The Fallout of Forgiveness: How Forgiveness Predicts Third-Party Perceptions of the Forgiver and the Forgiver’s Relationships

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Abstract

Forgiveness within romantic relationships may have broader consequences. Two studies investigated how forgiveness decisions predict outsiders’ perceptions of individuals and their relationships. Study 1 (n = 364) used an experimental between-subjects design and hypothetical vignettes to manipulate forgiveness, offense severity, and offense frequency. As hypothesized, participants perceived forgiving targets as more committed and satisfied, and the relation between forgiveness and person perceptions depended on offense frequency (competence) and severity (competence and warmth). In Study 2, participants (n = 134) recalled friends’ offenses. Forgiveness predicted perceived commitment, satisfaction, investment, warmth, and competence, at times interacting with severity and frequency, while accounting for intent and apologies. The findings are discussed in light of the importance of perceptions and social networks.

Keywords: Competence, forgiveness, investment model, relationship quality, romantic relationships, social networks, third-party perceptions, warmth
The Fallout of Forgiveness: How Forgiveness Predicts Third-Party Perceptions of the Forgiver and the Forgiver’s Relationship

Romantic partners can comfort and care for us, yet they can also frustrate, provoke, or betray us. Such transgressions might unfold within the confines of a couple, but relationships operate within a larger social context (e.g., Berscheid, 1999), suggesting these transgressions may have broader consequences. They may, for example, predict third-party perceptions of individuals and their relationship. Once formed, outsiders’ perceptions can alter an individual’s relationship success and personal well-being. Perceptions can translate into relationship interference (Sprecher, 2011) and potentially impede mental and physical health (Blaire & Holmberg, 2008). The current studies investigate how the choice to forgive (or to not forgive) a transgressing romantic partner may predict how outsiders perceive individuals and their relationships.

Third Parties and Forgiveness

Forgiveness is a benevolent, prosocially-motivated response towards a person who has committed an offense (McCullough, Worthington, & Rachal, 1997). Scholars have generally studied forgiveness in romantic relationships by focusing on its causes, correlates, or outcomes for the couple or couple members. This limited perspective may underestimate the role of outsiders. Victims often consult trusted outsiders to make sense of conflicts (Volkema, Farquhar, & Bergmann, 1996), perceiving friends and family as potential sources for support (Klein & Milardo, 2000). The majority of forgiveness research extending beyond the dyad explores victims’ feelings or forgiveness behaviors and how these correspond with outsiders’ support (e.g., Eaton, 2011). A notable exception, Green, Burnette, and Davis (2008) queried third parties directly, discovering that third parties tend to be less forgiving of transgressors than the victims.
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themselves. This work provides insight into the way outsiders perceive friends’ transgressors, yet we know little about how third parties perceive their own friend (the victim) or that friend’s relationship after a relationship transgression.

In order to understand how forgiveness may predict third-party perceptions, certain qualities of the transgression, such as its severity and frequency, warrant consideration. Severity reflects the perceived magnitude of a transgression’s consequences for the self or the relationship, and has a robust inverse relation with forgiveness (Fincham, Jackson, & Beach, 2005). Compared to mild offenses, severe offenses evoke more rumination, are less likely to be forgiven, and require more executive functioning to forgive (Pronk, Karremans, Overbeek, Vermulst, & Wigboldus, 2010). The frequency (discrete or chronic) of the offense also matters (Fincham, Hall, & Beach, 2005). For example, people are more likely to forgive an isolated incident of cheating than an on-going or repeat affair (Gunderson & Ferrari, 2008).

Perceptions of Relationship Quality

Understanding how forgiveness predicts third-party perceptions is essential because outsiders’ perceptions are powerful players in individuals’ relationships. Outsiders’ perceptions contribute to the stability, love, and satisfaction that individuals experience in their romantic relationships (Sprecher & Felmlee, 1992). These perceptions not only predict romantic relationship fate (Agnew et al., 2001; Le, Dove, Agnew, Korn, & Mutso, 2010), but may influence it, in part by driving or impeding relationship approval (Etcheverry, Le, & Hoffman, 2012). In other words, once formed, third-party perceptions are not benign. Outsiders’ reactions to a relationship are linked to how motivated they are to interfere with the relationship (Sprecher, 2011), potentially affecting its quality and stability. Because outsiders’ perceptions can initiate a
set of behaviors designed to influence individuals’ romantic relationships, the nature of these perceptions and the events that shape them become critically important to understand.

No cohesive theory has emerged to explain how outsiders form impressions of others’ relationships, but Rusbult’s (1980) investment model, focusing on individuals’ own perceptions within relationships, provides a framework for examining third-party relationship perceptions (Agnew et al., 2001; Etcheverry et al., 2012). The investment model (Rusbult, 1980) identifies several components (satisfaction, quality of alternatives, and investment) that predict commitment, a psychological attachment characterized by intention and a long-term orientation (Arriaga & Agnew, 2001; Rusbult & Buunk, 1993). Evidence suggests that higher satisfaction, fewer alternatives, and greater investment produce greater commitment (Rusbult, 1983).

People appear adept at perceiving others’ relationships along the dimensions of the investment model and often do so quite accurately (Agnew et al., 2001). Etcheverry and colleagues (2012) showed that outsiders form impressions of others’ satisfaction and alternatives and these judgments predict approval (accounting for 52% and less than 1% of the variance respectively). Such approval tends to correspond with outsiders’ support or interference in friends’ relationships (Sprecher, 2011). Manipulating satisfaction revealed its direct effect on approval, suggesting that third-party satisfaction judgments may be especially important for individuals’ relationship well-being (Etcheverry et al., 2012). This evidence, which demonstrates the potentially serious consequences of third-party judgments, underscores the need to investigate the bases for these perceptions.

