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Conradi, H.J.

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RESEARCH

Relative contributions of actor and partner forgiveness and attachment to couples' functioning

H. J. Conradi 

Department of Clinical Psychology, University of Amsterdam, Amsterdam, The Netherlands

Correspondence

H. J. Conradi, University of Amsterdam,
Postbus 15933, 1001 NK Amsterdam.
Email: h.j.conradi@uva.nl

Abstract

Objective: The objective of this study was to examine the relative contributions of actor and partner forgiveness and attachment to couples' functioning.

Background: Violations of expectations between romantic partners are inevitable and may cause severe relationship distress. Both forgiveness and secure attachment enhance constructive emotion regulation with positive effects on relationship functioning. Although these effects have been well documented in isolation, the relative contributions of forgiveness and attachment to relationship functioning have hardly been studied. This is unfortunate, as such knowledge could inform effective interventions.

Method: A large Dutch national population sample representative in terms of age and education ($N = 1,014$ couples) was recruited and actor and partner effects of forgiveness and attachment on relationship satisfaction and instability were examined by applying actor-partner interdependence modeling (APIM).

Results: Separate examination showed that actor and partner forgiveness explained 14.2% of the variance of relationship satisfaction and 7.2% of instability, while attachment explained 46.7% and 18.9%, respectively. Simultaneous examination showed shrinkage of forgiveness effects, whereas attachment effects remained robust. Actor avoidance was the main predictor of both outcomes, whereas partner forgiveness displayed small to nonsignificant effects.

Conclusion: Effects of forgiveness on relationship satisfaction and stability are modest compared to attachment.

Implications: The results suggest the importance of not framing relationship problems exclusively in terms of forgiveness but also in terms of the more inclusive attachment

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conceptualization of emotion regulation, in order to broaden the potential impact of interventions.

KEYWORDS

actor-partner interdependence modeling (APIM), attachment, couples' functioning, forgiveness, nationally representative sample

Intimate relationships are important sources of well-being and resilience but also can induce stress (Lebow et al., 2012). As needs and life goals of individual partners do not always align, conflicts and transgressions will inevitably occur (Metts, 1994). Transgressions, or breaches of expectations and appointments made by partners, can differ in their severity (e.g., not helping with household chores, or having an extra-relational affair) and intentionality (e.g., forgetting one's partner's birthday, or deliberately arriving late for dinner because one chooses to stay out drinking with friends). Martin et al. (2019) found that transgressions occur approximately once a week within long-standing relationships. Conflicts and transgressions may cause irritation, anger, hurt, and distrust. How these negative emotions are regulated affects relationship satisfaction and stability and, ultimately, the likelihood of the relationship continuing or ending (Fincham et al., 2006). Forgiving a partner is one way through which to regulate emotions (Burnette et al., 2014). Another well-documented source of emotion regulation between partners is attachment (Mikulincer & Shaver, 2016). Because forgiveness and attachment pertain to emotion regulation within couples, establishing their relative contributions to both relationship satisfaction and instability could prove important for helping to design interventions. Unfortunately, only one study (Edwards, 2007) has hitherto simultaneously examined the associations of both forgiveness and attachment with relationship satisfaction. The present study aims to address this lacuna.

EMOTION REGULATION IN COUPLES: ATTACHMENT AND FORGIVENESS

Effective emotion regulation within couples is considered complex as it requires adequate management of cognitions, emotions, and behavior *within* partners (cf. Gross, 1998), but also coordination *between* partners at these levels as it has been found that partners coregulate each other's emotions (Levenson et al., 2015). Thus, emotion regulation is considered both an intra-personal and interpersonal process. That is to say, partners influence each other through the way they experience and express their emotions and respond to each other's emotions, which affects their relationship satisfaction and instability (Bloch et al., 2014).

Attachment theory explicitly defines emotion regulation as both an individual and an interpersonal process (Bowlby, 1982). The way partners regulate emotions varies by the attachment style they are inclined to. Securely attached persons apply the primary attachment strategy of proximity seeking toward their partner to regulate their emotions. When experiencing stress, they seek closeness to their partners and openly ask them to help fulfil their attachment needs for validation, support, and reassurance. Insecurely attached (i.e., anxiously and/or avoidantly attached persons) utilize less functional emotion regulation strategies. These are rooted in an unfavorable learning history with their attachment figures (Ainsworth et al., 1978). Anxiously attached persons have a history with attachment figures who were inconsistently available and responsive to their attachment needs. To overcome their fear of being rejected, they hyperactivate their attachment system by claiming proximity and clinging to their partner. They coerce their partner to validate, support, and reassure them. When these attachment needs are not met, intensified anger toward the partner who is falling short may surface (Mikulincer & Shaver, 2016). Avoidantly attached persons have a

history with attachment figures who were consistently unavailable and unresponsive to their attachment needs. To avoid the hurt of being rejected, they deactivate their attachment system, reduce their proximity to their partners, and prefer to regulate their emotions by themselves (Mikulincer & Shaver, 2016). In sum, differences in people's attachment styles manifest themselves in different ways of regulating their emotions and relating to their partner.

