intimacy, controlling for problem severity and Time 1 intimacy (see Table 6). Husband's Time 2 intimacy was not predicted by his own or his wives' forgiveness behaviors. However, wives Time 2 intimacy final, full model explained a significant amount of variance ( $R^2 = .79$ ). First, wives intimacy at Time 1 strongly predicted wives intimacy a year later. Interestingly, wives benevolent behaviors predicted wives feeling less intimacy in their marriages a year later. Additionally, husbands' use of retaliation predicted wives reporting more intimacy in their marriages a year later.

Next, we examined the unique contributions of individual and spousal forgiveness approaches to Time 2 trust, controlling for problem severity and Time 1 trust (see Table 7). Husbands' Time 2 trust was not predicted by their own or their partners' forgiveness behaviors. Wives' final, full model explained a marginally significant amount of variance ( $R^2 = .56$ ). However, the only unique predictor was trust at Time 1 strongly predicted wives reporting trusting their husbands a year later.

## Discussion

Since conflict is inevitable in intimate relationships, forgiveness is a vital, necessary process for the longevity of romantic relationships (Fenell, 1993). Although it is apparent that forgiveness happens throughout the course of the marital relationship, the process may change in older adulthood due to older adults utilizing age-related strengths. Despite research growing over the past decade on the forgiveness process in marriage (Fincham, 2000; Fincham & Beach, 2001; Fincham & Beach, 2007), there is scant literature examining the forgiveness process in older adults' marriages or long-term marriages (Paleari et al., 2005). Our findings, however, suggest that focusing on later life-couples may be particularly important, as there appear to be different ways to enact the forgiveness process that have very different associations with marital functioning at this stage of the lifespan.

### **Is it Better to Forgive? It Depends on How You Do It**

The majority of couples in our sample did not report a transgression at all, seemingly bypassing the forgiveness process all together. However, reporting a transgression in and of itself was not linked to differences in marital functioning. Although reporting a transgression was not linked to lower or decreased marital functioning overall, marital functioning was sensitive to the forgiveness strategy that was utilized to repair the transgression. Furthermore, our analyses suggest that we need to be paying attention to the complexities of forgiveness in older adulthood and that it matters what forgiveness strategy partners use to repair transgressions. More specifically, it does not only depend on what forgiveness strategy (benevolence, avoidance,

retaliation) partners' use, but how we are assessing marital functioning (marital satisfaction, intimacy, and trust), and when we are assessing it (future vs. concurrent).

Such specificity is absent from Fincham et al.'s (2004) original conceptualization of forgiveness as having three dimensions: benevolence, avoidance, and retaliation. Within this definition, benevolence was considered a uniformly positive dimension and avoidance and retaliation were two different, but both consistently negative dimensions of forgiveness. Interestingly, we found that all three dimensions were linked to higher and lower marital functioning, but the direction of effects depended on what marital indicator was being assessed and when it was assessed. Our findings partially supported our hypotheses in that wives' benevolent behaviors were linked to their own greater marital satisfaction concurrently and husbands' benevolent behaviors were linked to their own greater feelings of trust within the relationship concurrently. Furthermore, husbands' retaliation behaviors predicted wives' lower marital satisfaction concurrently and wives' own retaliation behaviors were linked to decreased wives' marital satisfaction a year later, perhaps due to the lack of emotion regulation and experience of negative emotions (Carstensen et al., 1999; Charles, 2010). These findings are consistent with the forgiveness literature, as benevolence is beneficial for intimate relationships, whereas retaliation is detrimental for intimate relationships (Fincham, 2000; Fincham & Beach, 2002; Fincham et al., 2004).

Although many of our results were consistent with the literature, some of our findings were counter to our expectations about how forgiveness behaviors and marital functioning are related. First, although benevolence was linked to better marital functioning, husbands' benevolence was linked to wives' decreased marital satisfaction a year later and wives'

benevolence was linked to her own decreased intimacy a year later. Although not testable with the current measure of forgiveness, these findings may be explained by how benevolence was enacted in the relationship. For example, husbands' benevolence could turn into condescension or acting sanctimonious due to wanting recognition for the "good deeds" he does in the wake of repairing a transgression, which could be why benevolence is associated with decreased marital functioning. However, as these associations were not present at the bivariate correlational level, these findings should be interpreted with caution.