Forgiveness as a Cue for Relationship Quality

A review of the literature on commitment, satisfaction, alternatives, and investment reveals that third parties may use their friends’ forgiveness decisions to understand their friends’
Forgiveness and commitment are robustly linked within relationships (Finkel, Rusbult, Kumashiro, & Hannon, 2002), as are forgiveness and relationship satisfaction (Allemand, Amberg, Zimprich, & Fincham, 2007; Kachadourian, Fincham, & Davila, 2004). These findings suggest that, to outsiders, forgiveness may signal commitment and satisfaction. Perceptions of satisfaction may also be influenced by transgression severity and frequency. While forgiveness and commitment are linked within dyads regardless of transgression severity (Finkel et al., 2002), victims of highly severe offenses tend to be less satisfied in their relationships (Bachman & Guerrero, 2006). If observers are sensitive to these relations, transgression severity and frequency may join forgiveness as independent predictors of perceived satisfaction.

Forgiveness is also associated with having lower quality alternatives (Guerrero & Bachman, 2010). Outsiders, therefore, may perceive friends’ decisions to forgive as evidence that those friends have fewer alternatives to their current romantic partner (or are not attending to those alternatives; Maner, Rouby, & Gonzaga, 2010). Forgiveness is also associated with relationship investment (Guerrero & Bachman, 2010), with the act of forgiving itself resembling an effortful act of relationship investment (Ysseldyk & Wohl, 2012). Accordingly, outsiders may link others’ forgiveness with their relationship investment. Both perceptions of investment and alternatives may also reflect transgression characteristics. From the unforgiving third-party perspective (Green et al., 2008), victims of severe and repeat offenses may be seen as having better options elsewhere, independent of forgiveness. Further, staying in a relationship marked by severe or frequent offenses may signal greater investment.

**Perceptions of Competence and Warmth**

Forgiving a romantic partner may correspond not only with outsiders’ impressions of a couple’s relationship quality but also with impressions of individuals’ dispositions, such as their
competence and warmth. Competence and warmth account for approximately 82% of the variance in global impressions of well-known others (Wojciszke, Bazinska, & Jaworski, 1998). This substantial proportion underscores the need to examine factors that predict judgments of competence and warmth, because impressions about individuals, regardless of their accuracy, shape those individuals’ behaviors (Snyder & Swann, 1978). Further, should newly-acquired information revise an impression of a friend’s competence and warmth, such revision may have adverse consequences, as personality change is a primary reason for friendship dissolution (Johnson et al., 2004). Competence and warmth judgments not only have the potential to elicit expected behaviors from others (Snyder & Swann, 1978), but they also relate to the perceivers’ behaviors and beliefs. Perceptions of competence and warmth predict tendencies to harass, help, neglect, or associate (Cuddy, Fiske, & Glick, 2007) and are linked to admiration, contempt, pity, and envy (Fiske, Cuddy, Glick, & Xu, 2002), defining the extent to which people like and respect others (Fiske, Cuddy, & Glick, 2007). These corollaries underscore the need to understand the bases for perceptions of competence and warmth.

Forgiveness as a Cue for Competence and Warmth

No one theory provides a clear path for understanding how competence and warmth judgments are formed, but literature linking competence and warmth to aspects of forgiveness provides a basis for our discussion. People may infer competence (i.e., agency or intellect) from forgiveness. Research in social dilemmas has shown that observers judge targets as less competent when the targets choose to behave pro-socially despite knowing that to do so is against their own self-interest (Krueger, Massey, & DiDonato, 2008). The parallel case for forgiveness (a pro-social act) would be forgiving in contexts that put the self at risk (e.g., McNulty, 2010; 2011). Forgiving severe offenses and repeated offenses, therefore, may render
perceptions of less competence. Victims of defection in social dilemmas are viewed as less competent (Krueger & Acevado, 2007), suggesting that simply having a partner who chronically commits severe offenses, independent of forgiveness, could generate perceptions of incompetence.

Forgiveness may also predict outsiders’ perceptions of individuals’ warmth (i.e., communality). Warmer people tend to feel more positively towards transgressors and are more likely to forgive (Brose, Rye, Lutz-Zois, & Ross, 2005); this within-person link suggests observers may associate forgiving with warmth. Interestingly, withholding forgiveness may provide more information than forgiving. Consistent with expectancy-violation theory (Burgoon & Hale, 1988), withholding forgiveness after experiencing a mild offense may violate observers’ expectations of typical behavior in romantic relationships and potentially predict perceptions of less warmth. The same is unlikely true after severe transgressions, when withholding forgiveness would seem normative rather than diagnostic.

**Overview and Predictions**

The current research is the first to examine how decisions to forgive relational transgressions predict outsiders’ perceptions of individuals and their relationships. Because outsiders’ relationship perceptions can translate into relationship approval (Etcheverry et al., 2012) and potentially relationship support (Sprecher, 2011), and because impressions held by couples’ social networks appear to play a role in the life-course of their romantic relationships (Agnew et al., 2001), understanding the foundations for relationship perceptions is critical. Likewise, perceptions of competence and warmth underlie social interactions (Judd, James-Hawkins, Yzerbyt, & Kashima, 2004) and can shape others’ behaviors (Snyder & Swann, 1978), highlighting the need to identify factors that may predict these perceptions. Two studies, one
experimental and one correlational, tested the hypotheses that forgiveness independently predicts outsiders’ perceptions of commitment (H1) and predicts perceptions of satisfaction, investment, and lower quality alternatives (H2a). We also expected transgression severity and frequency to predict perceptions of less satisfaction, more investment, and higher quality alternatives (H2b). For impressions of competence and warmth, we hypothesized that forgiveness predicts lower perceived competence for severe and frequent transgressions (H3a); frequency predicts lower perceived competency for severe offenses (H3b); and withholding forgiveness inversely predicts perceived warmth for mild offenses (H4).

**Study 1**

Study 1 used an experimental design and hypothetical vignettes to test for the predicted relations.

**Methods**

**Participants.** Data were collected from 415 undergraduates (267 women; $M_{age} = 19.29$, $SD = 1.06$) from a small Mid-Atlantic Jesuit university. A manipulation check measured the recall accuracy of vignette features, including whether the target forgave his/her partner (80.7% responded accurately), the offense’s frequency (83.6%), and the offense’s severity (79.3%). We required two correct answers to be included in analyses, reducing our final sample to 364 undergraduates (129 men, 235 women; $M_{age} = 19.29$, $SD = 1.06$). Participants identified predominantly as Caucasian (86.8%) and single (66.8%).