Another perspective on emotion regulation in couples, which has gained notable attention from researchers and clinicians in recent decades, is the tendency to forgive. The present study examined dispositional forgiveness, or forgiveness across time and across situations (cf. Berry et al., 2001; Kachadourian et al., 2004; McCullough et al., 1998; McCullough et al., 1997). Conceptually, this is situated at the same level as attachment, which is relatively stable (Fraley, 2002). Definitions of forgiveness commonly include two components. First, inhibition of destructive reactions toward the transgressor, like resentment, retaliation, and avoidance, which can easily lead to conflict escalation and serve to undermine the relationship (McCullough et al., 1998). Second, enhancement of constructive reactions, like approach behaviors to the transgressor (Fincham & Beach, 2002), and behaviors directed at repairing and maintaining the relationship (Kato, 2016). Emotion regulation by partners varies as a function of the balance between these destructive and constructive reactions. Fincham (2010) deemed forgiveness to be a largely intrapersonal process, albeit with an interpersonal component. One would certainly expect the latter given that Levenson et al. (2015) define emotion regulation in couples as essentially an interpersonal process. Consequently, forgiving the transgressing partner is not only supposed to have actor effects, or effects within one person, in this case the victim of the transgression who may feel less resentment and more acceptance toward the transgressor, but also to have partner effects, or effects between partners. For example, when the victim of the transgression remains unforgiving and resentful and keeps turning away, this may trigger shame and guilt in the transgressor, thus contributing to a toxic relationship climate in which not only the actor but also the partner suffers and feels dissatisfied.

ATTACHMENT AND FORGIVENESS: OVERLAP AND SCOPE

Based on the descriptions of attachment and forgiveness as emotion regulation processes, one could infer that both overlap with one another. To provide the reader with a clearer account of this, findings in the literature of what forgiveness and attachment have in common are summarized.

In anxiously attached individuals, transgressions may trigger rumination about the unavailability and unresponsiveness of the partner (Saffrey & Ehrenberg, 2007), resulting in anger (Mikulincer, 1998), jealousy (Rodriguez et al., 2015), blaming, conflict, and volatility (Cooper et al., 2018). Similarly, nonforgiveness has been found to be associated with increased ruminations about transgressions, anger, resentment (Riek & Mania, 2012), sustained blaming, and psychological aggression (Braithwaite et al., 2011; Fincham & Beach, 2002). In avoidantly attached individuals, transgressions may trigger devaluation of the importance of the relationship (Birnie et al., 2009) and the partner (Mikulincer & Shaver, 2005) as a measure of self-protection against the partner's unresponsiveness and rejection. This may result in lack of empathy (Mikulincer et al., 2001), the suppression of positive emotions (Cassidy, 1994), and withdrawal from the relationship (Tran & Simpson, 2009). Comparably, nonforgiveness has been found to be associated with a lack of empathy and positive emotions (Riek & Mania, 2012), and avoidance from the transgressor (Braithwaite et al., 2011; Fincham et al., 2004). Finally, secure attachment is akin to forgiveness as both are characterized by a tendency to interpret partner behavior positively (Mikulincer & Shaver, 2016; Finkel et al., 2002; Wieselquist, 2009), an inclination to seek proximity to the partner, and constructive emotion regulation (Mikulincer & Shaver, 2016; Fehr et al., 2010; Fincham & Beach, 2002; Tsang et al., 2006).

This leads to the conclusion that emotion regulation by attachment and forgiveness resemble one another on the levels of cognitions, emotions, and behavior. Therefore, I deem that their impact on relationship satisfaction and instability overlap. On the other hand, forgiveness concerns emotion regulation to transgressions only, whereas attachment pertains to a broader scope of emotion regulation, that is, in stressful situations both related and *not* related to partner transgressions (Mikulincer & Shaver, 2016). Therefore, I conjecture overlap between forgiveness and attachment but simultaneously expect the scope of attachment to surpass that of forgiveness.

EMPIRICAL FINDINGS: RELATIONSHIP SATISFACTION

Empirically, the association between attachment anxiety and avoidance and relationship satisfaction has been well documented. A large meta-analysis by Li and Chan (2012) reported negative Pearson's correlations between relationship satisfaction and actor anxiety ($-.36$) and actor avoidance ($-.44$). More recently, another meta-analysis reported a negative Pearson's correlation for both partner anxiety and partner avoidance of $-.14$, while controlling for actor effects, with relationship satisfaction (Candel & Turliuc, 2019). The actor effects in this meta-analysis were similar to those found by Li and Chan (2012) and appeared to be significantly stronger than partner effects. These findings support the conceptualization of attachment as both an intrapersonal and interpersonal process.

