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Commitment, Forgiveness, and Relationship Self-Regulation: An Actor-Partner Interdependence Model

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ABSTRACT

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Relationship self-regulation (RSR) refers to the "work", or effort and strategies, that partners exert over time to maintain the health of their romantic relationships. Most research focuses on self-reports of RSR, however, several studies suggest that partner perceptions are more influential in relationship appraisal. In addition, most RSR research has focused not on partners' attitudes and virtues like commitment, but instead on personality traits, emotional health, and communication skills. In this study, we examine the relationship between partners' levels of commitment and forgiveness within their relationships, and how they perceive their partner's use of RSR behaviors. Using paired data from 679 cohabiting and married couples who took the RELATE questionnaire, we found that males' and females' self-reports of commitment and forgiveness were both positively associated with higher perceptions of partner RSR. Likewise, we found that, for females, higher self-reports of commitment and forgiveness were positively correlated with higher male perceptions of her RSR, and male forgiveness was positively correlated with female perceptions of his RSR. The variables of commitment and forgiveness explained an average of 44% of the variance in perceptions of partner RSR for both genders. Implications for future research and clinicians are discussed.

Keywords: relationship self-regulation, relationship work, RSR, commitment, forgiveness, couples

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Introduction

In Western cultures, it is commonly accepted that maintaining good relationships, especially romantic ones, requires work. One way to characterize this relationship work is via the concept of relationship self-regulation (RSR). Borne out of individual self-regulation theory, RSR consists of the variety of strategies partners use individually to bolster their relationships, (e.g. going on dates or attending relationship workshops), as well as their persistence in using them (Halford, Sanders & Behrens, 1994). Though RSR is a newer concept in relationship research, several studies have already suggested that higher RSR has a positive effect on one's relationship (Halford, Lizzie, Wilson, and Occhipinti, 2007; Shafer, Jensen, & Larson, 2012; Wilson, Charker, Lizzio, Halford, & Kimlin, 2005; Shafer, Jensen, & Larson, in press).

Researchers have also begun to examine the influence of one partner's RSR behaviors on the other's happiness and found that an increase in one's relationship effort can potentially produce an increase in relationship satisfaction and stability in one's spouse (Shafer, Jensen, & Larson, in press). The notion of partner's influencing each other is not a new idea. Gottman (1994) describes partner perceptions as interactive thermostats in marriage, and perceptions and appraisals have been shown to define the nature and climate of intimate relationships (Acitelli, Douvan, & Veroff, 1993; Sillars, 1985; Sternberg & Barnes, 1985). Partner perceptions and appraisals have been shown to influence not only intimacy and satisfaction, but relationship maintenance behaviors as well (Cramer & Jowett, 2010; Holmes, 2002; Lemay, Clark, & Feeney, 2007; Waldinger & Schulz, 2006). Literature suggests that an individual's perceptions of their partner's effort may be more important in maintaining the relationship than the actual behaviors (Long & Andrews, 1990; Kenny & Acitelli, 2001). This highlights the fact that our own evaluation of our relationship performance is less influential than our partner's view.

Recent shifts in relationship research have moved toward marital virtues such as forgiveness, commitment, trust, sacrifice, and kindness, instead of relationship pathology. Of these virtues, commitment and forgiveness are the strongest predictors of good couple outcomes in serious romantic relationships (including cohabiters) (Fincham, Stanley, & Beach, 2007). Studying positive relationship dimensions helps us identify the "self-regulatory mechanisms located within the dyad that provide the average couple with ways to forge deeper connection or to effect repairs of the relationship after experiencing distance and frustration," (Fincham et al., p. 278, 2007).

There is already a wealth of evidence suggesting that commitment and forgiveness are associated with more positive relationship behaviors, such as accommodation, repair efforts, remaining faithful, sacrificing for the good of the relationship, and decreasing conflict (Braithwaite, Selby & Fincham, 2011; Brandeau-Brown & Ragsdale, 2008; Fincham, Beach & Davila, 2004; Fincham, Beach & Davila, 2007; Le & Agnew, 2003; Miller, 1997; Rusbult & Buunk, 1993; Wieselquist, Rusbult, Foster & Agnew, 1999). However, there are no studies on how each partner's ability to commit to and forgive the other influences their how each person views the other's use of RSR. Our study investigates how commitment to the relationship and forgiveness behaviors influence each partner's perception of the other's RSR. If RSR can be expected to improve the quality of a relationship for both self and other, it is important to understand what makes partners more likely to notice the efforts of his or her partner.

Literature Review

Relationship Self-Regulation

RSR is the work that individuals put into their relationships to maintain them over time. Halford originally developed the concept out of self-regulation theory, stating that "RSR is the

individual regulation of thought, affect, and behavior needed to set and realize relationship-oriented goals," (Halford et al., 1994). Karoly (1993) explained that:

> Self-regulation refers to those processes, internal and/or transactional, that enable an individual to guide his/her goal-directed activities over time and across changing circumstances (contexts). Regulation implies modulation of thought, affect, behavior, or attention via deliberate or automated use of specific mechanisms and supportive meta-skills. The processes of self-regulation are initiated when routine activity is impeded, or when goal directedness is otherwise made salient (e.g., the appearance of a challenge, the failure of habitual action patterns, etc.) (p. 25).

He describes individual self-regulation as having several phases: goal selection, goal cognition, directional maintenance, directional change or reprioritization, and goal termination. An individual's ability to perform any action, from lifting a fork to writing a symphony, is a direct reflection of one's ability to effectively move through this process (Karoly, 1993).

Halford and colleagues (1994) observed that traditional approaches to couple therapy, such as Behavioral Couple Therapy, would often devolve into partner-blaming, which stalls a couple's progress. Thus, he introduced a new approach, dubbed relationship self-regulation, which helps each partner refine their *own* behavior, and look for ways he or she could improve the relationship. As a result, couple therapy and enrichment approaches have increasingly emphasized this concept of self-change as the best path to systemic change in couple relationships (Jacobson & Christensen, 1996; Markman, Stanley & Blumberg, 2010).