**Measures.**

**Relationship quality.** Perceived relationship quality was assessed using a modified version of the 25-item Investment Model Scale (IMS; Rusbult, Martz, & Agnew, 1998), which assesses commitment and dependence: satisfaction, investment, and alternatives. Scores from
the original version predict relationship longevity and correlate with interdependence and closeness (Rusbult et al., 1998). We adopted a third-party perspective for each question (e.g., “My friend feels satisfied with his/her relationship”). As is standard for the IMS (Rusbult et al., 1998), we administered the facet items when measuring aspects of dependence, but limited analysis to the global items (5 for each; scale of 0-8). The exclusion of two items from the 7-item commitment scale rendered the appropriate factor structure and improved reliability to .93; however the findings were the same with and without these two items so they were retained to maintain the integrity of the scale. Participants perceived the target as committed ($M = 4.96$, $SD = 1.52$; $\alpha = .85$), satisfied ($M = 3.83$, $SD = 1.90$; $\alpha = .93$), having some alternatives ($M = 5.13$, $SD= 1.40$; $\alpha = .82$), and invested ($M = 5.05$, $SD = 1.37$; $\alpha = .79$).

**Competence and warmth.** Using a 7-point scale, participants judged the target on traits related to competence (i.e., competent, confident, efficient, intelligent, and skillful) and warmth (i.e., friendly, good-natured, sincere, trustworthy, and warm), following an approach widely-used in previous research (Fiske et al., 2002). Analyses confirmed the measure’s two-factor structure. Overall, participants perceived the targets as fairly competent ($M = 4.33$, $SD = 1.20$; $\alpha = .84$) and warm ($M = 5.16$, $SD = 1.27$; $\alpha = .91$).

**Procedure.** After providing informed consent, participants were randomly assigned to read one of eight vignettes about a same-gender, close friend (see Table 1). The friend describes learning that his/her partner broke his/her favorite mug (a mild transgression) or had an affair (a severe transgression), either for the first time or the fifth-time. The friend also reveals whether or not he/she forgave his/her partner. Because apologies influence forgiveness (Gunderson & Ferrari, 2008), each target acknowledges that his/her partner issued an apology.
The transgressions were selected from a pilot study \((n = 33)\) testing the severity of different possible relationship events. The two selected were the most severe (having an affair; \(M = 7.00, SD = 0.00\)) and the least severe (breaking a favorite mug; \(M = 1.88, SD = 1.29\)), \(t(32) = 22.75, p < .001, \eta^2_p = .98\). The affair’s rank as highly severe is consistent with Metts’s (1994) characterization of sexual infidelity as the prototype of a severe relational transgression. Breaking a partner’s favorite mug violates less serious relational rules (e.g., taking care of valued objects), and accordingly, mean evaluations were significantly lower than the midpoint of the scale, \(t(32) = 9.42, p < .001, d = 1.64\).

After reading their vignette, participants rated the target’s relationship quality (commitment, satisfaction, alternatives, and investment), judged the target’s competence and warmth, and completed demographic questions. All participants were thanked and debriefed.

**Results**

Study 1 used a between-subjects experimental design to examine how forgiveness, offense severity, and offense frequency predict outsiders’ perceptions. Missing values were scarce (0.18%), evaluated as random, and estimated using the multiple imputation procedures (Rubin, 1987) available in SPSS (version 20). All analyses used the imputed data set and normality assumptions were met. Our primary hypotheses were examined using factorial analyses of variance with forgiveness, severity, and frequency as predictors for each dependent variable (the four measures of relationship quality, competence, and warmth).

We did not anticipate associations between gender or relationship status and our dependent variables, and found no relations \((t_s < 1.15 \text{ and } 1.43, \text{ respectively})\) except for commitment. Women inferred greater commitment \((M = 5.24, SD = 1.54)\) than men \((M = 4.44, SD = 1.36)\), \(t(292.87) = 5.07, p < .001, d = 0.55\) (equal variance not assumed), and individuals in
relationships ($M = 5.30, SD = 1.58$) inferred more commitment than those who were single or casually dating ($M = 4.87, SD = 1.50$), $t(361) = 2.29, p = .022$. Both variables were therefore included only in the model predicting commitment, $d = 0.28$.

**Commitment.** We hypothesized that forgiveness would predict commitment and did not anticipate that transgression characteristics would relate to commitment judgments (H1). Means and standard errors for all relationship perceptions are shown in Figure 1. Supporting our expectation, in a model that included gender and relationship status as predictors, forgiveness emerged as a predictor of commitment, $F(1, 332) = 18.31, p < .001, \eta^2_p = .05$. Neither severity nor frequency were independent predictors, $F_s(1, 332) < 2$, and no interactions were observed. Women inferred greater commitment across conditions than men, $F(1, 332) = 22.57, p < .001, \eta^2_p = .06$, but relationship status was not associated with perceived commitment.

**Relationship satisfaction.** We hypothesized that forgiveness, severity, and frequency would each predict relationship satisfaction (H2a and H2b). Results supported the association between forgiveness and satisfaction: targets who forgave were perceived as more satisfied, $F(1, 364) = 33.75, p < .001, \eta^2_p = .09$. We also observed an unanticipated interaction between severity and frequency on perceived satisfaction, $F(1, 354) = 8.25, p = .004, \eta^2_p = .02$. In the severe context, $F(1, 190) = 26.00, p < .001, \eta^2_p = .12$, and not the mild context, $F(1, 170) = 2.24, p = .137$, participants viewed victims of repeated infidelity as less satisfied than victims of a first-time affair. No other interactions were present.

**Alternatives.** We predicted main effects of forgiveness, severity, and frequency on perception of quality of alternatives (H2a and H2b), but instead observed a significant forgiveness-severity interaction, $F(1, 364) = 3.88, p = .050, \eta^2_p = .01$. When the targets did not forgive their partners, offense severity predicted more perceived alternatives, $F(1, 182) = 23.24,$
This relation was diminished but still present when the target forgave, $F(1, 178) = 4.64, p = .033, \eta^2_p = .03$. No other relations were observed.