Future work should utilize observational data, as this could demonstrate exactly how benevolence was enacted and if the efforts were actually benevolent or if it turned into condescension or sanctimonious behavior. Furthermore, cross validation within the couples would bolster this finding due to having wives' input on the nature and effects of husbands' benevolent behaviors. Additionally, it would be important to capture the proportion of benevolent behaviors to other more negative behaviors in the relationship, as Gottman's (1993) five to one relationship ratio states that for every one negative interaction in a conflict setting, there must be five positive interactions for a relationship to continue being successful and satisfying. Thus, if benevolent behaviors or positive interactions decreased over time while negative behaviors remained the same, there may not be enough positive interactions (e.g., benevolence) to counterbalance the negative interactions. Gottman's (1993) ratio could explain why wives would feel less intimacy and less satisfied with their marriages even though benevolence was still present.

Our findings for retaliation were also surprising, as husbands' retaliation related to an increase in wives' self-reported intimacy a year later. First, it is important to note that our sample

includes couples in highly satisfied marriages, which according to Bradbury and Fincham (1990) would lead them to have a more flexible attributional style. These couples may be more likely to consider each transgression on an individual basis and/or believe their partner's behavior was not intentionally meant to hurt them. For example, if husbands did something to "get back at" their wives, these wives could interpret this retaliatory response as benign or something husbands did only out of hurt in the moment compared to husbands trying to sabotage the relationship. This is consistent with Charles's (2010) SAVI model, which describes how older adults are able to let retaliation behaviors go due to their desire to intentionally increase positive emotions and decrease negative emotions. These findings also may be explained by Birditt and Fingerman's (2005) conclusion that older adults are better at "picking their battles", as partners may be able to let go of these retaliatory behaviors and not let it diminish their marital functioning.

Furthermore, retaliation can be seen as a sign of engagement in the relationship. Over time, engagement in the relationship - even if some of it is negative - may result in higher marital functioning (Gottman & Krockoff, 1989). Despite its negativity, engagement in the relationship can have more benefits than disengagement in the relationship. Such a possibility is consistent with husbands' retaliation being associated with wives' lower marital satisfaction at Time 1 but increasing wives' intimacy a year later. Husbands' retaliatory behaviors may make their wives still feel close due to husbands showing engagement in the relationship, even if their overall marital satisfaction is somewhat lower due to having to cope with retaliatory behaviors. This is consistent with work showing that husbands' engagement or taking an active role (e.g., engaging in discussing a problem) was associated with higher marital functioning, not the absence of negative problem-solving (Rauer & Volling, 2013). It is worth noting that the vast

majority of the retaliation behaviors rated low in our data: 1.6 for husbands and 1.54 for wives on a Likert scale of 1-6. Therefore, most of the retaliation that appears to be happening in these marriages were likely minor acts of retaliation (e.g., eye roll).

Lastly, wives' marital functioning appeared to relate to forgiveness more than husbands' marital functioning. This difference is consistent with Fincham and Beach's (2007) speculation that women are more attuned to the relationship than men. If women more attune to the relationship, not only do they focus on forgiveness behaviors, these behaviors more likely affect them as well. Women's attunement to the relationship is also consistent with the results being significant for retaliation even though the behaviors appeared to be minor acts of retaliation. Due to greater relationship attunement, even small or minor acts of forgiveness behaviors are associated with wives' marital functioning. Overall, our findings are supporting Fincham and Beach's (2007) speculation of women being more in touch with the relationship than men.

### **Is it Better to Forget? It Depends on How You Do It**

As previously mentioned, Fincham and colleagues (2004) conceptualized avoidance as a uniformly negative dimension of forgiveness. We hypothesized that avoidance would be less strongly but still positively linked to marital functioning due to decreasing or avoiding the negative affect associated with the transgression (Carstensen et al., 1999; Charles, 2010). Our findings somewhat supported our hypotheses and shed light on how avoidance is both positively and negatively linked to marital functioning. We found no differences in marital satisfaction, intimacy, or trust for couples that reported a transgression compared to those who stated that no transgression had occurred. However, we found some striking differences in avoidance that are essential to tease out. Avoidance of the problem or transgression all together appeared to be

relatively benign, as spouses who did so reported similarly high levels of marital functioning as the spouses who faced the problem. In contrast, avoiding the person, as the measure of avoidance tapped into, appeared to be more uniformly problematic for the marital relationship. Using avoidance behaviors with acknowledged transgressions was not only linked to less marital satisfaction for husbands and wives concurrently, it predicted decreased marital satisfaction for wives a year later.