Similar to individual self-regulation, RSR conceptually consists of four meta-competencies: *Appraisal* is the ability to accurately evaluate the state of the relationship, one's own behavioral contributions to its satisfaction, and the external factors that influence couple

interactions, e.g. personal characteristics, life events, and contextual variables (Wilson et al., 2005). *Self-directed goal setting* is the ability to make relationship goals, and *implementation* refers to the process of working towards those goals. Finally, partners *evaluate* how their relationship work has created the desired results by observing how their efforts are received by their partner (Halford et al., 1994). Empirically, RSR consists of two components: *relationship strategies* (behaviors one enacts to nurture the relationship), and *relationship effort* (one's persistence) (Halford et al., 1994; Halford, Lizzio, Wilson, & Occhipinti, 2007; Wilson et al., 2005). Taken together, they describe the nature of one's contributions to the relationship.

Relationship Self-Regulation and Commitment

Commitment to a romantic relationship can be most simply defined as 'the intention to maintain a relationship over time' (Stanley, Rhoades & Whitton, 2010). However, researchers have discovered that it is a much more nuanced concept with several domains. Though each has their own way of conceptualizing commitment, all models look at internal versus external motivations (e.g. personal values, attraction to partner, couple identity, etc. versus lack of alternatives, social pressure, irretrievable investments, etc.). For the purposes of this study, we focus on internal motivations, or personal dedication, which characterizes one's desire to continue, improve, and invest in the relationship (Stanley & Markman, 1992). Personal dedication can also describe one's attraction to their partner (love) and/or relationship (marital satisfaction) and the extent to which partners identify with being part of a coupleship (Johnson, Caughlin & Huston, 1999).

Studies have shown that committed partners actively ignore attractive alternatives (Miller, 1997), and are more likely to make relationships repairs when needed (Brandeau-Brown & Ragsdale, 2008). Most importantly, committed individuals have been shown to perform more

relationship-maintaining behaviors, such as being willing to accommodate and sacrifice for the other partner (Miller, 1997; Wieselquist et al., 1999). Committed partners become dependent upon one another over time, and come to rely on their relationship for their own well-being (Rusbult & Buunk, 1993). Additionally, to be committed is to consider one's relationship a long-term investment, which incentivizes partners to nurture and improve their relationships (Le & Agnew, 2003; Rusbult & Buunk, 1993). Therefore, as a reflection of that investment, committed partners are more likely to perform relationship-maintaining behaviors. An individual who is committed to a relationship will likely choose to invest time and energy into its upkeep, whereas those who remain less committed could hardly be expected to demonstrate the same level of effort.

Relationship Self-Regulation and Forgiveness

As Robert Quillen stated, "A happy marriage is the union of two good forgivers." For forgiveness to occur in a relationship, one partner must be conscious of having been injured or wronged by the other. As Fincham (2000) explains, "Without injury there is nothing to forgive."

Clinically, forgiveness refers to the multidimensional healing process that the injured partner goes through to move on from the hurtful event. It refers to shifts in cognition, affect, and behavior toward the offending party from pain and recrimination to more positive regard. It does not require condoning, overlooking, or forgetting the offense, nor does it require reconciliation, though these factors are often included in most people's definition of forgiveness (Fincham, 2000; Kearns & Fincham, 2004). Furthermore, it is a process that unfolds over time, characterized by a decrease in negative behaviors such as avoidance, retaliation, and resentment, and an increase in positive regard (e.g. empathy, acting with goodwill) (Fincham, 2000; Fincham, Hall & Beach, 2006).

Braithwaite et al. (2011) found that the relationship between forgiveness and relationship satisfaction is mediated by negative interpersonal tactics and behavioral self-regulation aimed at improving the relationship, even when accounting for baseline relationship satisfaction and dedication commitment. They state, "…when individuals have more forgiving tendencies, they are more likely to self-regulate with the goal of improving their relationship, and to inhibit their tendency to damage their relationship by using negative interpersonal tactics like hitting, berating, or avoiding their partner," (p. 558). While these findings are important, their sample was comprised of 84% women and individuals who only reported being in a committed romantic relationship, as opposed to being married, leaving room for further study. Even so, they aptly summarize the role of forgiveness, saying, "…forgiveness seems to short circuit the use of negative conflict strategies allowing the couple to exit from the negative reciprocity cycle that leads to distressed relationships," (p. 557).

When one forgives their partner, it is manifested in an increase in positive behaviors and regard within the couple, paired with a decrease in negative ones. It stands to reason that feeling forgiven by one's partner will also increase goodwill within the relationship. Partners who forgive well are more likely to identify and enact ways to improve their relationships, whereas lingering resentments and unresolved conflicts would interfere with those efforts. In addition, research has shown that forgiveness can positively influence partner attributions (Rusbult & Buunk, 1993), implying that one's own forgiving attitude can color perceptions of one's partner for the better.

Current Study

This study seeks to understand how commitment and forgiveness influences perceptions of relationship self-regulation behaviors. An Actor-Partner Independence Model (APIM; Kashy

& Kenny, 2000) was used to test the associations between male and female self-report of their commitment and forgiveness in the relationship, and males' view of their partner's RSR and female's view of their partner's RSR separately. We chose to use each partner's report of the other's RSR instead of self-report of RSR because partner perceptions may be more objective measures than self-report, and predict more variance in relationship satisfaction than the respondent's ratings of themselves (Busby, Holman & Taniguchi, 2001). Four hypotheses were tested in our study:

Actor Effects:

1. Male's self-report of his commitment and forgiveness will be positively associated with his perception of his partner's (female) RSR.
2. Female's self-report of her own commitment and forgiveness will be positively associated with her perception of her partner's (male) RSR.

Partner Effects:

3. Female's self-report of her own commitment and forgiveness will be positively associated with male's perception of his partner's (female) RSR.
4. Male's self-report of his own commitment and forgiveness will be positively associated with female's perception of her partner's (male) RSR.