**Investment.** We expected forgiveness, severity, and frequency to independently predict perceived investment (H2a and 2b). Results were not consistent with these predictions; however, we did observe a significant severity-frequency interaction on perceived investment, $F(1, 364) = 3.96, p = .048, \eta^2_p = .01$. Frequency predicted less perceived investment for the severe offense, $F(1, 190) = 8.31, p = .004, \eta^2_p = .04$, but not for the mild offense, $F(1, 170) = .001, p = .967$. No other relations were observed.

**Competence.** Figure 2 shows the means and standard deviations for perceptions of competence and warmth. We predicted that forgiveness would correspond with lower perceived competence when the offense was severe or frequent, and that victims of repeated severe offenses would be perceived as less competent than victims of repeated mild offenses (H3a and H3b). The observed forgiveness-severity interaction on competence supported our prediction, $F(1, 356) = 5.77, p = .017, \eta^2_p = .02$. For the severe offense, forgiving signaled less competence than not forgiving, $F(1, 189) = 5.46, p = .020, \eta^2_p = .03$; forgiveness did not indicate competence for the mild offense, $F(1, 170) = 1.56, p = .213$. We did not observe the expected forgiveness-frequency interaction on perceived competence; however, findings did show the expected severity-frequency interaction on perceived competence, $F(1,356) = 7.79, p = .006, \eta^2_p = .02$. Frequency did not relate to perceived competence when targets experienced the mild offense, $F(1, 170) = 0.99, p = .319$; however, victims of repeated severe offenses were perceived as less competent than victims of infrequent severe offenses, $F(1, 190) = 25.04, p < .001, \eta^2_p = .12$. There were no other interactions predicted or observed.
**Warmth.** We hypothesized that forgiveness would predict perceived warmth only when not-forgiving would violate a norm, i.e., only in the mild condition (H4). Supporting this prediction, we observed the expected forgiveness-severity interaction on perceptions of warmth, $F(1, 356) = 19.18, p < .001, \eta_p^2 = .05$. Withholding forgiveness from minor offenses signaled less warmth than forgiving, $F(1, 169) = 35.05, p < .001, \eta_p^2 = .17$. In the severe condition, warmth judgments did not vary as a function of forgiveness, $F(1, 190) = .06, p = .814$. No other relations were observed.

**Study 1 Discussion**

Study 1 provides evidence that forgiveness, along with offense severity and frequency, predicts judgments of relationship quality and judgments about the personal characteristics of competence and warmth. Forgiveness was strongly associated with perceived commitment and satisfaction, but did not independently predict perceived alternatives or investment. For these latter qualities, offense severity interacted with forgiveness or frequency to predict judgments. In terms of person perception, forgiving a severe offense was associated with perceptions of less competence, while targets who withheld forgiveness after experiencing a mild offense were perceived as less warm.

Study 1 offered baseline support for the idea that transgression-related information is associated with observers’ impressions, while sparking the need for additional inquiry. Our use of hypothetical scenarios and imaginary friends enhanced experimental control and allowed for tentative causal inference, but limited ecological validity. We cannot assume that transgression-related information operates similarly in real, on-going friendships. Further, we focused on only two transgressions while a great diversity of offenses is possible within a romantic context. Pilot testing documented our selected offenses as distinctly severe (having an affair) and mild
(breaking a favorite mug), and both met Mett’s (1994) criteria for a relational transgression, however, while both were designed to be interpreted as intentional, variation in perceived intentionality may limit the clarity of our conclusions.

To better understand how forgiveness within romantic relationships relates to outsiders’ perceptions, real-life relational transgressions and their associated perceptions warranted study. Further, the potential roles of forgiveness, severity, and frequency in predicting outsiders’ perceptions would be better understood if they were examined alongside transgressor intent and apologies, which matter in real-world transgressions (Gunderson & Ferrari, 2008). In addition, a more diverse sample, particularly in terms of relationship experience, would strengthen our conclusions. These limitations were addressed in Study 2.

**Study 2**

Study 2 examined how forgiveness, offense severity, and offense frequency relate to outsiders’ impressions by using a recall paradigm in which participants remembered real-life instances when a friend was a victim of a relational offense. We hypothesized that forgiveness, severity, and frequency would predict perceptions in the manner specified in Study 1, above and beyond intent and apologies. Given our secondary interest in intent and apologies, we made no predictions regarding their roles in explaining outsiders’ perceptions.

**Methods**

**Participants.** We recruited 139 participants using Amazon’s Mechanical Turk (MTurk), an online labor marketplace that connects survey administrators to a demographically-diverse group of motivated survey takers (Buhrmester, Kwang, & Gosling, 2011). MTurk is a reliable source for high quality data and has been used in relationship research (e.g., Dailey, Brody, LeFebvre, & Crook, 2013; Slotter & Gardner, 2012). We limited our sample to English-
speaking MTurk participants living in the United States and, following Waldroon and Kelley (2005), we invited only those with clear recall of the targeted event. Participants were compensated with a nominal fee of $0.40. The data from five participants who failed an attention-check question were excluded from analyses, leaving 134 participants (101 females). Participants ($M_{age} = 32.63, SD = 12.20$) identified as single or dating casually ($n = 44$), dating seriously ($n = 34$), engaged or married ($n = 48$), and divorced ($n = 7$). The majority identified as Caucasian (70.9%), Asian (10.40%), or Black (9.70%), with annual incomes typically under 25K (41.80%), between 25 and 40K (19.40%), or between 50 and 75K (17.90%).

Measures.