Such distinctions are especially noteworthy due the previous uncertainty of how Fincham and colleagues (2004) conceptualized and then measured forgiveness. Fincham and colleagues' (2004) measure of the forgiveness subscale, avoidance, only included avoiding the person. Our results indicate that it is essential to distinguish between the goals of avoiding the person or avoiding the problem or transgression. Avoiding the person once a transgression is acknowledged appears problematic for the marital relationship, whereas avoiding the problem could indicate the couple would rather preserve the positivity and intimacy of the relationship. This supports our hypotheses of couples utilizing emotion regulation strategies to handle transgressions within the relationship, which is consistent with both SAVI (Charles, 2010) and SST (Carstensen et al., 1999). Moving forward, researchers need to distinguish more specifically if couples are avoiding the transgression or if they are avoiding the person after an acknowledged transgression, as these appear to be very different processes with potentially different consequences.

### **Strengths and Limitations**

**Strengths.** Our study included several notable strengths. First, by capturing multiple dimensions of marital functioning (marital satisfaction, intimacy, and trust) over two waves of

data collection, we were able to explore how forgiveness strategies were related to the stability and changes of multiple indices of marital functioning. Second, we controlled for problem severity, which helped us view how forgiveness behaviors are linked to marital functioning regardless of how severe the transgression was in the relationship. Third, we have reports from both spouses on forgiveness behaviors and marital functioning, which enabled us to see how one's own and one's partners' forgiveness behaviors are linked marital functioning. For example, we found that husbands' retaliation behaviors predicted wives' increased intimacy a year later. Without looking at cross-spouse reports, we would not be able to see how older adults' forgiveness behaviors spillover to their spouses. Finally, our focus on the forgiveness process among older couples is a unique feature, as the previous literature almost exclusively focuses on newlywed couples and couples in younger adulthood (e.g., Fincham & Beach, 2002).

**Limitations.** Despite the strengths of our study, there were some limitations to consider when interpreting the results. First, our sample was fairly homogenous (e.g., financially stable, European American, highly maritally satisfied), thus our sample is not generalizable to populations that do not match this description. Furthermore, our sample size is modest and even smaller for those who reported transgressions. This leads us to have less statistical power and we may have detected some more findings if we had a larger sample size. Additionally, the highly satisfied nature of this sample may have made avoiding transgressions easier to accomplish. This means that due to the couples being very satisfied with their marriages, their partners probably enact transgressions that are relatively minor (e.g., rearranged the organization of the closet), making avoiding the problem or not acknowledging a transgression an easier process. This is supported by the average problem severity score being a 4.17 for husbands and a 3.80 for wives

on a Likert scale of 1-9. Thus, it is unlikely that the couples themselves would say the transgressions were traumatic, despite that being a central feature of Gordon and Baucom's (1998) definition of a transgression.

Second, we only had self-report data from the couples and did not actually observe them enacting or having discussions about transgressions and forgiveness behaviors (benevolence, avoidance, and retaliation). Observational data could have bolstered the reliability and validity of what each spouse reported due to actually being able to witness the behaviors. For example, one couples', "I wanted to even the score", could mean they slept in the other room for one night versus they planned to hurt the other person in a similar manner.

Third, our data is retrospective over the past year and each partner asked to report a time they felt the "most hurt". Therefore, the reports of transgressions and forgiveness behaviors may not be as well remembered. If we had participants write in daily diaries, there is the potential for the data to be more accurate. Furthermore, only examining one example of a transgression and forgiveness behaviors, especially it being the instance in which the partner felt the "most hurt", may not capture the most generalizable way couples enact forgiveness and handle transgressions (Fincham & Beach, in press). The forgiveness process may look very different for couples' "average" transgressions or if we investigated several instances of transgressions and forgiveness behaviors.