The association between actor forgiveness and relationship satisfaction is also extensively established. A meta-analysis found a positive Pearson's correlation ($.32$) between actor forgiveness and relationship satisfaction (Fehr et al., 2010). Associations between partner forgiveness and satisfaction are understudied. Partner effects of forgiveness were reported by only three studies. These studies reported small- to medium-sized effects (Gordon et al., 2009; Kachadourian et al., 2004; McCullough et al., 1998). Unfortunately, such studies are not only scarce but also based on undergraduate and convenience samples. The present study aimed to address this limitation by examining the association between partner forgiveness and satisfaction within a large nationally representative sample. This allows me to examine whether forgiveness can be characterized as an interpersonal process (partner effects), next to its well-known intrapersonal impact (actor effects).

Given the overlap of forgiveness and attachment as emotion regulation processes within couples, it is striking to find that research directly comparing the relative contributions of forgiveness and attachment to relationship satisfaction is almost entirely absent. To the best of my knowledge, there is only an unpublished dissertation by Edwards (2007) that reported that attachment was a better predictor of relationship satisfaction than forgiveness, supporting the theoretical argument that attachment pertains to a broader scope of emotion regulation than forgiveness. Unfortunately, this study was limited in that it examined actor effects only for forgiveness and attachment and was based on a sample of undergraduates. In the present study, I examined both actor and partner effects of forgiveness and attachment in a nationally representative sample.

EMPIRICAL FINDINGS: RELATIONSHIP INSTABILITY

Another important marker of relationship functioning that is paramount to this study is relationship instability, or steps directed toward the dissolution of the relationship (Weiss & Cerreto, 1980). Studies investigating the associations between attachment and forgiveness and relationship instability are scarce. In the field of attachment, most of these studies are based on categorical analyses of predominantly actor attachment styles and suggest that anxious and

avoidant attachment styles are positively linked with instability (Birnbaum et al., 1997; Duemmler & Kobak, 2001; Feeney & Noller, 1990; Hazan & Shaver, 1987; Kirkpatrick & Davis, 1994; Kirkpatrick & Hazan, 1994). Recently, researchers published a dimensional analysis (based on the same data set used in the present study) that found significant positive associations between actor and partner avoidance and anxiety and relationship instability (Conradi et al., 2021). The effect of avoidance on instability was about 1.5 times larger than that of anxiety.

Unfortunately, empirical studies on associations between forgiveness and relationship instability are almost wholly absent. I only found one study by He et al. (2018) that reported small- to medium-sized positive correlations between actor and partner forgiveness and stability among newlyweds. There is more data available with regard to two constructs related to instability: commitment, which is a marker for stability, and actual separation, which is the end product of instability. First, the meta-analysis by Fehr et al. (2010) found a positive Pearson's correlation (.23) between actor forgiveness and commitment. This was supported by two longitudinal studies (Tsang et al., 2006; Ysseldyk & Wohl, 2012). Second, Hall and Fincham (2006) reported a negative association between actor forgiveness and actual separation, which was subsequently replicated by Kato (2016) in a longitudinal study. In the present study, I aimed to expand upon the scarce research by studying both actor and partner effects of forgiveness on relationship instability in a large nationally representative sample.

Finally, I did not find any studies examining the relative contributions of forgiveness and attachment to relationship instability. Therefore, the present study examined these effects, making it possible to examine whether forgiveness and attachment overlap in their associations with instability and, again, whether the impact of attachment is larger as might be expected from its broader scope.

CURRENT STUDY

The current study set out to address the three aforesaid lacunae in previous studies. This concerns examination of (a) the largely overlooked associations between partner forgiveness and relationship satisfaction, (b) associations between both actor and partner forgiveness and relationship instability, and (c) the relative contributions of forgiveness and attachment to relationship satisfaction and instability, which constituted my primary focus. Several hypotheses were tested:

(1a) It was anticipated that actor and partner forgiveness would have positive associations with relationship satisfaction,

(1b) and negative associations with relationship instability.

(2a) Previously, negative associations were found for actor anxiety, actor avoidance, partner anxiety and partner avoidance with relationship satisfaction,

(2b) and positive associations with relationship instability.

(3a) Based on theoretical considerations pertaining to the broader scope of emotion regulation by attachment than forgiveness, the relative contribution of actor and partner forgiveness was expected to be smaller than that of attachment concerning relationship satisfaction,

(3b) and relationship instability.

