# Third-Party Forgiveness: (Not) Forgiving Your Close Other's Betrayer

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*Building on attribution and interdependence theories, two experiments tested the hypothesis that close friends of victims (third parties) are less forgiving than the victims themselves (first parties). In Experiment 1, individuals imagined a scenario in which either their romantic partner or the romantic partner of a close friend committed the identical relationship offense. Third parties were less forgiving than first parties, a phenomenon we termed the third-party forgiveness effect. This effect was mediated by attributions about the perpetrator's intentions and responsibility for the offense. In Experiment 2, first and third parties reported an actual offense and their subsequent unforgiving motivations. The third-party forgiveness effect was replicated and was mediated by commitment to the perpetrator. Perpetrator apology or amends to the victim increased third-party forgiveness. Future third-party research can expand interpersonal forgiveness research beyond the victim-perpetrator dyad.*

*Keywords:* forgiveness; attribution; commitment; apology; third-party

In Greek myth, the house of Atreus appeared to be cursed to a never-ending cycle of murder and revenge. Agamemnon sacrificed his daughter Iphigenia in order to appease the goddess Artemis and obtain favorable winds to sail to Troy. After the end of the Trojan War and the return to Greece years later, Agamemnon was murdered by his wife Clytemnestra and her lover, and they in turn were murdered by Agamemnon's son Orestes. In these examples, close friends and relatives of victims demonstrated unforgiving motivations toward the perpetrators, even though they arguably were not direct victims of an offense. Although murder is obviously an extreme example, the story of the house of Atreus reveals that transgression and forgiveness is a socially embedded process. The present research focuses on the forgiveness process of third parties in an interpersonal relationship context. Is it possible that third parties—such as close friends or family members of victims—might be less forgiving than the victims themselves, despite the fact that an offense was not directed at them? The answer to this question is consequential, because partner offenses are a nearly inevitable aspect of involvement in long-term romantic relationships (Holmes & Murray, 1996), and close friends' and family members' impressions of relationship partners are important predictors of personal and relationship well-being (e.g., Sprecher & Felmlee, 1992).

We begin with a simple premise: Transgressions frequently involve more than the perpetrator and the victim. Even mild offenses that seem limited in scope can have ripple effects in a larger social context. Close friends or family members of both perpetrator and victim may take sides and feel intimately involved in an offense and its aftermath. Those close to the victim may feel wronged or deeply hurt themselves. They may believe that they are entitled to forgive or not forgive the perpetrator. Interpersonally, they may even influence the victim's decision to forgive or the victim's process of emotional forgiveness. The degree of forgiveness by victims as well as third parties—experienced both privately and interpersonally—may consequently determine relationship outcomes. In short, forgiveness often takes place in a broader social milieu that involves third parties. However, in contrast to the explosion of research over the past decade on victim forgiveness and self-forgiveness (see Worthington, 2005a), study on the forgiveness of perpetrators by close friends of a victim, or third-party forgiveness, has largely been neglected.

### Definitions of Forgiveness Usually Focus on the Dyad

Most research definitions of forgiveness emphasize the intrapersonal aspect of forgiveness: Forgiveness is a transformation or redirection of motivation on the part of a person who has been wronged in order to unburden oneself of resentment or hostility (Enright, 2001; McCullough, Fincham, & Tsang, 2003; Worthington, 2005a, 2005b). Some conceptualizations also involve the replacement of negative emotions with positive, prosocial emotions (e.g., Worthington, 2003). One principal advantage of intrapersonal definitions of forgiveness is that forgiveness is defined apart from the actions of a perpetrator (e.g., apology), and there is greater conceptual clarity, as forgiveness is distinguished from reconciliation and other processes. Interpersonal models of forgiveness emphasize the context in which forgiveness occurs, especially the ongoing relationship between the perpetrator and the victim (e.g., Finkel, Rusbult, Kumashiro, & Hannon, 2002). Similarly, intervention models emphasize forgiveness as a key process in improving marriages and other intimate relationships (e.g., Freedman, Enright, & Knutson, 2005; Gordon, Baucom, & Snyder, 2005; Wade & Worthington, 2005). However, even interpersonal definitions and models of forgiveness focus almost exclusively on the relationship between the perpetrator and the victim. Indeed, some definitions of forgiveness implicitly eliminate a role for third parties (Exline & Baumeister, 2000), though Fincham (2000) noted that such forgiveness "is important at philosophical . . . and practical levels (e.g., in relation to the Holocaust, post-apartheid South Africa)" (p. 6).