Lastly, we have no cross validation within the couples on the transgression or forgiveness behaviors. Therefore, we have no input of whether each spouse agreed upon the way in which their partner enacted forgiveness behaviors (e.g., did the wife really experience her husband's positive thinking).

## **Conclusions**

This study contributed to the literature by examining the successful but different avenues older adults can take in order to effectively deal with transgressions within the marital relationship. Overall, older adults appear to be able to utilize several strategies to handle transgressions positively, and these strategies appeared to have unique associations with marital functioning both when it happened and a year later. Perhaps most importantly, it appears that researchers should consider separating avoiding the person versus avoiding the problem due to these forgiveness behaviors being differentially related to marital functioning. Understanding these nuances may be especially relevant due to the growing population of older adults and especially for those who attend therapy (James & Haley, 1995). It is important to understand these distinctions because not only do forgiveness strategies differ in the later life stage, forgiveness strategies that could have been previously harmful to the relationship in younger adulthood could now be either neutral or even beneficial (e.g., avoiding the problem using emotion regulation strategies to promote intimacy).

In conclusion, our findings suggest practitioners should be aware of how the forgiveness process may look different in older adult marriages versus marriages in other life stages. For example, bypassing transgressions and the forgiveness process may not be harmful for older adults' marital functioning, whereas practitioners tend to discourage avoidance in early marriages as a way to manage transgressions as it leads to potentially negative patterns of communication (Gottman & Krokoff, 1989). Bypassing the forgiveness process fits with Gordon, Baucom, and Snyder's (2000) idea that not all negative events in marriage require forgiveness. It is likely that older adults experience events within their marriages that are negative but not

necessarily deleterious (e.g., disagreement over what color to paint a room), and thus not all of these events warrant one partner forgiving the other. Furthermore, practitioners should focus on increasing intimacy and positivity and curtailing negative emotions that result from a transgression, as this emotion regulation improves emotional well-being in older adults (Charles, 2010). Practitioners should utilize interventions that draw upon older adults' strengths, such as attuning to the positive, increasing intimacy, and emotion regulation, to not only improve or maintain older adult marriages, but to promote greater well-being overall.

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	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	13	14	15	16	17	18	19	20
1. H Problem Severity	1.00																			
2. H Benevolence	-.23	1.00																		
3. H Avoidance	.14	-.34*	1.00																	
4. H Retaliation	.06	-.44*	.47**	1.00																
5. W Problem Severity	.06	-.06	.07	.19	1.00															
6. W Benevolence	-.15	.47*	.14	-.21	-.10	1.00														
7. W Avoidance	-.06	-.13	.10	.07	.12	.12	1.00													
8. W Retaliation	.19	-.35†	-.04	-.14	.12	-.09	.45**	1.00												
9. H Marital Satisfaction T1	-.51*	.52**	-.18	-.25	-.25	.42*	-.30	-.09	1.00											
10. H Marital Satisfaction T2	-.39†	.30†	-.59**	-.36*	-.16	-.13	-.27†	-.04	.61**	1.00										
11. W Marital Satisfaction T1	-.22	.43**	-.12	-.38*	-.00	.65**	-.25	-.24	.57**	.57**	1.00									
12. W Marital Satisfaction T2	-.31	.30	-.43*	-.23	.10	.33†	-.46*	-.53**	.45**	.59**	.87**	1.00								
13. H Intimacy T1	-.04	.44**	-.19	-.43**	-.34†	.39*	-.02	.16	.57**	.59**	.48**	.38**	1.00							
14. H Intimacy T2	-.38†	.26	-.61**	-.42*	-.27	.01	-.06	.02	.41**	.65**	.46**	.54**	.67**	1.00						
15. W Intimacy T1	.10	.25	-.05	-.34*	.04	.65**	.10	-.15	.34**	.37**	.73**	.64**	.54**	.54**	1.00					
16. W Intimacy T2	.09	.22	-.31†	-.09	-.03	.48**	-.04	-.15	.30*	.33*	.57**	.65**	.49**	.53**	.82**	1.00				
17. H Trust T1	-.35†	.51**	-.18	-.34*	-.32	.44**	-.07	.08	.77**	.56*	.49**	.31*	.73**	.45**	.45**	.34*	1.00			
18. H Trust T2	-.56**	.23	-.47**	-.39*	-.38†	.09	-.16	-.04	.62**	.74**	.52**	.52**	.59**	.72**	.38**	.29*	.69**	1.00		
19. W Trust T1	-.10	.37*	-.11	-.22	.09	.67**	.01	-.17	.44**	.42**	.81**	.69**	.46**	.50**	.78**	.66**	.49**	.47**	1.00	
20. W Trust T2	-.22	.25	-.33†	-.15	.09	.33†	-.57**	-.25	.35**	.44**	.66**	.65**	.33*	.42**	.40**	.56**	.37**	.39**	.62**	1.00
<i>M</i>	4.17	5.20	2.59	1.59	3.80	5.17	2.57	1.54	116.4	113.9	117.6	113.5	5.94	5.85	5.81	5.67	6.34	6.21	6.40	6.23
<i>SD</i>	2.08	.73	1.13	.76	2.24	1.00	1.30	.65	18.07	17.57	14.57	15.28	.76	.93	1.15	1.04	.78	.79	.65	.69