Methods

Procedures

We used the RELATionship Evaluation (RELATE) questionnaire, a secondary data set gathered from an online relationship assessment questionnaire taken by individuals in committed romantic relationships (Busby et al., 2001). RELATE offers feedback to couples on potential problem areas in their partnerships, and is available to researchers as rich, in-depth data on

romantic relationships. Respondents were asked to complete the survey independently of their partner. Importantly, the data are not from a random sample of the general population, but instead primarily consist of college-educated students in family-focused and psychology courses, participants in couple workshops, couples seeking therapy, and individuals who happened upon the questionnaire via web search. These procedures prevent us from claiming that our results are generalizable. However, the data come from a large sample that has some ethnic, religious, and SES diversity. They come from subsets of questions not found in other data sets (e.g., Busby et al., 2001; Busby, Holman & Walker, 2008; Busby, Holman & Niehuis, 2009; Meyer, Larson, Busby, & Harper, 2012).

Sample Description

We began with matched-pair responses from 1,460 couples who had taken the RELATE between 2011 and 2013. Because there were so few homosexual and mixed-orientation couples, we chose to focus on heterosexual couples in intimate relationships who were cohabiting, married, and remarried (as opposed to casually dating, seriously dating, or engaged). This resulted in a smaller sample of 679 couples, which is 46.50% of the original sample that were included in the analyses. Utilizing the SPSS program's (version 21.0) Missing Value Analysis 7.5, an expectation maximization (EM) technique was used with inferences based on the likelihood under the normal distribution (Hill, 1997). The Little's MCAR test was used to estimate whether values were missing completely at random. The result indicated that data (a total of 0.353% of all values) was indeed missing completely at random: chi-square = 372.53 (df = 336; p = .083). Full Information Maximum Likelihood was used to impute the missing values using the AMOS software (Arbuckle, 2006). Full Information Maximum Likelihood was used to impute the missing values using the AMOS software (Arbuckle, 2006).

The sample was predominantly Caucasian (approximately 80.5%), with a median income of $20,000 to 40,000 for females, and $40,000 to 60,000 for males. Among male participants, the average age was 32.43 years old (SD = 9.05, Range = 18-66). For female participants, the mean age was 30.73 (SD = 8.79, Range = 18-70). Approximately 77% of the sample also identified with a religious denomination, with approximately 28% Latter-day Saint (Mormon), 21% Protestant, and 14% Catholic. In terms of education, approximately 4% of the sample completed a high school diploma or less as their highest degree of education, 36% completed some college, 29% completed a bachelor's degree, 8% completed some graduate schooling, and 23% completed a graduate degree. In addition, 49.3% of the sample was cohabiting, with the remaining 50.7% married and/or remarried. Average relationship length was between 2-5 years, with a range of 0 months to 40 years. Further demographics can be seen in Table 1.

Measures

The RELATE questionnaire consists of 271 items and each subscale demonstrates an internal consistency between .70 and .90. In addition, they have been shown to be both valid (construct) and reliable (alpha and test-retest reliability) (see Busby et al., 2001 for more detailed information).

Relationship self-regulation (RSR). RSR was measured using the relationship effort and relationship strategies subscales from the RELATE dataset (Busby et al., 2001). As previously discussed, partner perceptions are a more accurate evaluation of the state of a relationship than self-reports or observed behaviors (Acitelli et al., 1993; Cramer & Jowett, 2010; Kenny & Acitelli, 2001). As such, for this study we used perceptions of partner RSR instead of self-reports of RSR.

Relationship Effort Partner Scale measures one's perceptions of how willing and able one's partner is to put forth effort in the romantic relationship over time (Brown & Larson, 2014). RELATE's effort subscale (α=0.781) (Busby et al., 2001) is modified from scales used by Halford et al. (1994), and Wilson et al. (2005), as well as Wilson et al. (2012), and Shafer and colleagues (2012). Respondents were asked four questions about their perception of their partner's relationship effort. Responses ranged from *never true* (1) to *always true* (5). Examples of questions include: "If things go wrong in the relationship my partner tends to feel powerless", "My partner tends to fall back on what is comfortable for him/her in relationships, rather than trying new ways of relating", and "If I don't appreciate the change efforts my partner is making, s/he tends to give up". Items were reverse coded and scores ranged from 1-5, with higher scores indicating higher perception of partner's use of relationship effort. Cronbach's alphas were .796 for male's report of partner's relationship effort, and .785 for female's report of partner's relationship effort.

Relationship Strategies Partner Scale measures one's perceptions of specific actions one's partner takes to improve their relationship. Respondents were asked four questions about their perception of their partner's relationship strategies. Responses ranged from *never true* (1) to *always true* (5). Example questions include: "My partner tries to apply ideas about effective relationships to improve our relationship", "My partner actually puts his/her intentions or plans for personal change into practice", and "If the way my partner is approaching change doesn't work, s/he can usually think of something different to try." Scores ranged from 1-5, with higher scores indicating higher perception of partner's use of relationship strategies used more often. Cronbach's alphas were .789 for male's report of partner's relationship strategies, and .829 for female's report of partner's relationship strategies.

Male's responses from the above eight items (four from partner's relationship effort and four from partner's relationship strategies) were used to create the latent variable of *male perception of partner's RSR* and female's responses to the above eight items were used to create the latent variable of *female perception of partner's RSR*. No measurement invariance was found and the measurement model demonstrated excellent fit for the data (X^2 = 315.589, df=97, p<.001, CFI= .951, TLI=.939, RMSEA=.058).

Commitment. Commitment was measured using four self-report items from the commitment subscale in RELATE. Respondents were asked to report on their commitment to their relationship, and responses ranged from *strongly disagree* (1) to *strongly agree* (5). Item examples include: "My relationship with my partner is more important to me than almost anything else in my life", "I may not want to be with my partner a few years from now" (reverse scored), and "I like to think of my partner and me more in terms of 'us' and 'we' rather than 'me' and 'him/her'."