The anticipated effects were examined in a large representative national sample of couples to ensure maximum generalizability of the findings. In general, the representativeness of study samples is a serious and often overlooked problem. Relying on convenience and student samples bears the danger of obtaining findings that do not replicate well. Furthermore, examining a large sample, as done in this study, prevents Type II errors, which are looming in the case of partner effects because, in general, these are weaker than actor effects.

METHOD

Participants and procedure

Couples were recruited by Flycatcher, an agency originally affiliated with Maastricht University. Panel members were sampled in order to obtain a representative sample of the Dutch population with regard to age and level of education. Their partners were asked whether they were willing to participate (see flow chart, online Figure S1). All respondents gave their informed consent prior to participation. Participation was voluntary and data were treated anonymously. Only heterosexual partners aged over 18, who were in a relationship for 6 months or longer, were included in the study. In this way, both adolescent relationships and relationships that were in their explorative phase were excluded, thus meaning that relationship issues may have surfaced and, as such, regulation of negative emotions was needed.

Respondents were, on average, approximately 52 years old (Table 1). The build-up of age was fairly comparable to the Dutch population over 18 years of age (Dutch Central Bureau of Statistics & MOA Expertise Center, 2017), although somewhat skewed toward older respondents (i.e., less people in the category 18–24 years old, 3.0% vs. 10.9%, and more in the category 60–64 years old, 13.4% vs. 7.8%, than in the general population). This was expected because of the inclusion criterion of being in a relationship of at least half a year, and in line with a large nationally representative United States general population sample (Mickelson et al., 1997). Levels of education (low 29.5%, middle 38.2%, and high 32.2%) were fairly representative of the Dutch population (low 29.6%, middle 42.6%, and high 27.8%; Dutch Central Bureau of Statistics & MOA Expertise Center, 2017). Mean relationship duration was approximately 25 years and 80% of the couples were married. Men scored significantly higher on forgiveness

TABLE 1 Sociodemographic characteristics, forgiveness, attachment, and relationship satisfaction and instability

	All partners <i>N</i> = 2,028	Men <i>n</i> = 1,014	Women <i>n</i> = 1,014	Test values Men vs. women
Age <i>M</i> (<i>SD</i>)	52.57 (14.64)	54.04 (14.63)	51.10 (14.50)	$F = 20.65; p < .001$
Education (%)				$\chi^2 = 11.17; p < .01$
Low	29.5	26.3	32.7	
Middle	38.2	39.0	37.5	
High	32.2	34.7	29.8	
Employed (%)	60.3	66.3	54.2	$\chi^2 = 30.97; p < .001$
Living status (%)				
Married	80.5			
Not married living together	12.3			
Not married living apart	7.2			
Duration relationship in years <i>M</i> (<i>SD</i>)	24.83 (15.69)			
Children with partner (%)	65.3			
Children present in household (%)	36.1			
Forgiveness <i>M</i> (<i>SD</i>)	13.27 (2.82)	13.95 (2.77)	12.59 (2.71)	$F = 124.11; p < .001$
Avoidance <i>M</i> (<i>SD</i>)	2.09 (0.87)	2.13 (0.88)	2.05 (0.86)	$F = 4.25; p < .05$
Anxiety <i>M</i> (<i>SD</i>)	2.77 (0.96)	2.74 (0.95)	2.80 (0.97)	$F = 1.50; p > .05$
Relationship satisfaction <i>M</i> (<i>SD</i>)	118.05 (15.65)	118.41 (15.42)	117.68 (15.88)	$F = 1.08; p > .05$
Relationship instability <i>M</i> (<i>SD</i>)	0.60 (1.49)	0.48 (1.36)	0.71 (1.59)	$Z = -3.99; p < .001$

Note: Bold values refer to statistically significant differences.

and attachment avoidance than women, but they did not differ on attachment anxiety. Mean relationship satisfaction was 118.4, which was comparable to the mean of 114.8 for married couples reported by Spanier (1976).

Measures

The Tendency to Forgive scale (TTF; Brown, 2003) was used to determine dispositional forgiveness. The four items were reformulated to assess forgiveness among romantic partners. The TTF measures several aspects of forgiveness: ruminative patterns, “If my partner wrongs me, I often think about it a lot afterward”; negative emotions, “I have a tendency to harbor grudges”; and benevolence, “When my partner wrongs me, my approach is just to forgive and forget.” The response options range from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 5 (*strongly agree*). Brown (2003) reported favorable psychometric qualities, including good convergent validity (trait forgiveness, perspective taking, and agreeableness) and discriminant validity (extraversion, openness, and conscientiousness). Brown (2003) reported an internal consistency of $\alpha = .82$. Braithwaite et al. (2011) reported $\alpha = .66$, while the present study found $\alpha = .69$ for women and $.66$ for men, which is around the lower limit of what is considered adequate.