Offense characteristics. Participants were asked to recall and describe a relational offense experienced by a friend, wherein the friend was the victim and the friend’s partner was the perpetrator. We then asked participants about the offense’s severity using McCullough, Fincham, and Tsang’s (2003) one-question approach, “How painful was this offense for your friend?” and a 1(not painful at all) to 7 (extremely painful) scale. Participants tended to recall severe offenses ($M = 5.66, SD = 1.65$) with only 23% at or below the scale’s midpoint. Seven-point scales were also used to measure forgiveness (“To what extent did your friend forgive his/her romantic partner?”; $M = 4.73, SD = 2.06$) and offense frequency (“How often had your friend’s significant other done this before?”; $M = 3.13, SD = 2.24$). Participants judged transgressor intent using three attribution questions effective in previous research (McCullough et al., 2003) and modified for the third-person perspective ($M = 5.35, SD = 1.46; \alpha = .75$). Participants reported whether the transgressor offered an apology (67.91% indicated yes), and if possible, evaluated the apology’s sincerity ($M = 5.25, SD = 1.70$).
**Relationship quality.** To keep the online survey brief, we used a shortened form of the investment model measure (Etcheverry et al., 2012) to assess relationship quality. Analyses confirmed the expected four-factor structure of this brief measure. Participants responded on a 9-point scale to four sets of three items targeting commitment ($M = 6.22, SD = 2.87; \alpha = .98$), satisfaction ($M = 3.58, SD = 2.42; \alpha = .91$), alternatives ($M = 6.39, SD = 1.86; \alpha = .79$), and investment ($M = 7.00, SD = 1.89; \alpha = .89$).

**Competence and warmth.** Competence ($M = 4.58, SD = 1.55; \alpha = .90$) and warmth ($M = 5.56, SD = 1.31; \alpha = .91$) were assessed in the same manner as in Study 1. Items sorted in the expected fashion, confirming the measure’s two-factor structure.

**Procedure.** MTurk participants were routed to a separate website (qualtrics.com) to complete an informed consent form. They were then asked to recall an instance when a close friend was annoyed, irritated, offended, hurt, or betrayed by his or her romantic significant other. As modeled by Waldroon and Kelley (2005), participants were asked to describe a specific event that happened to a specific friend rather than to offer a general impression. Participants chose events they had witnessed (74.60%) or learned about directly from their friend (20.10%), recalled the events well ($M = 5.99, SD = 0.99$), and took the survey questions seriously ($M = 6.56, SD = 0.78$). Prototypical examples for mild, moderate, and severe offenses are shown in Table 2. After recalling the incident, participants completed all measures, were thanked, debriefed, and compensated through MTurk.

**Results**

Study 2’s results were based on a correlational design. Missing values (0.27%) were judged as random and estimated using multiple imputation to produce our final data set. Our main hypotheses were examined using simultaneous multiple linear regression analyses. In
addition to the primary predictor variables (forgiveness, severity, and frequency) and their interaction terms, models included transgressor intent and the presence of an apology (coded “0” for no apology, “1” for apology), as well as their first-order interactions. We inspected for multicollinearity and centered each predictor prior to computing interaction terms. Correlations among predictors are presented in Table 3. We also tested for potential, if unanticipated, associations between gender or relationship status and relationship or person perceptions. Men and women were no different in their perceptions ($t_s < 1.70$), and neither were individuals in relationships compared to single or casually dating individuals ($t_s < 1.60$).

**Commitment.** We predicted an association between forgiveness and perceived commitment (H1). Consistent with this expectation, friends who were more forgiving of their romantic partners were perceived as more committed, $b = .12 \ (se = .02), t(117) = 6.21, p < .001$.

We did not make predictions about apologies or intent, yet the presence of an apology predicted perceived relationship commitment, interacting with forgiveness and intent. A closer look at these interactions maintained the predicted relation between forgiveness and commitment, but refined it such that forgiving in the presence of an apology more strongly predicted commitment, $b = .19, t(130) = 5.05, p < .001$, than when no apology was received, $b = .13, t(130) = 15.59, p < .001$. The presence of an apology predicted perceived commitment more strongly when offenses were intentional, $b = 1.14, t(130) = 2.42, p = .017$, than when they were unintentional, $b = .67, t(130) = 2.48, p = .014$.

**Relationship satisfaction.** We hypothesized that observers would perceive their friends as more satisfied when the friends were more forgiving, experienced less severe offenses, and experienced the offenses less frequently (H2a and H2b). As predicted, friends who were more forgiving were seen as more satisfied, $b = .06 \ (se = .02), t(116) = 3.63, p < .001$. We also
replicated Study 1’s severity-frequency interaction on perceived satisfaction, $b = -.03$ ($se = .01$), $t(116) = 2.49, p = .013$. When offenses were severe, their frequency predicted less perceived relationship satisfaction, $b = -.22, t(130) = 6.49, p < .001$; this relation was weaker for infrequent offenses, $b = -.12, t(130) = 4.58, p < .001$. The only other relation observed was for intent: intentionality inversely predicted observers’ judgments of satisfaction, $b = -.06$ ($se = .02$), $t(130) = 2.67, p = .008$.

**Alternatives.** We expected forgiveness, severity, and frequency to predict perceptions of lower quality alternatives (H2a and H2b). No relations emerged for the primary predictors, but victims of more intentional offenses were perceived as having better alternatives, $b = .36$ ($se = .17$), $t(116) = 2.17, p = .030$.

**Investment.** Hypotheses 2a and 2b predicted independent associations between perceived investment and forgiveness, severity, and frequency. Results largely confirmed these predictions. Friends who forgave their partners were perceived as more invested in their relationships, $b = .41$ ($se = .12$), $t(116) = 3.54, p < .001$. Likewise, victims of more severe offenses were perceived as more invested, $b = .47$ ($se = .18$), $t(116) = 2.61, p = .009$. No other associations were observed.

**Competence.** We tested H3a and H3b, expecting that outsiders would perceive their friends as less competent when they forgave severe or frequent offenses; we also expected judgments of less competence for victims of severe and frequent offenses. The proposed forgiveness-severity interaction on perceived competence was not significant, $b = -.10$ ($se = .10$), $t(116) = 1.30, p = .194$, but was in the expected direction. Results showed the anticipated forgiveness-frequency interaction, $b = -.10$ ($se = .05$), $t(116) = 2.12, p = .034$. For infrequent offenses, forgiveness did not predict perceived competence, $b = -.01, t(130) = .01, p = .925$;
however, for frequent offenses, forgiveness (marginally) predicted perceptions of less competence, $b = -0.44, t(130) = 1.85, p = .066$. The offense characteristics of severity and frequency did not interact to predict perceived competence.