Male's responses to the four items were used to create the latent variable of *male commitment*, and female's responses to the four items were combined to create the latent variable of *female commitment*. Cronbach's alphas were .787 for males, and .746 for females. Partial measurement invariance was confirmed (i.e., factor loadings did not differ for males and females) and the measurement model demonstrated excellent fit for the data (X^2=41.969, df=19, p <.01, CFI=.985, TLI=.978, RMSEA=.042).

Forgiveness. Forgiveness was measured using three self-report items from the forgiveness subscale from RELATE. Respondents reported on their own perceived forgiveness behavior and responses ranged from *never true* (1) to *always true* (5). Items include: "I can forgive my partner pretty easily", "When I have been emotionally or verbally injured by something my partner has done I can still move forward and have a good relationship", and "I am able to give up the hurt and resentment toward my partner when he or she does not treat me as well as I deserve".

Male's responses to the three items were used to create the latent variable *male forgiveness*, and female's responses to the three items were used to create the latent variable *female forgiveness*. Cronbach's alpha was .843 for males and .885 for females. Partial measurement invariance was confirmed (i.e., factor loadings did not differ for males and females), and the measurement model demonstrated excellent fit for the data (X^2=14.119, df=10, p=.168, CFI=.998, TLI=.997, RMSEA=.025).

Control variables. Common sociodemographic characteristics like income, religion, and education, which are related to relationship characteristics, were also controlled for (Amato, Booth, Johnson & Rogers, 2007; Meyer et al., 2012). Participants specified their yearly gross income by selecting a response ranging from 0 = "none" to 11 = "$300,000 or more". When added in the model, it was represented as a continuous variable, with every one unit increase in category representing an increase in income.

Self-identified religious affiliation was measured with dichotomous variables (Protestant, Catholic, LDS, Other, and None). Respondents also specified how much education they had completed by selecting a response ranging from 1 = "less than high school" to 9 = "graduate or professional degree completed". Again, when added in the model, education was represented as a

continuous variable, with a one unit increase in education representing having received more education. We controlled for relationship length (represented as a continuous variable) because research has suggested that couples experience a slight decline in RSR behaviors over time (Halford et al., 2007).

Finally, because research has suggested that RSR behaviors may differ across union type (Meyer et al., 2012), self-identified relationship status was represented as a categorical variable, with each category being dummy-coded (cohabiting and married/remarried). All of the above control variables were regressed onto both the individual's outcome as well as their partner's outcome variables. This was done in order to identify the actor and partner effects of the control variables.

Statistical Analyses

Kashy and Kenny (2000) developed the Actor-Partner Interdependence Model (APIM), which examines the shared influence and interdependence in relationships (i.e., the characteristics of one member of the dyad affect outcomes of the other member of the dyad). In APIM, the *actor effect* refers to the fact that a person's outcome is affected by his or her own predictor variables. The *partner effect* refers to the same person's outcome also being affected by his or her partner's predictor variables. The following latent variables were included in the model: *male commitment*, *female commitment*, *male forgiveness*, *female forgiveness*, *female perception of partner's RSR*, and *male perception of partner's RSR*.

Results

Preliminary and Descriptive Statistics

Mean scores on all measures, correlations, and standard deviations were calculated for observed variables and are shown in Table 2. The highest correlations were between female's

forgiveness and female's perception of partner's RSR (r=.53, p<.01), and between male's forgiveness and male's perception of partner's RSR (r=.43, p<.01). Male commitment was most highly correlated with male's forgiveness (r=.39, p<.01), and female commitment was most highly correlated with female's forgiveness (r=.42, p<.01).

Actor-Partner Independence Model

A structural equation model (SEM: Jöreskog, 1973; Wiley, 1973) was fit using the AMOS software (Analysis of Moment Structures; Arbuckle, 2006). The full model, including all control variables and hypothesized paths, was initially fit, and revealed a good fit for the data (X^2=1072.107, df=529, *p*<.001, CFI=.947, TLI=.937, RMSEA=.039). However, in order to fit a more parsimonious model, a delta chi-square test was performed and revealed a chi-square difference of 22.95, which was below the critical value of 38.885 for 26 degrees of freedom at the .05 level. Thus, removing all non-significant pathways did not significantly harm model fit. The final model demonstrated a good fit for the data: (X^2=1049.157, df=503, *p*<.001, CFI=.941, TLI=.930, RMSEA=.040, and accounted for 46.4% of the variance in female perception of partner's RSR, and 40.8% of the variance in male perception of partner's RSR (See Figure 1). Standardized factor loadings are shown in Table 3, and unstandardized and standardized beta weights are shown in Table 4.

Actor Effects

Male. *Male commitment* was significantly and positively related to *male perception of partner's RSR* (Beta=.250, $p<.001$). In addition, *male's forgiveness* was significantly and positively related to *male perception of partner's RSR* (Beta=.301, $p<.001$).

Female. Likewise, *female commitment* was significantly and positively related to *female perception of partner's RSR* (Beta =.259, $p<.001$), and *female forgiveness* was significantly and positively related to *female perception of partner's RSR* (Beta =.405, $p<.001$).

Partner Effects

Male. In terms of partner effects, *female commitment* was significantly and positively related to *male perception of partner's RSR* (Beta =.125, $p<.05$). Likewise, *female forgiveness* was significantly and positively related to *male perception of partner's RSR* (Beta =.127, $p<.01$).

Female. Additionally, *male forgiveness* was significantly and positively related to *female perception of partner's RSR* (Beta =.130, $p<.01$), whereas no partner effect was found from *male commitment* to *female perception of partner RSR*.

Control Variables

Male education level was significantly and positively associated with *female perception of partner's RSR* (Beta=.127, $p<.01$), and female education level was significantly and negatively associated with *female perception of partner's RSR* (Beta=-.087, $p<.05$). Additionally, length of relationship was significantly and negatively related to both *female perception of partner's RSR* (Beta= -.217, $p<.001$) and *male perception of partner's RSR* (Beta= -.106, $p<.05$). Finally, cohabitation was significantly and positively associated with both *male perception of partner's RSR* (Beta=.192, $p<.01$) and *female perception of partner's RSR* (Beta=.080, $p<.05$).

