

# Vengefully ever after?

Eli J. Finkel on how the key to forgiveness may lie in our beliefs about romantic destiny

**Frequently, romantic relationships are effortless and pleasurable. Affection is deep, passion is strong, and laughter is pervasive.**

**Unfortunately, most of us will on occasion be victims of partner transgressions within our long-term romantic relationships, and the survival and health of these relationships frequently depend upon our ability to forgive such transgressions. What factors predict whether or not a person will find their way to forgiveness?**

**The scientific study of forgiveness has flourished in the past decade, offering several compelling answers to this question. This article reviews recent research establishing three factors that predict forgiveness tendencies: relationship commitment, narcissistic entitlement, and beliefs in romantic destiny.**

## question

Under what circumstances is it unwise to forgive, and how might different definitions of forgiveness (intrapersonal vs. interpersonal) influence scholars' thinking on this issue?

## resources

Worthington, E.L., Jr. (2005). *Handbook of forgiveness*. New York: Routledge. [www.forgiving.org](http://www.forgiving.org)

**H**umans devote vast resources – time, money, emotional investment, and the like – to establishing and maintaining romantic relationships.

Spending these resources on the pursuit of love is frequently wise, as involvement in a satisfying romantic relationship is among the most powerful predictors of happiness and health (Cohen et al., 2000; Myers, 2000).

Unfortunately, those very relationships that can make life so wonderful can also cause devastation, despair and outrage. My Northwestern University undergraduates reported recently on upsetting behaviours their partner had enacted over the preceding two weeks. One male student, for example, recounted an incident in which his girlfriend 'told me my faults in a really mean way and [made me] feel [horrible] about them'. A female student reported on a distressing phone conversation she had with her long-distance boyfriend: 'I told him that I missed him, and when I asked whether he missed me too, he said "I don't know – not really, I guess"'. Another female student related the following incident: 'He said I was getting mad at him when I was trying to calmly explain how I felt about something. Then as I kept explaining, he said I was acting like a bitch.'

Given how distressing it is to be the victim of partner transgressions, what makes people get beyond this initial distress and forgive? The answer to this question, which is the focus of the present article, is consequential for two reasons: (a) partner transgressions are nearly inevitable in long-term romantic relationships (Holmes & Murray, 1996); and (b) when contrasted

with experiencing vengeance, finding one's way to forgiveness is associated with enhanced interpersonal harmony (Fincham et al., 2004), healthier physiological functioning (Witvliet et al., 2001), reduced negative affect (Worthington & Scherer, 2004), and fewer negative physical health symptoms (Toussaint et al., 2001). Despite these positive correlates of forgiveness, however, victims frequently have difficulty getting beyond the retaliatory and vengeful gut-level impulses that partner transgressions frequently provoke (Rusbult et al., 2005).

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

My goal in the present article is not to provide a comprehensive overview of the forgiveness literature, but rather to review three different programmes of research my colleagues and I have recently conducted as illustrative examples of current forgiveness research. Each of these three programmes investigates a different predictor of forgiveness in romantic relationships. The first predictor, relationship commitment, is a relationship-specific variable that has been

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**Given how distressing it is to be the victim of partner transgressions, what makes people get beyond this initial distress and forgive?**

established as an important instigator of diverse relationship-promoting processes (Rusbult et al., 2001). The second predictor, narcissistic entitlement, is a personality variable relevant to the way individuals perceive interpersonal circumstances in which one individual might owe something to another (Raskin & Terry, 1988). And the third predictor, beliefs in romantic destiny, is also a personality variable, but one that applies specifically to beliefs about how romantic relationships are supposed to function (Knee, 1998).

### Relationship commitment

In a first series of studies, we examined the role of relationship commitment in promoting forgiveness (Finkel et al., 2002). Relationship commitment refers to individuals' psychological attachment to,

long-term orientation toward, and intent to persist in a given relationship (Arriaga & Agnew, 2001). In one study – the first to use experimental procedures to manipulate commitment to a current relationship partner – we devised a priming manipulation in which we randomly assigned research participants to experience a temporary increase or decrease in their commitment to their current relationship partner (Finkel et al., 2002). The logic behind this priming manipulation was that individuals tend to experience some degree of day-to-day and moment-to-moment fluctuation in their relationship commitment, fluctuation that should be sensitive to experimental manipulation. Participants in both conditions answered five open-ended questions relevant to their partner and their relationship. Those in the high-commitment priming condition

responded to items such as 'What is the number one reason why it would be nice to grow old with your partner?' and 'Describe two ways in which you feel that your life has become linked to your partner'. Those in the low-commitment priming condition responded to items such as 'Describe one of the activities that you enjoy engaging in when your partner is not around' and 'Describe two ways in which you are independent of your partner'.