Does the experience of someone who has not been directly wronged, but who feels hurt or offended due to a close relationship to the victim, qualify as an offense that can be forgiven? What is the nature of the forgiveness process for third parties? That is, are the emotions and motivations the same for third parties as for victims? For example, Lerner (Meindl & Lerner, 1983) proposed a "heroic motive" that may be activated in situations where a close other is hurt or wronged. Perhaps this heroic motive can lead to vengeful motivations as one tries to protect or save one's close friend or family member. Certainly first and third parties differ in their experience of an offense (e.g., whether the perpetrator intended to harm them or whether the perpetrator has apologized to them) and in their perspectives regarding an offense (e.g., their attributions about the perpetrator). It seems clear that individuals experience some degree of unforgiveness toward perpetrators of an offense against their close friends or family members; they may hold grudges or act vengefully. Therefore, the process of third-party forgiveness deserves empirical investigation.

Lay uses of the word *forgiveness* clearly include third parties. Parents and close friends easily recall experiences in which a loved one was hurt and they were reluctant to forgive the perpetrator, even if their loved one chose to forgive (e.g., "I'll never forgive him for what he did to my daughter"). Such situations are familiar in culture, history, and myth. When a person is killed, the role of forgiveness or retaliation often appears to devolve to the surviving kin (third parties). In many cases, an escalating cycle of violence ensues. The Hatfield versus McCoy feud, which may have begun with a dispute over the ownership of a pig, became further inflamed by an affair between Roseanna McCoy and Johnse Hatfield. The feud did not subside until after at least a dozen members of the families were murdered, several were imprisoned, and both the National Guard and Supreme Court became embroiled in the feud. Politicians currently address historical atrocities in which forgiveness appears to cross generations and international boundaries. South Africa's Truth and Reconciliation Commission aimed to bring light to past atrocities under apartheid, but with the higher goal of bringing the country together. A German chancellor apologized for the Holocaust on behalf of Germany. During a trip to Senegal, then-President Bill Clinton apologized for the role of the United States in slavery. The Virginia legislature passed a resolution apologizing for slavery in 2007. These last examples are particularly fascinating, because no one living was involved directly in the aforementioned slavery. However, it is widely acknowledged that the effects of these injustices linger, and the state, as a perpetual entity, should apologize via its representative. In these

examples, people who feel hurt or offended on behalf of past victims (third parties) receive apologies from people representing the perpetrators.

Although historical myths and politicians have broadly pointed to the role of third parties in responses to offenses, we are not aware of any research by psychologists that directly compares first-party and third-party forgiveness of offenses that occur in romantic relationships. Are third parties more or less forgiving or vengeful than first parties? How do third parties influence the victim's forgiveness? One recent line of work investigated the second question, noting that validation of an offense by a third party (i.e., not the perpetrator) significantly reduced unforgiving motivations by the victim (Eaton, Struthers, & Santelli, 2006). This investigation bolsters our contention that forgiveness may be a more embedded social process than previously conceptualized.