Discussion

The purpose of this study was to test the associations between men's and women's self-report of commitment and forgiveness, and their perception of their partner's RSR behaviors. Partner perception of RSR can be an important measure of a person's contribution to a relationship, even more so than their own self-reported contribution, as one may believe they are putting forth effort in the relationship, but if their partner does not think, feel, or see it that way, the relationship suffers. Even so, prior studies have primarily focused on self-reports of RSR behaviors and relationship outcomes (Halford et al., 2001; Halford et al., 2007; Wilson, 2005). We have addressed this gap in the literature by using dyadic data from 679 couples in the RELATE data set to examine the relationship between one partner's input (i.e. commitment and forgiveness) and the other's output (i.e. RSR behaviors), as perceived by the first partner.

Actor Effects

We found that higher self-reported commitment in both men and women predicted higher levels of perceived RSR behaviors by their partners, which is in line with the existing literature that shows that higher levels of commitment are associated with more positive partner attributions (Rusbult & Buunk, 1993). Our findings illustrate that committed men and women likely perceive their partner as putting forth more effort into the relationship.

We also found that higher levels of forgiveness in both men and women predicted higher perceptions of partner RSR. Fincham and colleagues (2004) propose that the forgiving partner helps the couple step out of a negative conflict cycle, and return to the status quo of RSR. In addition, they posit that higher forgiveness on the part of one could be in response to effective conflict strategies on the part of the other, and the lack of forgiveness could be a response to negative conflict strategies (e.g. withdrawing or retaliating) (Braithwaite et al., 2011).

Alternatively, partners who feel forgiven may, in turn, feel more motivated to work at their relationships, while lack of forgiveness from one partner may lead the other to feel discouraged and less inclined to keep making efforts in the relationship.

Partner Effects

Our findings show that men's view of their partners' RSR is positively associated with that women's self-reported level of commitment. Existing research has already demonstrated a positive correlation between commitment and pro-relationship behaviors, such as accommodation, willingness to sacrifice for the relationship, ignoring romantic alternatives, and making relational repairs (Brandeau-Brown & Ragsdale, 2008; Miller, 1997; Rusbult & Buunk, 1993). Such behaviors are aimed at improving relationship quality, similar to one's use of RSR; specifically relationship strategies (tactics employed to enhance relationships), and effort (their use over time). Our findings both complement the existing literature and contribute to the growing understanding of RSR.

Similarly, we found that men's and women's view of their partner's RSR is positively associated with that partner's self-reported level of forgiveness. This finding illustrates the idea that forgiveness is characterized by a decrease in negative regard and behavior toward the offending party, coupled with an increase in goodwill (Braithwaite et al., 2011; Fincham, 2000; Fincham et al., 2006; Kearns & Fincham, 2004). If one partner is able to forgive the other, which could, itself, be characterized as a measure one takes to improve the relationship, they are likely capable of finding other ways to improve the relationship (e.g. RSR strategies). Likewise, forgiveness is not a single event, but a process that unfolds over time (Fincham et al., 2006), not unlike relationship effort. If a partner is willing to see the forgiveness process through to the end, it seems that they would be able to sustain their other relational efforts too (RSR effort).

Control Variables

Of particular interest is our finding that men's education level positively impacted the women's experience of his RSR. Studies have shown that education level is positively correlated with relationship satisfaction (Kurdek 1991, 1993; Larson & Holman, 1994; Martin & Bumpass, 1989), and, in turn, relationship satisfaction is positively correlated to positive partner attributions (Fincham, Harold & Gano-Phillips, 2000; Karney, Bradbury, Fincham & Sullivan, 1994). Higher education could equate to greater job stability, stronger problem-solving skills and critical thinking, and greater access to relationship resources (such as relationship books and classes). Conversely, men who are less educated may have more stressful job situations, depleted emotional and physical reserves, and limited resources available for enhancing their relationships. In addition, women have been shown to place a higher premium on their relationships, monitor their relationship quality more closely than men, and are typically socialized to be more emotionally attuned to their partners (Carels & Baucom, 1999; Fincham, Garnier, Gano-Phillips, & Osborne, 1995; Miller, Kreger Silvermany, & Falk, 1995; Willis, Weiss & Patterson, 1974), and therefore may be impacted more significantly by relationship stressors.

Similarly, we found that women's level of education negatively impacted her view of his RSR. It is possible that women who have completed more education are more likely to be employed outside the home in some capacity. Previous research has demonstrated that wives' employment is negatively associated with husbands' mental health (Kessler & McRae, Jr., 1982). One possible explanation for this relationship is that husbands of working wives feel less adequate as providers compared to men whose wives stay home (Staines, Pottick, & Fudge, 1986). Furthermore, women typically still perform more household duties than men, even when

working outside the home. Inequitable divisions of labor have been shown to contribute to depression in wives (Bird, 1999). Depression or underlying resentments due to disagreements about relationship roles or contributions could cause men to contribute less, and women to view their contributions less generously.

We also found that length of relationship was negatively associated with women's perception of their partner's use of RSR. This supports Halford and colleague's (2007) finding that relationship effort may decline slightly with time, however it is unclear why length of the relationship only influenced female's perceptions of their partner's RSR and not men's. Men and women have been shown to experience relationships differently. Specifically, women tend to report lower satisfaction than men (Amato et al., 2007), be more sensitive to problems within the relationship (Doss, Atkins, & Christensen, 2003), and be more likely to perceive couple inequality (Amato et al., 2007). These differences in satisfaction could also be due to the highly gendered nature of many relationships, in which women take on a caregiving role, take care of the children and housework, and earn less than their partners (Amato et al., 2007).

Finally, we found that cohabitation had a positive effect on both his and her perception of the other's RSR. Because the mean length of relationship in this study was 2-5, it is possible that cohabiting couples are still early in their romantic relationship, and view their cohabitation as a sign of increased commitment and devotion to the relationship. It may be that cohabitation is a gesture of mutual commitment, and has bolstered both partners' view of the other's contributions.