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

### Narcissistic entitlement

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

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

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

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

### Destiny beliefs and attachment anxiety

After establishing this link between narcissistic entitlement and (lack of) forgiveness, my colleagues and I began exploring how a different personality variable – beliefs in romantic destiny – would be associated with forgiveness (Finkel et al., 2007). In contrast to our work on relationship commitment and on narcissistic entitlement, however, we hypothesised that beliefs in romantic destiny would predict forgiveness not

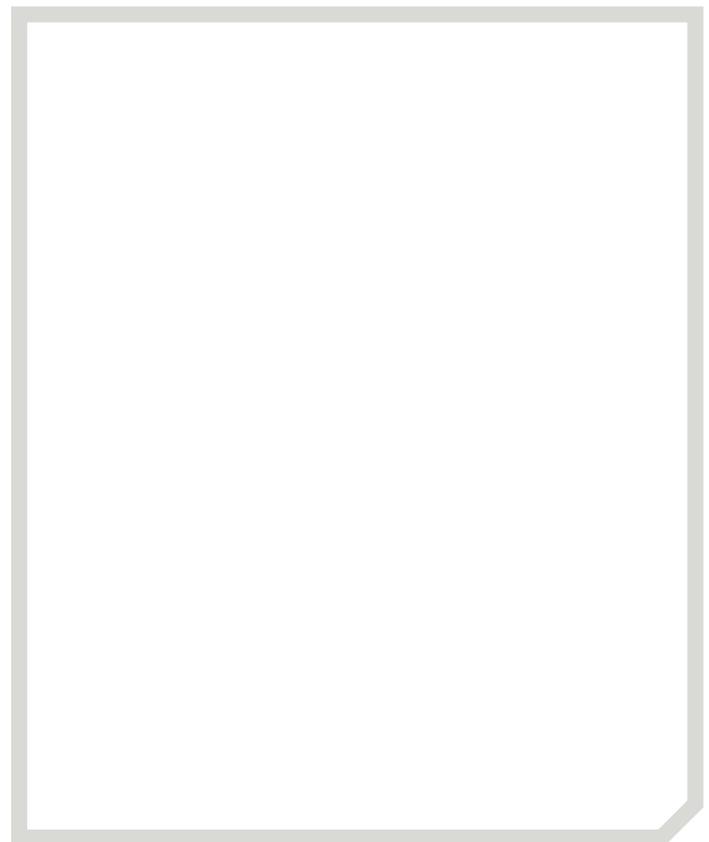
through a main effect, but rather as part of an interaction effect involving attachment anxiety. Destiny beliefs – sometimes called soulmate beliefs (Franiuk et al., 2002) – refer to the view that romantic relationships are or are not 'meant to be' (Knee & Canevello, 2006). Such beliefs are typically assessed with a self-report instrument measuring participants' agreement with statements such as 'potential relationship partners are either compatible or they are not' and 'potential relationship partners are either destined to get along or they are not' (Knee et al., 2003).

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

We predicted that individuals who held strong destiny beliefs and experienced

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

In a first study, participants reported on



More narcissistic individuals are less likely to forgive

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their destiny beliefs before we randomly assigned them to experience an experimental manipulation of either attachment anxiety or attachment security. Finally, they reported the degree to which they would forgive a series of hypothetical partner transgressions, which were similar to those employed in the commitment priming experiment described earlier. We manipulated attachment anxiety versus security by asking participants to unscramble 10 different five-word sequences, omitting one word from each to create four-word sentences. Whereas the attachment anxiety prime was designed to activate cognitive representations related to uncertainty and vulnerability (e.g. 'child vulnerable today felt the' became 'the child felt vulnerable'), the attachment security prime was designed to activate cognitive representations of certainty and safety (e.g. 'child protected today felt the' became 'the child felt protected'). To minimise suspicion, several of the five-word sequences were fillers that were related neither to anxiety nor to security.

Results revealed that destiny beliefs and the attachment prime interacted as hypothesised to predict forgiveness. Specifically, individuals in the attachment anxiety condition exhibited diminished tendencies toward forgiveness to the degree that they adhered strongly to beliefs in romantic destiny. In contrast, the forgiveness tendencies of individuals in the attachment security condition were not diminished by strong beliefs in romantic destiny.

This same pattern of results emerged in a prospective longitudinal study investigating naturally occurring partner transgressions over a six-month period. This follow-up study revealed that destiny beliefs and naturally occurring elevations in attachment anxiety (assessed 14 times during the course of the study as agreement with the following measure: 'I need a lot of reassurance that my partner cares about me') interacted as hypothesised to predict forgiveness, not only immediately following the transgression, but also when predicting change over time in forgiveness. This destiny

beliefs x attachment anxiety interaction effect was robust beyond the effects of many potential confounds, including relationship closeness and commitment, transgression severity, time since the transgression, trait attachment anxiety and trait forgiveness tendencies.

"certain individuals are plagued by a generally vengeful orientation"

Additional analyses revealed that the destiny beliefs x attachment anxiety interaction effect was mediated – both cross-sectionally and longitudinally – by trust in the partner. It appears that strong destiny theorists experiencing elevated attachment anxiety following partner transgressions are prone toward concluding that they cannot trust their partner, and this distrust, in turn, renders them unlikely to forgive.

### Challenges facing forgiveness researchers

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

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

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

### Implications for intervention?

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



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