### The Third-Party Forgiveness Effect and Possible Mediators

We predict that close friends of victims (third parties) may be less forgiving of perpetrators than the victims themselves, in spite of the fact that they were not the ones directly harmed. We label this disparity the *third-party forgiveness effect*. Why might third parties be less forgiving than victims? There are several possible reasons. One possibility is that attributions regarding the offense differ between first and third parties. When an offense is judged to be less intentional or serious, individuals are more willing to forgive (e.g., Fincham, 2000; Fincham, Paleari, & Regalia, 2002). Another possibility is that the quality of the relationship affects, either directly or indirectly, propensity to forgive (McCullough et al., 1998). Variables such as marital quality (Fincham et al., 2002) and relationship commitment (Finkel et al., 2002) have been linked to forgiveness in both correlational and experimental studies. A third possibility is that victims are much more likely to hear—and respond positively to—an apology than are third parties. Research supports the notion that apologies facilitate forgiveness (e.g., Darby & Schlenker, 1982; McCullough, Worthington, & Rachal, 1997; Younger, Piferi, Jobe, & Lawler, 2004). No previous research has examined the role of apology in facilitating forgiveness for those close to the victim (though Risen and Gilovich [2007] examined the role of observers in the acceptance of dubious apologies). Are third parties more forgiving if the perpetrator makes amends with them personally or if they know that the perpetrator apologized or made amends with the victim? Experiment 1 examines the role of attributions in the third-party forgiveness effect, and Experiment 2 examines the role of commitment to the perpetrator and the role of apology or amends in the third-party forgiveness effect.

## EXPERIMENT 1

The first aim of Experiment 1 was to test the hypothesis that third parties (vs. first parties) are indeed less forgiving—to empirically demonstrate the third-party forgiveness effect. In a conservative test of our hypothesis, we assessed and controlled for two established predictors of forgiveness: empathy (McCullough et al., 1997; Ripley & Worthington, 2002) and trait forgivingness (Berry & Worthington, 2001; Brown, 2003). Half of the participants imagined an offense committed against them by their romantic partner and then reported their attributions regarding the offense and their degree of forgiveness (first-party condition). The other half of the participants wrote down the name of their closest friend who was in an established romantic relationship and then imagined that the offense had been committed by the close friend's partner against the close friend (third-party condition). Thus, we directly compared first-party and third-party forgiveness of the same offense.

The second aim was to test the hypothesis that attributions may mediate the third-party forgiveness effect. In many respects, the decision to forgive or not forgive begins with the attributions made regarding the offensive action. As Fincham (2000) noted, "attributing responsibility is analogous to the first act in a longer play—it can be said to set the stage for further evolution of drama" (p. 2). Via both experimental and cross-sectional methodologies, attributions have been linked to a variety of positive and negative behaviors toward relationship partners, including forgiveness (e.g., Bradfield & Aquino, 1999; Fincham, 2000; Fincham et al., 2002). Fincham (2000) argued that individuals often absolve blame in order to maintain relatedness; in support of this proposition, he found that responsibility attributions are strongly correlated with forgiveness in close relationships.

Other research converges to highlight that more benevolent attributions occur in more intimate relationships. Although the self-serving bias—the tendency to take credit for success but make external attributions for failure—is a robust phenomenon across the lifespan and across cultures (Mezulis, Abramson, Hyde, & Hankin, 2004), it is mitigated in the context of relational closeness (Sedikides, Campbell, Reeder, & Elliot, 1998). In two experiments that manipulated relational closeness in the lab, individuals who felt closer to their interaction partner acted in a less self-serving manner than individuals who felt relationally distant. Thus, it seems logical that more positive impressions by romantic partners, relative to third parties, should lead to more generous attribution patterns in the domain of forgiveness.

## METHOD

### Participants

Introductory psychology students ($N = 82$; 59 women) participated in partial fulfillment of a course requirement. Participants were informed that the study concerned dating relationships and that in order to participate, it was necessary that they currently be dating someone. All participants were in dating relationships that had lasted at least 4 weeks. Participants ranged in age from 17 to 36 ($M = 19$, $SD = 2.35$); 69% were freshmen, 16% sophomores, and 15% were juniors or seniors. Participants were of varying ethnicity (69% Caucasian, 16% African American, 5% Hispanic, 5% Asian, 5% Other, and 1% not reported). Participants in the first-party condition ($n = 41$) reported that their own romantic relationships had lasted an average of 16 months (median = 13 months; range = 2 months to 4 years); 94% categorized their relationships as "dating regularly," "dating steadily," or "engaged/married"; and 90% reported that the relationship was completely exclusive (i.e., neither the participant nor the partner dated other people). Similarly, participants in the third-party condition ($n = 41$) reported that their close friends had been in a relationship with their partners for an average of 18 months (median = 15 months; range = 1 month to 6 years); 100% categorized the close friends' relationships as "dating regularly," "dating steadily," or "engaged/married"; and 88% reported that the close friend's relationship was completely exclusive. Chi-square analyses revealed no significant differences between first and third parties in terms of the target relationship's duration, status, or exclusivity.