Our results supported our original hypotheses, specifically that commitment, forgiveness, and perceptions of partner RSR behaviors are all positively correlated, with the exception of male commitment and female perception of his RSR. Theoretically, these findings can help us to

further refine our conceptualization of relationship health. Instead of focusing solely on individual behavior, interaction patterns, or virtuous attributes, our study examines the relationship between all three. While the topic bears further research, it would seem that virtuous attitudes lead to better behaviors, which are observed by one's partner, who then may respond more favorably in the relationship.

Limitations and Future Research

This study has a number of limitations. The sample from which we culled our data was not nationally representative. Rather, it largely consisted of college students, couples in clinical settings and marriage education courses, and internet traffic, which resulted in a sample that is predominantly white and more highly educated and religious than the general population. Additionally, our sample was not obtained randomly. Respondents sought out the RELATE, which could result in a sample that is more highly committed to their relationships than others. As such, it would beneficial to examine RSR predictors in a nationally representative, random sample.

In addition, we studied how commitment and forgiveness predict perceptions of partner RSR, but a reciprocal relationship may exist between the two. It is possible that observing RSR behaviors in one's partner could impact one's commitment, and make one more or less inclined to forgive. For example, if I feel like my partner is consistently working hard on our relationship, it may inspire me to feel more committed and more inclined to forgive my partner when they hurt me. Likewise, having a partner recognize one's efforts in the relationship (RSR) could also influence attitudes of commitment and forgiveness. If I feel like my partner recognizes my RSR contributions, I may be more likely to stay committed and extend forgiveness when needed. This is an alternative model that needs testing in the future.

Additionally, due to the cross-sectional nature of our data, our study only reflects one point in time in each relationship, which does not allow for insight on causation. Relationships are not static in nature and thus, experience both subtle and dramatic fluxuations in quality and behaviors (Gottman, 1994). A longitudinal analysis of how commitment and forgiveness interact with how partner's perceive each other's RSR will help us better understand the nature of those associations.

Lastly, our dummy coded religion, race, and marital status variables would not run all at once in the Amos program. Additionally, dummy coded variables that should agree with each (such as male and female cohabitation) will create multi-collinearity problems if run together. Therefore we used only female reports of marital status and relationship length. In order to run the model, we ran each control variable individually in Amos to determine the ones with significant pathways according to methodology proposed by Ping (2010). We then eliminated the insignificant control variables in order to create the most parsimonious model, and reported on the final results in this paper. When run in MPLUS, the program would eliminate any respondents who did not answer a demographic question, effectively halving our sample size and making it unusable for the number of control variables and pathways. In order to better analyze the data, one would need to use mean scores instead of latent variables for both the predictor and outcome variables.

Most research to date on RSR has focused mainly on personality constructs (e.g. responsibility) (Halford, 2011), emotional health factors (e.g. good self-esteem, lack of depression, and anxiety) (Brown & Larson, 2014), individual background factors such as family-of-origin experiences (Brown & Larson, 2014), and adult attachment styles (Roundy & Larson, 2014). This is one of the first studies to suggest it may take more than just good mental health

and personal characteristics to develop the RSR skill. We have demonstrated that virtuous attitudes such as commitment and forgiveness are also key predictors. Future research should combine personality, personal, and background characteristics with select attitudinal dimensions like the ones studied here, as well as other attitudes such as trust, sacrifice, kindness, and sanctification (Fincham et al., 2007).

Finally, our data measures perceptions of relationship self-regulation contributions, which are subjective by nature. Though there is merit to evaluating the relationship between various predictors and perceived RSR behaviors, it would also be valuable to research these relationships using actual observed behaviors. This would provide a more objective evaluation of each partner's RSR contributions (versus their perceptions) and how they influence the relationship.

Clinical Implications

Clinically, these findings offer several potential points of intervention for clinicians working with distressed couples. A variety of therapeutic models, such as Integrative Behavioral Couples Therapy (Christensen, Jacobson, & Babcock, 1995), Emotion Focused Therapy (Johnson, 2004), and Gottman's Sound Marital House Theory (Gottman, 1999) focus on improving relationships by sculpting partner interactions in more positive ways via enactments. Those teaching couples RSR should be aware that certain attitudes (e.g. commitment and forgiveness) may be prerequisites to learning new behaviors or skills (e.g. RSR) (Halford et al., 2001, Halford & Wilson, 2009), which can be successfully taught to most couples through relationship education at home (Halford, Moore, Wilson, Farrugia & Dyer, 2004).

However, when these approaches reach a stalemate in treatment, it may be useful for clinicians to reassess each partner's level of commitment, and whether or not there are lingering

emotional injuries within the relationship that need to be attended to first, resulting in forgiveness. Inversely, clinicians may want to encourage and teach partners to use RSR behaviors to enrich their relationships, and potentially create more goodwill within the relationship, which may positively influence both commitment and forgiveness levels.

Similarly, our findings lend further credence to self-guided relationship education programs, such as the Couple CARE program (Halford et al., 2004), which teaches couples relationship skills, including self-directed change, to set and implement relationship goals, and then to evaluate their progress, i.e. to use RSR in their relationships. Partners complete the bulk of the program at their own pace at home, and evaluate their progress by phone with a licensed and trained psychologist. The program consists of six units: Self-change, Communication, Intimacy and caring, Managing differences, Sexuality, and Adapting to change. Each unit models healthy relationship behaviors for the couple, has each partner evaluate their own skill level, and then create and work on relationship-enhancing goals. Clinicians may offer the Couple CARE program to distressed couples who are unable or unwilling to participate in traditional couple therapy, with the hope that the couple can develop their skills at home.