The Experiences in Close Relationships self-report questionnaire (ECR; Brennan et al., 1998) assesses adult attachment in romantic relationships. It consists of two subscales of 18 items each: (a) anxiety about rejection and abandonment, or the expectation that partners will perceive them as unacceptable or unlovable (example item: “I worry a fair amount about losing my partner”); and (b) avoidance of intimacy, or the expectation that partners will be unavailable and unresponsive to their attachment needs (example item: “I try to avoid getting too close to my partner”). The response options range from 1 (*disagree strongly*) through 4 (*neutral/mixed*) to 7 (*agree strongly*). The Dutch ECR was found to be valid and reliable (Conradi et al., 2006). Cronbach’s alpha for avoidance was $.91$ for women and $.92$ for men, while for anxiety it was $.88$ for both genders.

Relationship satisfaction was measured with the Dyadic Adjustment Scale (DAS; Spanier, 1976). The 32 items measure several aspects, like cohesion, affectional expression, consensus/conflict, and satisfaction (example item: “In general, how often do you think that things between you and your partner are going well?”). Likert scales with variable response options are used for the responses. For example, the response options for the consensus items range from 0 (*always disagree*) to 5 (*always agree*), whereas for most of the satisfaction items these range from 0 (*never*) to 5 (*all the time*). Higher total scores are indicative of higher relationship satisfaction. Construct validity has been found to be strong (Spanier, 1976). Regarding the present sample, internal consistency was $\alpha = .92$ for both genders.

The Marital Status Inventory (MSI; Weiss & Cerreto, 1980) assesses relationship instability, defined as taking concrete steps to break up the relationship, by means of 14 *true–false* items (example item: “I have discussed the issue of divorce seriously or at length with my partner.”). The MSI has been shown to have strong construct and discriminant validity among couples (Crane et al., 1984). In the current sample $\alpha = .80$ for women and $.81$ for men.

Statistical analyses

The analytic strategy was based upon running three models including the following independent variables, namely, (a) actor and partner forgiveness, (b) actor and partner attachment anxiety and avoidance, and (c) actor and partner forgiveness, anxiety, and avoidance. These models were run separately for each of the dependent variables (i.e., relationship satisfaction and instability). By comparing the explained variances and the coefficients of the predictors of each of

the models, strong indications of the relative contributions of forgiveness and attachment were obtained. Models were run both with and without controlling for specific covariates (gender, relationship duration, marital status, and presence of children in the household) in order to check whether the coefficients of the forgiveness and attachment predictors changed or remained stable.

As scores of partners cannot be considered independent, I applied an actor–partner interdependence model (APIM) framework (Cook & Kenny, 2005) with couples as the unit of analysis and partners nested within this. For this purpose, linear mixed models were used for relationship satisfaction (as residuals were normally distributed) and generalized linear mixed models for relationship instability (as residuals showed a negative binomial distribution, cf. Sellbom et al., 2014) in SPSS Version 27. Interdependence of partner scores was corrected for by including a random intercept at the couple's level.

The mean item scores of the scales were used for the analyses, which were created by summing the (mirrored or not) items according to the manuals. To be able to compare coefficients, I transformed the independent variables and relationship satisfaction, but not relationship instability (because of its non-normal distribution), into *z* scores (Hox, 2010). This means that the relative strength of coefficients is interpretable within, but not between, the analyses concerning relationship satisfaction and instability. The explained variance of each of the models tested was calculated by dividing the variance of the fixed predicted value by the sum of the variances of the fixed predicted value, the random effects, and the residuals (Nakagawa & Schielzeth, 2013). There were no missing data.

RESULTS

Zero order correlations

In the online Table S1, zero order correlations are reported between the study variables. As anticipated, the correlations between actor and partner forgiveness with relationship satisfaction were significant and positive, while they were significant and negative for relationship instability. The correlations between actor and partner avoidance and anxiety with relationship satisfaction were significant and negative, while they were significant and positive for relationship instability (as reported previously in Conradi et al., 2021). Finally, as expected, the correlations between actor and partner forgiveness and avoidance and anxiety were negative.

Actor and partner forgiveness and relationship satisfaction and instability

Tables 2 and 3 report the results of the APIM analyses. Hypotheses (1a) and (1b) concerning the positive associations of actor and partner forgiveness with relationship satisfaction and the negative associations with instability were supported. Regarding relationship satisfaction (Table 2), significant main effects were found of actor forgiveness ($\beta = .28$), partner forgiveness ($\beta = .18$), and concerning the covariates relationship duration and children present in the household, indicating that couples in shorter relationships and couples without children present in the household reported higher satisfaction. Together, these factors explained 14.2% of the variance.

Regarding relationship instability (Table 3), significant main effects were found of actor forgiveness ($b = -.17$), partner forgiveness ($b = -.06$), and concerning the covariates sex and marital status, indicating that men and married couples reported less instability. Together, these factors explained 7.2% of the variance.