### Procedure

Participants completed individual difference assessments of empathy and trait forgivingness. Individuals in the third-party condition were asked to write down the initials of a close friend who (a) had been in a romantic relationship for at least 4 weeks and (b) whose romantic partner they knew personally. Then, in a between-participants manipulation of relationship type, participants imagined an offense committed against them by their romantic partner (first-party condition) or committed against their close friend by their close friend's romantic partner (third-party condition). Then they reported their attributions for the offense and the degree to which they would forgive the perpetrator of the hypothetical offense. Finally, they reported demographic information about themselves and were debriefed.

### Individual Difference Measures

Participants completed two individual difference measures related to situational forgiveness: the Trait Forgivingness Scale (Berry, Worthington, O'Connor, Parrott, & Wade, 2005) and an empathy scale (Davis, 1983). The Trait Forgivingness Scale included 10 items (e.g., "I can forgive a friend for almost anything"). Participants indicated their agreement with each item on a 5-point scale (1 = *strongly disagree*; 5 = *strongly agree*). Items for the scale were averaged to create a composite index for trait forgivingness, $\alpha = .76$. The trait empathy scale included seven items (e.g., "I am often quite touched by things that I see happen"). Participants indicated their agreement with each item on a 5-point scale (1 = *does not describe me at all*; 5 = *describes me very well*). Items for the scale were averaged to create a composite index for empathy, $\alpha = .81$.

### Hypothetical Offense

We asked participants to imagine that either their close friend's partner committed an offense against their close friend (third-party condition) or that their own partner committed an offense against them (first-party condition). The offense scenario in the third-party condition was the following (in the first-party condition, the offense was committed by the participant's romantic partner):

> Imagine that your close friend and his/her romantic partner were at a gathering of friends one month ago. Somehow, everyone all started talking about different fears over dinner. To your friend's surprise, your friend's partner tells the people present about a strong fear that your friend has. Your friend doesn't like telling people about this issue at all. To make matters worse, your friend's partner makes fun of your friend for having this fear, saying it is completely irrational and silly and that your friend needs to "get over it."

### Attributions

Participants completed an attribution measure (Fincham, 2000). Three items assessed perceived responsibility for the offense (e.g., "To what extent do you blame your friend's partner for this conflict" [wording for third-party condition]). Three items assessed whether the offense was perceived as stable or unstable, internal or external, and general or specific (e.g., "In the future, if this offense arises, is the cause likely to be the same?" [stability]). Participants indicated their agreement with items using a 7-point scale (1 = *will never again be present*; 7 = *will always be present*). Responses to the six items were averaged to create a composite index for attributions, $\alpha = .74$, with higher numbers indicating more negative attributions about the perpetrator.

### Forgiveness

Participants responded to a single, face-valid forgiveness item (McCullough et al., 2003): "Please rate the

degree to which you have forgiven the person" who committed the offense. Participants indicated their degree of forgiveness using a 5-point scale (1 = *no forgiveness*; 5 = *complete forgiveness*).

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

### The Third-Party Forgiveness Effect

To examine the primary hypothesis that third parties are less forgiving than first parties (i.e., whether there is a third-party forgiveness effect), we performed an independent samples *t* test. Individuals were more forgiving of offenses committed against them by their own dating partners than of offenses committed against their close friends by the friends' dating partners; in short, we obtained evidence for a third-party forgiveness effect, $t(80) = 2.43$, $p < .05$. As predicted, first parties ($M = 4.29$, $SD = 0.93$) reported significantly more forgiveness than third parties did ($M = 3.71$, $SD = 1.23$).