Conclusion

This study adds to the literature by using an Actor-Partner Interdependence Model (APIM) to identify both actor and partner effects of how commitment and forgiveness influence perception of partner's relationship self-regulation (RSR) behaviors. The results highlight that male perception of his partner's RSR behaviors is positively influenced by his self-reported commitment and forgiveness as well as his partner's self-reported commitment and forgiveness. For females, her perception of her partner's RSR behaviors is positively influenced by her self-reported commitment and forgiveness, as well as her partner's self-reported forgiveness. Of

particular interest in this study, was that the actor effects were stronger. This finding suggests that if an individual views his partner's RSR behaviors in a negative light, it is likely due to the individual having lower commitment and forgiveness. These associations are important for clinicians to recognize, as it highlights the importance of how one's view of the other is impacted by self-appraisals.

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Table 1.

Demographic characteristics of couple sample

		Men		Women	
Variables		Mean (N=679)	SD	Mean (N=679)	SD
Age		32.43	9.05	30.73	8.79
		N	%	*N*	%
Marital Status	Cohabiting	335	49.3	335	49.3
	Married, First Marriage	309	45.5	315	46.4
	Remarried	35	5.2	29	4.3
Race					
	African/Black	44	6.5	31	4.6
	Asian	19	2.8	33	4.9
	Caucasian	548	80.8	542	80.1
	Native American	4	0.6	5	0.7
	Latino(a)	38	5.6	38	5.6
	Mixed/Biracial	15	2.2	22	3.2
	Other	10	1.5	6	0.9
	Unreported	1	0.1	2	0.3
Income					
	None	19	2.8	92	13.7
	Under $20,000	122	18.2	176	26.3
	$20,000-39,000	108	16.1	114	17
	$40,000-59,000	101	15.1	104	15.5
	$60,000-79,000	81	12.1	64	9.6
	$80,000-99,000	73	10.9	37	5.5
	$100K-119K	41	6.1	31	4.6
	$120K-139K	32	4.8	16	2.4
	$140K-159K	21	3.1	11	1.6
	$160K-199K	25	3.7	12	1.8
	$200-300K	15	2.2	7	1
	$300K+	33	4.9	6	0.9
	Unreported	8	1.2	9	1.3
Religion					
	Catholic	105	15.5	91	13.4
	Protestant	139	20.5	147	21.7
	Latter-day Saint (Mormon)	190	28	192	28.3
	Other	84	12.4	98	14.4
	None	161	23.6	151	22.2
Education					
	Less than High School	6	0.9	1	0.1
	GED	12	1.8	5	0.7
	High School Diploma	27	4	8	1.2
	Some College, not currently enrolled	69	10.2	37	5.4
	Some College, currently enrolled	126	18.6	155	22.8
	Associate's Degree	39	5.7	59	8.7
	Bachelor's Degree	209	30.8	184	27.1
	Graduate Degree, not completed	43	6.3	64	9.4
	Graduate Degree, completed	148	21.8	166	24.4

Table 2.

Correlations, Means, and Standard Deviations for all variables

Variables	1	2	3	4	5	6
1. Male Commitment Self	-					
2. Female Commitment Self	.30**	-				
3. Male Forgiveness Self	. 39**	.24**	-			
4. Female Forgiveness Self	.27**	.42**	.23**	-		
5. Male Perception of Partner RSR	.11**	.29**	.43**	.31**	-	
6. Female Perception of Partner RSR	.30**	.42**	.30**	.53**	.34**	-
$\bar{X}$	4.54	4.54	4.11	3.94	3.48	3.43
Standard Deviations	.54	.57	.73	.82	.52	.71

Note: * $p < .05$. ** $p < .01$. *** $p < .001$

Table 3.

Standardized Factor Loadings for Latent Variables and Indicators

Item	Standardized Loading
Male Commitment	
My relationship with my partner is more important to me than almost anything else in my life.	.722 (X1)
I may not want to be with my partner a few years from now.	.793 (X2)
I like to think of my partner and me more in terms of "us" and "we" rather than "me" and "him/her."	.586 (X3)
I want this relationship to stay strong no matter what rough times we may encounter.	.674 (X4)
Female Commitment	
My relationship with my partner is more important to me than almost anything else in my life.	.598 (X5)
I may not want to be with my partner a few years from now.	.804 (X6)
I like to think of my partner and me more in terms of "us" and "we" rather than "me" and "him/her."	.455 (X7)
I want this relationship to stay strong no matter what rough times we may encounter.	.684 (X8)
Male Forgiveness	
I can forgive my partner pretty easily	.791 (X9)
When I have been emotionally or verbally injured by something my partner has done I can still move forward and have a good relationship.	.791 (X10)
I am able to give up the hurt and resentment toward my partner when he or she does not treat me as well as I deserve	.830 (X11)
Female Forgiveness	
I can forgive my partner pretty easily	.826 (X12)
When I have been emotionally or verbally injured by something my partner has done I can still move forward and have a good relationship.	.843 (X13)
I am able to give up the hurt and resentment toward my partner when he or she does not treat me as well as I deserve	.881 (X14)
Male's perception of Partner's RSR	
Relationship Strategies	
My partner tries to apply ideas about effective relationships to improve our relationship.	.525 (X15)
My partner actually puts his/her intentions or plans for personal change into practice.	.641 (X16)
My partner gives me helpful feedback on the ways I can help him/her achieve his/her goals.	.597 (X17)
If the way my partner is approaching change doesn't work, s/he can usually think of something different to try.	.685 (X18)
Relationship Effort	
If things go wrong in the relationship my partner tends to feel powerless.	.593 (X19)
My partner tends to fall back on what is comfortable for him/her in relationships, rather than trying new ways of relating.	.649 (X20)

If I don't appreciate the change efforts my partner is making, s/he tends to give up.	.799 (X21)
Even when my partner knows what s/he should do differently to improve things in the relationship, s/he cannot seem to change her/his behavior.	.617 (X22)
Female's perception of Partner's RSR	
Relationship Strategies	
My partner tries to apply ideas about effective relationships to improve our relationship.	.642 (X23)
My partner actually puts his/her intentions or plans for personal change into practice.	.702 (X24)
My partner gives me helpful feedback on the ways I can help him/her achieve his/her goals.	.601 (X25)
If the way my partner is approaching change doesn't work, s/he can usually think of something different to try.	.731 (X26)
Relationship Effort	
If things go wrong in the relationship my partner tends to feel powerless.	.435 (X27)
My partner tends to fall back on what is comfortable for him/her in relationships, rather than trying new ways of relating.	.746 (X28)
If I don't appreciate the change efforts my partner is making, s/he tends to give up.	.830 (X29)
Even when my partner knows what s/he should do differently to improve things in the relationship, s/he cannot seem to change her/his behavior.	.647 (X30)

Note: All standardized loadings are significant at the 0.000 level

Table 4.