TABLE 2 Relationship satisfaction: Effects of models with actor and partner forgiveness, avoidance, and anxiety controlled for sex, marital status, relationship duration, and presence of children in the household

Relationship satisfaction									
Forgiveness			Attachment			Forgiveness and attachment			
4839.164 / 4850.387			4187.106 / 4198.326			4164.745 / 4175.964			
14.2%			46.7%			47.8%			
	<i>t</i>	<i>p</i>	β (SE)	<i>t</i>	<i>p</i>	β (SE)	<i>t</i>	<i>p</i>	β (SE)
Sex	-0.18	.859	-.00 (.03)	2.81	.005	.06 (.02)	1.42	.156	.03 (.02)
Marital status	1.77	.077	.13 (.07)	0.53	.595	.03 (.06)	0.61	.542	.03 (.06)
Relationship duration	-2.54	.011	-.08 (.03)	-0.46	.649	-.01 (.02)	-0.93	.353	-.02 (.02)
Children present hh	3.05	.002	.15 (.05)	4.02	<.001	.16 (.04)	3.62	<.001	.15 (.04)
Actor forgiveness	14.04	<.001	.28 (.02)				5.93	<.001	.10 (.02)
Partner forgiveness	9.16	<.001	.18 (.02)				2.54	.011	.04 (.02)
Actor avoidance				-22.93	<.001	-.43 (.02)	-22.12	<.001	-.42 (.02)
Actor anxiety				-7.18	<.001	-.13 (.02)	-5.49	<.001	-.10 (.02)
Partner avoidance				-9.55	<.001	-.18 (.02)	-9.31	<.001	-.18 (.02)
Partner anxiety				-3.50	<.001	-.06 (.02)	-2.60	.009	-.05 (.02)

Note. AIC = Akaike information criterion; BIC = Bayesian information criterion; Children present hh. = Children present in the household. Bold values indicate significant effects.

TABLE 3 Relationship instability: Effects of models with actor and partner forgiveness, avoidance, and anxiety controlled for sex, marital status, relationship duration, and presence of children in the household

AIC / BIC R ²	Relationship instability					
	Forgiveness		Attachment		Forgiveness and attachment	
	t	p	t	p	t	p
	4622.821 / 4628.430		4470.971 / 4476.579		4457.734 / 4463.342	
	7.2% b ^a (SE)		18.9% b ^a (SE)		19.9% b ^a (SE)	
Sex	-2.14	.032	-4.14	<.001	-2.46	.014
Marital status	-1.96	.050	-0.73	.465	-0.77	.439
Relationship duration	-1.15	.252	-2.58	.010	-2.38	.018
Children present hh	-0.16	.874	0.16	.876	0.34	.736
Actor forgiveness	-7.89	<.001			-3.97	<.001
Partner forgiveness	-2.68	.008			1.04	.300
Actor avoidance			6.52	<.001	5.75	<.001
Actor anxiety			3.78	<.001	2.73	.006
Partner avoidance			3.42	<.001	3.73	<.001
Partner anxiety			3.47	<.001	3.47	<.001

Note. AIC = Akaike information criterion; BIC = Bayesian information criterion; Children present hh. = Children present in the household. Bold values indicate significant effects. ^aThese coefficients are only standardized with regard to the independent variable.

Models without the covariates resulted in almost identical coefficients for both actor and partner forgiveness and very similar explained variances (online Tables S2 and S3).

Actor and partner attachment and relationship satisfaction and instability

Regarding relationship satisfaction (Table 2), main significant effects were found of actor avoidance ($\beta = -.43$), actor anxiety ($\beta = -.13$), partner avoidance ($\beta = -.18$), and partner anxiety ($\beta = -.06$), and concerning the covariates sex and children present in the household, indicating that men and couples without children present in the household reported higher relationship satisfaction. Together, these factors explained 46.7% of the variance.

Regarding relationship instability (Table 3), significant main effects were found of actor avoidance ($\beta = .15$), actor anxiety ($\beta = .08$), partner avoidance ($\beta = .08$), and partner anxiety ($\beta = .08$), and concerning the covariates sex and relationship duration, indicating that men and couples in longer relationships reported less relationship instability. Together, these factors explained 18.9% of the variance.

Models without the covariates resulted in almost identical coefficients for both actor and partner attachment and very similar explained variances (online Tables S2 and S3).