Note: † $p < .10$ , \* $p < .05$ , \*\* $p < .01$

Table 2.

*Hierarchical Regression Analyses of Time 1 Marital Satisfaction*

	Husbands' Marital Satisfaction		Wives' Marital Satisfaction	
	$\Delta R^2$	$\beta$	$\Delta R^2$	$\beta$
Step 1	.16†		-.04	
Problem Severity		-.46†		-.14
Step 2	.14		.38*	
Problem Severity		-.49*		.03
Benevolence		.42		.56*
Avoidance		.29		-.36
Retaliation		-.08		.02
Step 3	.16		.23†	
Problem Severity		-.52*		.24
Benevolence		.28		.84**
Avoidance		.24		-.39†
Retaliation		-.03		-.23
Partners' Benevolence		.29		-.49
Partners' Avoidance		-.52*		-.18
Partners' Retaliation		.27		-.62*
Total $R^2$	.45†		.57*	

\*\* $p < .01$ ; \* $p < .05$ ; † $p < .10$ .

Table 3.

*Hierarchical Regression Analyses of Time 1 Intimacy*

	Husbands' Intimacy		Wives' Intimacy	
	$\Delta R^2$	$\beta$	$\Delta R^2$	$\beta$
Step 1	-.06		-.04	
Problem Severity		-.05		.14
Step 2	.33†		.20	
Problem Severity		-.15		.24
Benevolence		.18		.56*
Avoidance		.45†		-.04
Retaliation		-.56†		-.05
Step 3	.18		.04	
Problem Severity		-.13		.43
Benevolence		.36		.79*
Avoidance		.31		-.13
Retaliation		-.32		-.30
Partners' Benevolence		.27		-.52
Partners' Avoidance		.09		-.27
Partners' Retaliation		.43		-.43
Total $R^2$	.45†		.20	

\*\* $p < .01$ ; \* $p < .05$ ; † $p < .10$ .

Table 4.

*Hierarchical Regression Analyses of Time 1 Trust*

	Husbands' Trust		Wives' Trust	
	$\Delta R^2$	$\beta$	$\Delta R^2$	$\beta$
Step 1	-.01		-.04	
Problem Severity		-.22		.16
Step 2	.16		.26†	
Problem Severity		-.27		.25
Benevolence		.45		.61*
Avoidance		.27		-.05
Retaliation		-.14		-.00
Step 3	.26†		.00	
Problem Severity		-.18		.42
Benevolence		.32		.80*
Avoidance		-.02		-.15
Retaliation		.08		-.23
Partners' Benevolence		.64*		-.45
Partners' Avoidance		-.14		-.30
Partners' Retaliation		.29		-.33
Total $R^2$	.41†		.22	

\*\* $p < .01$ ; \* $p < .05$ ; † $p < .10$ .

Table 5.