**Warmth.** We hypothesized that friends who withheld forgiveness for mild offenses would be perceived as less warm (H4). The expected interaction was not present; instead, we observed an association between withholding of forgiveness and perceptions of less warmth, $b = .06 (se = .01), t(116) = 3.96, p < .001$. Further, friends victim to more severe offenses were perceived as more warm, $b = .06 (se = .02), t(116) = 2.85, p = .004$. No other relations were present.

**Study 2 Discussion**

Individuals who recalled transgressions experienced by their friends tended to perceive more relationship commitment, satisfaction, and investment when those friends were more forgiving of their romantic partners. The associations between forgiving and perceived relationship quality appeared above and beyond variance accounted for by perceived intent and the presence of an apology. A notable exception, perceived alternatives was predicted (inversely) only by offense intentionality. Perceived intentionality also inversely predicted perceived relationship satisfaction. The presence of an apology appeared relevant for judgments of relationship commitment, but did not predict other relational perceptions. Finally, transgression severity and frequency helped explain perceptions of satisfaction and investment.

We did not find the specific forgiveness-severity interactions hypothesized for competence and warmth. Instead, individuals perceived friends whose partners repeatedly committed the same offense as less competent, and indiscriminately associated more warmth with both more forgiving friends and those who experienced more severe offenses.
General Discussion

The current research is the first to investigate how individuals’ decisions and experiences in romantic transgressions relate to outsiders’ impressions of those individuals and their relationships. Two studies (one experimental and one correlational) converged to suggest that friends who forgive are generally viewed as having higher quality romantic relationships than those who do not and may be perceived as warmer and less competent depending on the nature of the transgression experienced. It is well-established that relationship transgressions trigger responses from within the dyads themselves (Roloff, Soule, & Carey, 2001); now we have evidence to suggest that transgressions are also associated with outsiders’ perceptions. Building on evidence suggesting that outsiders’ perceptions matter for relationship well-being (Sprecher, 2011), the current study provides a foundation for future research on the connection between couples’ relationship events, their relationship decisions, and their social networks.

Predicting Relationship Quality from Forgiveness

Focusing on the components of the investment model allowed us to investigate how forgiveness predicts outsiders’ perceptions of romantic relationship quality. Across two studies, forgiveness predicted outsiders’ perceptions of friends’ commitment, a finding that extends the robust within-person relation between forgiveness and commitment (Finkel et al., 2002). As expected, forgiveness predicted commitment independently from transgression characteristics. Perhaps this reflects awareness of the tendency for highly-committed individuals to make benign attributions for partners’ transgressions (Menzies-Toman & Lydon, 2005). Such bias would reduce the usefulness of disclosed transgression information for commitment judgments. Alternatively, perhaps observers’ judgments related to forgiveness and not transgression details because forgiveness is a future-oriented behavior (Ysseldyk & Wohl, 2012), one that represents
renewed commitment to a relationship regardless of past relationship events. We held apologies constant in Study 1, but Study 2 showed that forgiving partners who had received an apology, compared to those who did not, were seen as more committed. Likewise, when offenses were intentional, receiving an apology was associated with stronger judgments of commitment than not receiving an apology. For the social network, it seems that both the friend’s and the transgressor’s behaviors predict their impressions.

Findings from the two studies also suggest that people may perceive greater satisfaction when friends are more forgiving, which is consistent with the strong link between feeling satisfied and forgiving (McCullough et al., 1998). When rendering these judgments, outsiders appeared attuned to transgression characteristics and partner intention, perceiving less satisfaction from repeat offenses (predominantly when those offenses were severe) and intentional offenses. It seems forgiveness may predict satisfaction but how much satisfaction may depend upon contextual factors.

The current investigation offered different insights into how relational transgressions relate to perceived alternatives. Outsiders perceived high-quality alternatives when targets were victims of severe offenses (particularly when forgiveness was withheld) in Study 1 and when transgressions were perceived as intentional in Study 2. In neither case did forgiveness independently predict perceived alternatives. Because outsiders have limited access to the intimate workings of their friends’ relationships (as discussed in Green et al., 2008), they may have trouble discounting the negativity of a severe or intentional offense, even if their friends forgive. This would help explain why transgression details, rather than forgiveness, predicted perceived alternatives. Additional research could test the direction of the relation and examine
how outsiders’ friendship maintenance behaviors or social support might vary with the perception that friends have better alternatives outside of their current relationships.

Study 2 showed that people who recalled real-world relational offenses tended to perceive more investment when friends were forgiving or when friends experienced more serious relational offenses. This relation was most apparent in Study 2 perhaps because the depth and diversity of real-life relationship investment is difficult to communicate in brief, hypothetical vignettes. That offense severity predicted perceived investment illuminates how investment and satisfaction are distinct aspects of relationship quality, even to outsiders. When the costs outweigh the rewards of relationship participation, an individual might be unhappy or unsatisfied, but calculating the stability of the relationship warrants attention to other dimensions of quality as well (Rusbult, 1980). Outsiders seem sensitive to the idea that their friends might keep a relationship intact because of considerable investment, even when they experience severe relationship offenses. Additional research might probe how relationship perceptions associated with forgiveness or transgression characteristics might predict outsiders’ approval of or support for a relationship.

**Predicting Person Characteristics from Forgiveness**

Our work suggests that people’s impressions of forgivers, not just their relationships, are linked to relational transgressions. Outsiders tended to perceive forgivers of severe offenses (Study 1) and forgivers of frequent offenses (Study 2) as less competent than their non-forgiving counterparts, and the link between forgiving and judgments of warmth was universal when judging real-world friends but contingent upon offense severity when imagining hypothetical targets.
Contrary to the beneficial view of forgiveness advanced through positive psychology (Fincham & Beach, 2010), we found that forgiveness did not predict uniformly positive perceptions. Instead, forgiving a severe relational transgression was associated with judgments of less competence, which in turn is associated with such negative interpersonal behaviors as neglect (Cuddy et al., 2007). The potential implications for victims of severe offenses such as physical or emotional abuse are compelling: in times when they may most need their friends’ support, their friends may distance themselves through negative social perceptions. This is consistent with reports from victims of interpersonal violence that their social networks treat them differently after the offense, and the more they are treated differently, the greater their psychological symptoms and the slower their recovery (Ullman, 1996). The importance of competence judgments linked to relational transgressions may also be revealed in behaviors linked to lowered perceptions of competence, as previous research shows that when others perceive individuals as less competent, they are more apt to exclude or demean them (Cuddy et al., 2007), evaluate them as less attractive dating partners (Ben Hamida, Mineka, & Bailey, 1998), and refrain from electing them into leadership positions (Todorov, Mandisodza, Goren, & Hall, 2005). These possibilities reinforce the idea that forgiveness likely operates with the complexity of most dynamic psychological constructs, at times benefiting and at times harming individuals and their relationships (McNulty & Fincham, 2012).