Relative contributions of actor and partner forgiveness and attachment

For relationship satisfaction (Table 2), significant main effects were found of actor forgiveness ($\beta = .10$), partner forgiveness ($\beta = .04$), actor avoidance ($\beta = -.42$), actor anxiety ($\beta = -.10$), partner avoidance ($\beta = -.18$), and partner anxiety ($\beta = -.05$), and concerning the covariate children present in the household, indicating that couples without children present in the household reported higher levels of relationship satisfaction. These factors collectively explained 47.8% of the variance. Comparing this model with the model with forgiveness only ($R^2 = 14.2\%$) attachment added $\Delta R^2 = 33.6\%$ and compared with the model with attachment only ($R^2 = 46.7\%$) forgiveness added $\Delta R^2 = 1.1\%$. This supports hypothesis (3a).

Concerning relationship instability (Table 3), significant main effects were found of actor forgiveness ($b = -.09$), actor avoidance ($b = .13$), actor anxiety ($b = .06$), partner avoidance ($b = .09$), and partner anxiety ($b = .08$), and concerning the covariates sex and relationship duration, indicating that men and couples in longer relationships reported less relationship instability. The partner effect of forgiveness was nonsignificant. Together, these factors explained 19.9% of the variance. Comparing this model with the model with forgiveness only ($R^2 = 7.2\%$) attachment added $\Delta R^2 = 12.7\%$ and compared with the model with attachment only ($R^2 = 18.9\%$) forgiveness added $\Delta R^2 = 1.0\%$. This supports hypothesis (3b).

Models without the covariates resulted in almost identical coefficients for actor and partner forgiveness and attachment and very similar explained variances (online Tables S2 and S3).

DISCUSSION

To the best of my knowledge, this is the first study to examine simultaneously the effects of actor and partner forgiveness and attachment on relationship satisfaction and instability in a large nationally representative sample. As anticipated, significant actor and partner effects of forgiveness were detected. However, the inclusion of actor and partner avoidance and anxiety more than halved the effects of actor and partner forgiveness, leaving partner forgiveness

nonsignificant with respect to relationship instability. Conversely, the actor and partner effects of attachment remained stable across models, both with and without forgiveness being included. Overall, the effect of attachment was around three times larger than that of forgiveness. In particular, the effect of actor avoidance was substantial.

Forgiveness and relationship functioning

As anticipated, significant actor and partner effects of forgiveness on relationship satisfaction and instability were found. Regarding relationship satisfaction, the actor effect of forgiveness was in line with the meta-analysis by Fehr et al. (2010). The effect of partner forgiveness on satisfaction corroborated the scarce findings in the literature (Kachadourian et al., 2004; Gordon et al., 2009; McCullough et al., 1998). In summary, the findings suggest that forgiving your partner and being forgiven by them helps to enhance relationship satisfaction, implying that both actor and partner effects must be considered in research. This underlines the conceptualization of forgiving as both an intrapersonal and interpersonal emotion regulation process.

Regarding instability, as anticipated, significant effects were found for actor forgiveness and, albeit small, for partner forgiveness. Apparently, forgiving your partner and having a forgiving partner are both associated with greater stability. However, the total effect of forgiveness on relationship instability was small. Therefore, it seems that forgiveness is not the main factor in taking steps toward dissolution of relationships. I speculate that the alignment of interests between partners, the consequences of separation in terms of the level of contact with children, finances, housing arrangements, and so forth, may also be important factors.

Attachment and relationship functioning

As reported earlier (Conradi et al., 2021) and completely in line with the two aforementioned meta-analyses (Candel & Turliuc, 2019; Li & Chan, 2012), both actor and partner avoidance and anxiety negatively affected relationship satisfaction. The same was true for relationship instability, albeit the effects were substantially smaller (cf. Birnbaum et al., 1997; Duemmler & Kobak, 2001; Feeney & Noller, 1990; Hazan & Shaver, 1987; Kirkpatrick & Davis, 1994; Kirkpatrick & Hazan, 1994). The associations with avoidance were substantially larger than those with anxiety. One explanation for this might be that avoidantly attached individuals distance themselves from their partners and thereby weaken the bond, whereas anxiously attached individuals cling to their partners thereby stressing the importance of the bond (Mikulincer & Shaver, 2016).

Relative contributions of forgiveness and attachment

Changes in both explained variances and individual predictor coefficients demonstrate that the relative contribution of forgiveness to relationship functioning appeared to be quite modest compared to the contribution of attachment. First, the explained variances of relationship satisfaction and instability by forgiveness only, were about three times smaller than those by attachment only. Moreover, adding attachment to forgiveness resulted in large additional explained variances, whereas adding forgiveness to attachment resulted in negligible additional explained variances. This was reflected by the serious shrinkage of the coefficients (they more than halved) of actor and partner forgiveness when controlling for attachment, whereas coefficients of attachment remained almost stable when controlling for forgiveness. Together, this suggests that claims about the importance of forgiveness like "... forgiveness is the cornerstone of a

successful relationship” (Braithwaite et al., 2011, p. 558) and “a happy marriage is the union of two good forgivers” (quote from Robert Quillen in Fincham et al., 2006, p. 415) are disproportionate compared to the effects of attachment.