Unstandardized Beta Weights, Standardized Beta Weights, S.E. and p values for SEM

Path	**Unstandardized (β)**	**Standardized (Beta)**	**S. E.**	***p***
Actor Effects				
Male Commitment → Male Perception of Partner RSR	.285	.250	.060	***
Male Forgiveness → Male Perception of Partner RSR	.184	.301	.031	***
Female Commitment → Female Perception of Partner RSR	.417	.259	.083	***
Female Forgiveness → Female Perception of Partner RSR	.309	.405	.038	***
Partner Effects				
Male Forgiveness → Female Perception of Partner RSR	.184	.130	.031	**
Female Commitment → Male Perception of Partner RSR	.139	.125	.059	*
Female Forgiveness → Male Perception of Partner RSR	.067	.127	.025	**
Control Variables				
Male Education → Female Perception of Partner RSR	.043	.127	.013	**
Female Education → Female Perception of Partner RSR	-.033	-.087	.014	*
Cohabiting → Male Perception of Partner RSR	.174	.192	.034	***
Cohabiting → Female Perception of Partner RSR	.105	.080	.044	*
Relationship Length → Male Perception of Partner RSR	-.019	-.106	.008	*
Relationship Length → Female Perception of Partner RSR	-.055	-.217	.012	***

*Note: * $p < .05$. ** $p < .01$. *** $p < .00$*

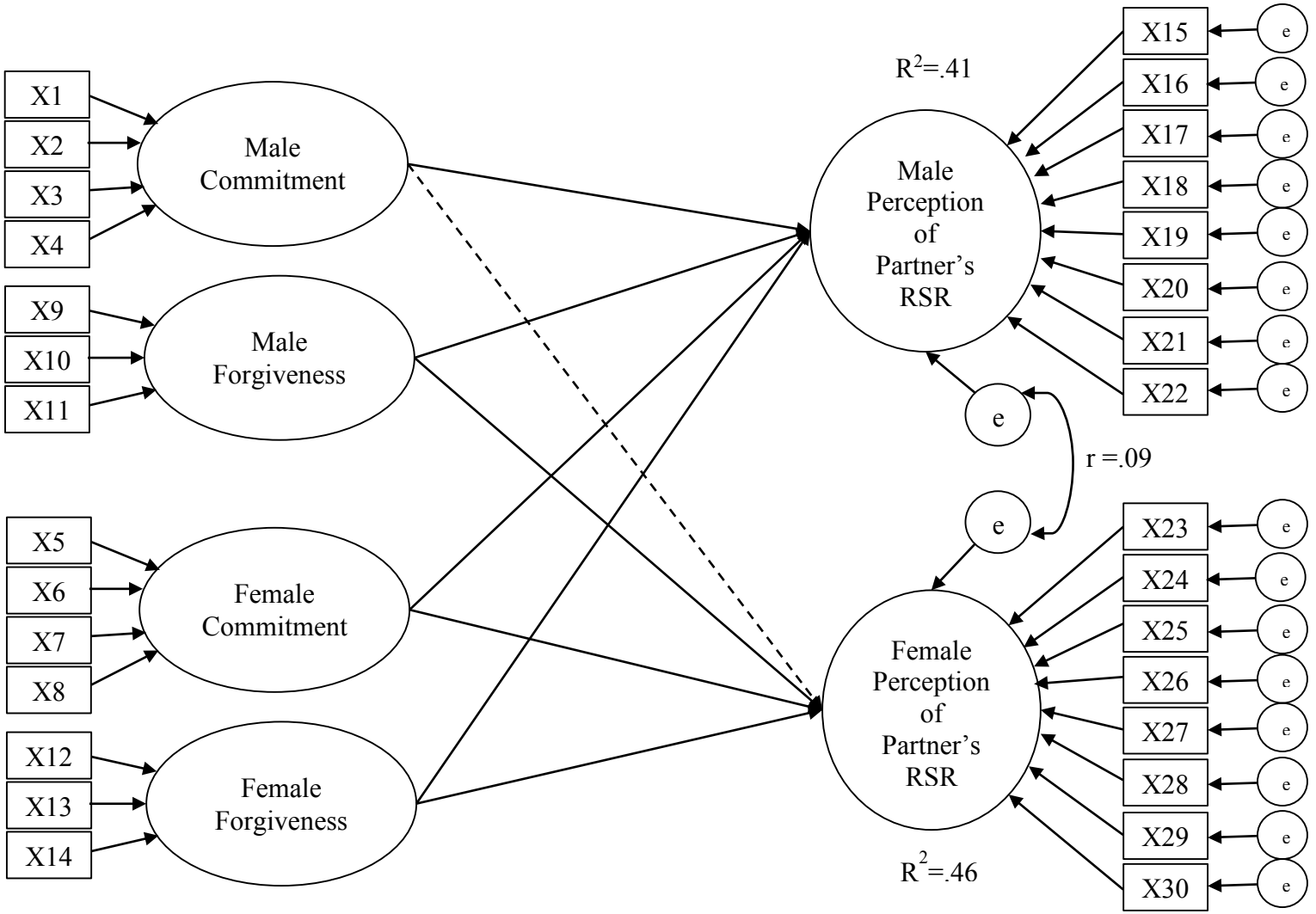

Figure 1. Structural Equation Model with R squared values