Forgiveness predicted outsiders’ perceptions of warmth in Study 2 (recall paradigm), while withholding forgiveness after a mild offense was associated with less perceived warmth in Study 1 (hypothetical scenarios). This difference between Study 1 and Study 2 might be attributed to the salience of severe offenses; fewer participants spontaneously recalled real-world transgressions that were mild compared to severe, and fewer still recalled mild offenses that
friends did not forgive, which may have limited our ability to detect the expected interaction. The rarity of a romantic partner violating the relational norm of forgiving a mild offense highlights the value of simultaneously studying evidence from both real-world and hypothetical relational transgressions.

When recalling transgressions in Study 2, participants tended to perceive friends who forgave and friends who experienced more severe offenses as warmer. These findings are concerning. They suggest that to make sense of victims of severe offenses, particularly those who forgive, observers may be inclined to view them as more agreeable or nice. The corollary to this idea is that victims may have trouble remaining warm in the eyes of their social network if they resist or do not forgive partners for severe offenses. This is consistent with evidence showing that when victims of psychological abuse actively resist to being abused, they are generally perceived as less warm (Capezza & Ariaga, 2008). Scholars are challenged to learn how to help victims effectively navigate difficult relationship experiences without adversely altering others’ impressions of them and without sacrificing their self-respect (Luchies, Finkel, McNulty, & Kumashiro, 2010).

**Limitations**

Several limitations should be noted. In Study 1, we used only two relational offenses and did not measure partner intent or the presence of an apology, nor did we manipulate other potentially influential factors, such as the victim’s behavioral response to the offense, the emotional quality of the victim’s response to the transgressor, or the quality of amends offered for the offense. In Study 2, which used a recall paradigm, we measured participants’ perceptions at only one-time point, limiting the extent to which we could infer that learning about a relational transgression preceded and produced the impressions we measured. A longitudinal design or an
experimental design that walks couples through specific relational offense scenarios in the laboratory could provide greater insight into this relation. Moving beyond self-report measures of the outsiders’ perceptions and integrating an index of perception accuracy could also expand our understanding of how relational transgressions might be useful in constructing person and relationship perceptions.

In Study 2, we solicited memories of friends’ relational offenses and participants reported that they clearly recalled the relationship events they described, but we cannot be sure that the passage of time did not alter participants’ perceptions of the events and their friends. People generally reconstruct relationship memories to fit their current views (Holmberg & Holmes, 1994) and this bias was likely at play in the current study. Further, participants tended to recall memories of severe offenses that at times seemed to embody the emotional significance of flashbulb memories. Flashbulb memories are no different from everyday memories in their accuracy, even if people feel they are accurately describing an event (Talarico & Rubin, 2003). These limitations, though common for recall paradigms, encourage additional research that begins soon after a relational event is witnessed and includes perception measurement at multiple time points.

Finally, we sampled from both an undergraduate and a more diverse adult population, but focused on members of a Western culture. Cultural differences may be relevant for this work, as variations in conduct expectations and norms (Karremans et al., 2011), tendencies to make dispositional inferences (Morris & Peng, 1994), and the role of family or friends in relationships (MacDonald, Marshall, Gere, Shimotomai, & Lies, 2012) could affect impressions associated with forgiveness.

**Conclusion**
The current research provides an initial look at how forgiving relational transgressions predicts perceptions of relationship quality, competence, and warmth. Because outsider judgments affect relationship health and personal well-being (e.g., Blair & Holmberg, 2008; Sprecher & Felmee, 1992), by identifying specific factors that predict these perceptions, we have begun to unravel the complex role of forgiveness in close relationships. Our findings reinforce the perspective that forgiveness does not have universally-positive correlates, showing that at times forgiving can predict less favorable person or relationship impressions. Taken together, our work advances the idea that relationships are embedded in a social context and highlights the importance of pursuing an understanding of the role of that social context.
End Notes

1. Additional analyses that included the participants who failed two or more recall questions did not change the observed patterns for each dependent variable but did reduce the effect sizes.

2. Linear regression assumes normally-distributed residuals. A number of our dependent variables showed substantial skew and a plotting of residuals supported the decision to log-transform (reflecting when necessary) warmth, relationship satisfaction, commitment, and investment. All analyses using these variables were conducted using the log-transformed data and should be interpreted with care.
References


Fincham, F. D., & Beach, S. R. (2010). Of memes and marriage: Toward a positive relationship


Klein, R. C., & Milardo, R. M. (2000). The social context of couple conflict: Support and


McCullough, M. E., Rachal, K. C., Sandage, S. J., Worthington, E. L., Brown, S. W., & Hight,


Table 1

Sample Vignette for Study 1 (Female Participant Version)

Instructions: Please read the following story. Imagine that Suzy is a close friend of yours and this scenario is actually occurring.

Suzy and Joe have been dating for three years. They spend a lot of time together. Sometimes they go hiking (Joe’s an avid hiker), sometimes they go to concerts (Suzy loves seeing live music), and sometimes they cozy-up on the couch and watch a movie. They spend holidays together and their parents have met. You think you know a lot about their relationship and rely on Suzy to tell you how things are going. The following is the most recent conversation between you and Suzy:

You are talking with Suzy when she says:

“Last night, I walked into the kitchen and found that Joe broke my favorite mug (had an affair)!”

You say, “Really?”

She says, “Yeah. He’s never broken anything of mine before (This is the fifth time he’s broken something of mine/cheated on me). He apologized.”

You ask, “Did you forgive him?”