*Hierarchical Regression Analyses of Time 2 Marital Satisfaction*

	Husbands' Marital Satisfaction		Wives' Marital Satisfaction	
	$\Delta R^2$	$\beta$	$\Delta R^2$	$\beta$
Step 1	.04		.56**	
Problem Severity		-.18		.14
T1 Marital Satisfaction		.30		.81**
Step 2	.31†		.11	
Problem Severity		.06		.15
T1 Marital Satisfaction		.57†		1.07**
Benevolence		-.26		-.23
Avoidance		-.51†		.44†
Retaliation		-.31		-.34
Step 3	-.01		.19*	
Problem Severity		.19		.37*
T1 Marital Satisfaction		1.01†		.87**
Benevolence		-.39		-.00
Avoidance		-.58		.18
Retaliation		-.26		-.73**
Partners' Benevolence		-.16		-.59*
Partners' Avoidance		.50		-.50*
Partners' Retaliation		-.34		-.04
Total $R^2$	.35		.86**	

\*\* $p < .01$ ; \* $p < .05$ ; † $p < .10$ .

Table 6.

*Hierarchical Regression Analyses of Time 2 Intimacy*

	Husbands' Intimacy		Wives' Intimacy	
	$\Delta R^2$	$\beta$	$\Delta R^2$	$\beta$
Step 1	-.04		.64**	
Problem Severity		-.29		.05
T1 Intimacy		-.19		.83**
Step 2	.39†		-.06	
Problem Severity		-.25		.06
T1 Intimacy		-.10		.99**
Benevolence		-.49†		-.28
Avoidance		-.39		-.05
Retaliation		-.36		-.07
Step 3	-.12		.21†	
Problem Severity		.11		-.10
T1 Intimacy		-.70		1.17**
Benevolence		-.03		-.56*
Avoidance		-.38		-.08
Retaliation		-.78		-.04
Partners' Benevolence		.64		.16
Partners' Avoidance		-.14		-.17
Partners' Retaliation		.72		.56*
Total $R^2$	.23		.79*	

Table 7.

*Hierarchical Regression Analyses of Time 2 Trust*

	Husbands' Trust		Wives' Trust	
	$\Delta R^2$	$\beta$	$\Delta R^2$	$\beta$
Step 1	.27†		.53**	
Problem Severity		-.51†		.18
T1 Trust		.20		.73**
Step 2	.17		-.09	
Problem Severity		-.47†		.23
T1 Trust		.38		.69*
Benevolence		-.45†		-.04
Avoidance		-.09		-.24
Retaliation		-.41		.08
Step 3	-.08		.12	
Problem Severity		-.20		.25
T1 Trust		.11		.69*
Benevolence		-.47		-.03
Avoidance		-.35		-.33
Retaliation		-.56†		-.04
Partners' Benevolence		.61		-.11
Partners' Avoidance		-.02		-.53
Partners' Retaliation		.01		.30
Total $R^2$	.36		.56†	

\*\* $p < .01$ ; \* $p < .05$ ; † $p < .10$ .

Appendix A

Fincham et al.'s (2004) Marital Forgiveness Scale – Event.

**Marital Forgiveness Scale – Event**

Think of the time (option to specify time period; eg., during the last 12 months) when you felt most **wronged** or hurt by your partner.

Write a very brief description of what happened:

How much hurt or upset did you experience when this event happened?

Very little hurt    1      2      3      4      5      6      7      8      9    Most hurt ever felt

Now please rate the following statements:

*Strongly Disagree*

*Strongly Agree*

- |   |   |   |   |   |   |  |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|--|
| 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | 6 | I didn't want to have anything to do with her/him                                |
| 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | 6 | I soon forgave my partner  |
| 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | 6 | I found a way to make her/him regret it  |
| 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | 6 | I gave him/her the cold shoulder,  |
| 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | 6 | I withdrew from my partner   |
| 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | 6 | I did something to even the score,   |
| 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | 6 | It was easy to feel warmly again toward my partner                               |
| 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | 6 | I retaliated or did something to get my own back                                 |
| 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | 6 | I am able to act as positively toward my partner now as I was before it happened |

The above items yield three subscales:

**Benevolence** (2<sup>nd</sup>, 7<sup>th</sup>, 9<sup>th</sup> items, alpha = .86 and .85 for husbands and wives, respectively)

**Avoidance** (1<sup>st</sup>, 4<sup>th</sup>, 5<sup>th</sup> items, alpha = .76 and .80 for husbands and wives, respectively),

**Retaliation** (3<sup>rd</sup>, 6<sup>th</sup>, 8<sup>th</sup> items, alpha = .79 and .77 for husbands and wives, respectively)