I can only speculate about the reasons for the predominance of attachment, as in the present study other possible explanatory constructs were not measured. Presumably, however, attachment is a more inclusive construct than forgiveness. Although both forgiveness and attachment help to regulate people’s emotions when faced with conflicts and transgressing partners unresponsive to their needs, the impact of attachment on relationship functioning may be broader than that of forgiveness, as attachment also affects emotion regulation in stressful situations *not* caused by partner transgressions. Moreover, attachment not only regulates the way in which people *react* to partners, like forgiveness does, but also regulates the way people *proactively ask* their partners to help fulfill their attachment needs for validation, support, and reassurance (Mikulincer & Shaver, 2016). This may help researchers to understand why, from an attachment perspective, transgressors have a twofold impact on the hurt partner. First, the transgressor is the source of the emotional pain. Second, the transgressing partner who normally is the primary source of support within the relationship, can, temporarily, not act as such. Together, this helps to understand why the variance explained by forgiveness appears to be largely absorbed and surpassed by attachment.

Importantly, I do not believe that the modest contribution of forgiveness to relationship functioning in comparison to attachment is due to the way forgiveness was assessed. First, the zero-order correlation of actor forgiveness with relationship satisfaction in the current study was identical to that found by Fehr et al. (2010) in their meta-analysis (.32), thus bolstering trust in the way forgiveness was assessed. Second, forgiveness was assessed at a comparable conceptual level as attachment, namely as a trait or an enduring factor with a durable influence on relationship functioning.

Strengths and limitations

Strengths of the current study were several. First, the study was based on a large nationally representative sample. Second, the hitherto scarcely evaluated partner effects of forgiveness were examined. Finally, associations between forgiveness and the understudied relationship instability were examined.

Several limitations also warrant mentioning. First, as with all actor–partner modeling, it was necessary to include both partners. This may have resulted in a selection bias toward lengthier and happier relationships. However, mean relationship satisfaction was fairly similar to the satisfaction reported by Spanier (1976) among married couples. Nonetheless, findings of the current study may not be generalizable to clinically distressed couples. In addition, this study focused on relationship satisfaction and instability as its outcomes. However, other outcomes, like stress specifically related to transgressions only, need to be studied in order to examine whether the relative contributions of forgiveness and attachment may shift. The same accounts for studying other competing emotion regulation constructs next to forgiveness and attachment, such as self-control (Tangney et al., 2004). Finally, the cross-sectional design of the study rules out examination of the complex interplay between forgiveness, attachment, satisfaction, and stability over time.

Clinical implications

It was found that attachment has stronger associations with relationship satisfaction and instability than forgiveness does. Transgressions can be seen as violations of trust that undermine the security of the attachment bond between the two partners, which may increase

hyperactivation and/or deactivation of the partners' attachment system. Although more research is needed concerning the complex interplay between forgiveness and attachment, one fruitful approach might be to *integrate* the process of forgiving transgressions with repairing of the attachment bond instead of merely propagating forgiveness.

Such an integrated approach is provided by Emotion Focused Couple Therapies (EFCT; Greenberg et al., 2010; Johnson et al., 2001). EFCT aims to replace the insecure attachment strategies of deactivation and hyperactivation with the secure primary attachment strategy (Johnson, 2004). However, when attempts to repair the attachment bond are blocked by distrust caused by severe transgressions, then additional steps must be taken to facilitate forgiveness of the transgressor embedded within the process of making attachment secure. Both Makinen and Johnson (2006) and Greenberg et al. (2010) provide road maps for such a process. After the hurt partner has described the violation of trust caused by the transgression, the transgressor may deny or minimize the transgression. What is key here, is that the hurt partner refrains from distance-promoting behaviors like blaming or avoidance (secondary attachment strategies of hyperactivation and deactivation), and instead expresses proximity-promoting emotions like grief and fear about the damage the transgression has caused to the security of the attachment bond. This resembles the motivational change described in forgiveness processes of replacing resentment and retaliation with approach behaviors. The transgressor is then helped to understand the consequences of the transgression for the attachment bond and is encouraged to empathize with the hurt partner. It is crucial that the transgressor accepts responsibility for the transgression, expresses regret, and apologizes. Subsequently, the hurt partner applies the primary attachment strategy by conveying his or her attachment needs and openly asking for the validation and reassurance he or she was deprived of at the time of the transgression. Finally, the transgressor is helped to stay accessible and responsive to these needs. These steps make clear that, in line with the current study's findings, forgiving is not merely an intrapersonal process, but rather a fundamentally complex interpersonal attachment process (Johnson et al., 2001).

ORCID

H. J. Conradi  <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-8013-0408>

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SUPPORTING INFORMATION

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