She replies, “Yes, I forgave him (No, I didn’t).”
Table 2

**Prototypical Examples of Recalled Offenses for Different Levels of Severity**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Level of Severity</th>
<th>Example</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>High Severity (7 or 8)</strong></td>
<td>One night RC told [my friend] JM that she didn’t want her to stay over and that she was going to bed early. JM was sad but decided it was okay just to stay in by herself for a night. I called JM and invited her out to a local bar for a drink. When we got there we grabbed a drink and started dancing. Not long after we noticed BS at the corner table with someone else... kissing. JM started crying and I brought her outside. She texted BS and asked what she was doing. RC said &quot;watching a movie in bed.&quot; JM wanted to leave but I confronted RC. I asked her where JM was and she played it off as tho[sic] she didn’t know. Then JM came around the corner and it looked like RC saw a ghost.</td>
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<td></td>
<td>One afternoon CC was sitting in front of the TV watching her favorite show. When KC walked into the room and was upset, because he felt that CC was being lazy. KC started calling her out of her name. They began to argue. KC grab a knife and tried…to stab her. CC was able to run to a neighbor house and call the police. KC was arrested, And CC never forgave KC.</td>
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<td></td>
<td>One day my friend came over to my house and looked very upset. After asking him to tell me what was bothering him, he told me that his girlfriend had just admitted to cheating on him a month before. They had been together for 2 years. He was very upset about this, and we talked about it for hours. He asked me for my opinion on the situation, and I told him he should leave the relationship because his partner could not be trusted.</td>
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<td><strong>Moderate Severity (3, 4, or 5)</strong></td>
<td>For Valentine’s Day, EJ prepared several paper hearts that she had written things she like about JJ on and placed them in a shoe box. She had set up their bedroom with wine and candles. She had gotten a babysitter for their children so they could have romantic evening. She waited for him to come home from work. He was late and came home in a bad mood. He ignored her and the things she had prepared for him and did not want to spend the evening with her. She ended up burning the paper hearts in their sink.</td>
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<td></td>
<td>FD and [my friend] AD have been married for roughly 4.5 years and have a daughter together. On their daughter's 3rd birthday FD brought home a present for their daughter (he showed up late to the party as he was purchasing the gift after work- all the guests (mainly friends of AD) were already there.) FD brought in the gift which was a Barbie bicycle which the daughter was thrilled about. However, AD was annoyed because they already owned the exact same bicycle. She was hurt that FD did not know what toys their daughter had or consult with her before buying a gift.</td>
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<td></td>
<td>[My friend] LL was making a tuna melt, and DW told her she was making it wrong. They were arguing about the sequence in which to put the sandwich together. In the middle of the fight they started bringing up other deep seated problems (e.g., he always tells her what to do, or she can never adjust to new things). LL stormed out crying and went to our other friends’ home. After time to cool off and relax, LL went back home to DW. She forgave him but i don't believe they resolved the way to make tuna melts.</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Mild Severity (1 or 2)</strong></td>
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</table>
They were skyping each other and everything was perfectly fine. When OW was skyping she was not paying attention to the screen, and instead was talking to her friends. RG got angry when he kept telling her to look at the screen as they don't get to see each other often. They argued for quite a while. It went on for about 20 minutes, but they apologized to each other.

WR was irritated because CC was smoking in the house after she asked him to not. They argued a bit. CC called WR a hypocrite because she also smokes, though not as much as CC. WR acknowledged this, but said that another friend in the house was asthmatic and could not breathe with the smoke. After that, CC apologized and went outside, where he and WR enjoyed a cigarette together.

PS had to work most of the day on [my friend] IM's birthday and was supposed to pick up her cake as soon as he got off work. PS forgot to pick up IM's birthday cake from the bakery for her birthday party. By the time they realized this, the bakery was already closed. IM was mildly irritated about it, but PS quickly went to the grocery store and bought another cake. He even personalized it especially for her. They laughed about it afterwards because they had so much cake left over when they picked up the other cake from the bakery the next day.

Note. Initials were changed.
Table 3

*Correlations among Study 2’s Variables*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>1</th>
<th>2</th>
<th>3</th>
<th>4</th>
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<th>7</th>
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<th>9</th>
<th>10</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Forgiveness</td>
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<td>2. Offense Severity</td>
<td>-0.41**</td>
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<td>3. Offense Frequency</td>
<td>-0.12</td>
<td>0.00</td>
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<td>4. Competence</td>
<td>0.02</td>
<td>-0.07</td>
<td>-0.15</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>5. Warmth</td>
<td>0.21*</td>
<td>0.02</td>
<td>0.11</td>
<td>0.51**</td>
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<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>6. Commitment</td>
<td>0.60**</td>
<td>-0.24*</td>
<td>0.01</td>
<td>0.07</td>
<td>0.29*</td>
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<tr>
<td>7. Satisfaction</td>
<td>0.54**</td>
<td>-0.42**</td>
<td>-0.13</td>
<td>0.35**</td>
<td>0.19*</td>
<td>0.54**</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>8. Alternatives</td>
<td>-0.14</td>
<td>0.15</td>
<td>-0.09</td>
<td>0.09</td>
<td>0.21*</td>
<td>-0.12</td>
<td>-0.22*</td>
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<tr>
<td>9. Investment</td>
<td>0.17*</td>
<td>0.01</td>
<td>-0.07</td>
<td>0.26*</td>
<td>0.42*</td>
<td>0.45**</td>
<td>0.23*</td>
<td>0.03</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>10. Intentionality</td>
<td>-0.35**</td>
<td>0.56**</td>
<td>0.34**</td>
<td>-0.15</td>
<td>0.04</td>
<td>-0.23*</td>
<td>-0.50**</td>
<td>0.19*</td>
<td>-0.12</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11. Presence of an apology</td>
<td>0.40**</td>
<td>-0.12</td>
<td>-0.24*</td>
<td>0.11</td>
<td>0.01</td>
<td>0.23*</td>
<td>0.31**</td>
<td>-0.03</td>
<td>0.04</td>
<td>-0.22</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Figure 1. Perceived relationship commitment, satisfaction, alternatives, and investment of forgiving and unforgiving targets by transgression severity and frequency.

Figure 2. Competence and warmth judgments of forgiving and unforgiving targets by transgression severity and frequency.