### Attributions as a Mediator of the Third-Party Forgiveness Effect

To examine whether attributions for an offense serve as a mediator of the third-party forgiveness effect, we used the three-step hierarchical regression analysis recommended by Kenny and colleagues (Baron & Kenny, 1986; Kenny, Kashy, & Bolger, 1998). We included trait forgivingness and trait empathy as control variables in all regression models. Consistent with past research, in the first step, trait forgivingness, $\beta = .23$, $t(78) = 2.10$, $p < .05$, and trait empathy, $\beta = .25$, $t(78) = 2.35$, $p < .05$, both significantly predicted forgiveness; greater trait forgivingness and greater trait empathy were associated with greater reported forgiveness of the offense. Even with trait forgivingness and trait empathy in the model, relationship type (first party vs. third party) significantly predicted forgiveness, $\beta = .20$, $t(78) = 1.98$, $p < .05$; first parties reported greater forgiveness than third parties. In the second step, relationship type (first party vs. third party) predicted attributions; first parties reported less negative attributions than third parties, $\beta = -.29$, $t(78) = -2.69$, $p < .01$. Trait forgivingness and trait empathy did not have a significant effect on attributions in this step. In the third step, when we included relationship type and attributions in the model, attributions (the mediator) accounted for unique variance in forgiveness above and beyond relationship type, $\beta = -.34$, $t(77) = -3.40$, $p < .001$. As attribution scores increased (i.e., as more blame was assigned), forgiveness decreased. When the variance accounted for by attributions was partialled, the association between relationship type (first party vs. third party) and forgiveness became nonsignificant, $\beta = .10$, *ns*; Sobel $z = 2.12$
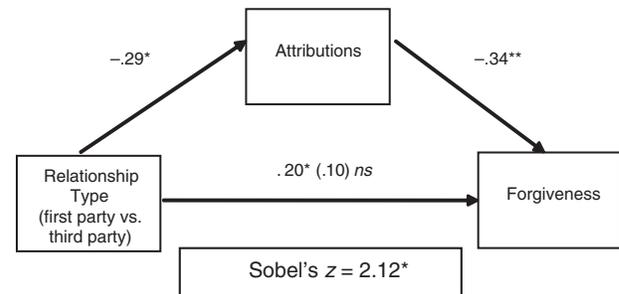


**Figure 1**  Experiment 1: Attributions as a mediator of the third-party forgiveness effect.
NOTE: The values in the figure represent standardized regression coefficients. The coefficient in parentheses represents the association of relationship type with forgiveness when the variance from attributions is partialled.
*$p < .05$. **$p < .01$.

(Sobel, 1982; see Figure 1). As predicted, attributions mediated the third-party forgiveness effect.

In summary, individuals imagined an offense by a romantic partner and imagined that they were either the victim (first-party condition) or that a close friend was the victim (third-party condition). Third parties reported being less forgiving than first parties, a phenomenon we labeled the *third-party forgiveness effect*. Moreover, we found that attributions made about the offense mediated the forgiveness difference between first and third parties. Specifically, it seems that third parties (vs. first parties) were less forgiving, because they made less benevolent attributions regarding the perpetrator.

## EXPERIMENT 2

Although Experiment 1 provided strong support for the existence of a third-party forgiveness effect as well as a potential mediator of the effect, it suffers from two potential limitations: (a) a single-item measure of forgiveness and (b) a scenario-based methodology. Hypothetical scenarios are a useful research tool in that it is possible to use them to standardize aspects of an offense, but replicating the third-party forgiveness effect in the context of naturally occurring offenses would strengthen confidence in the results. Accordingly, Experiment 2 was designed to replicate the third-party forgiveness effect as well as to extend it by changing four key elements of the method. First, we used a different measure of forgiveness that focused on unforgiving motivations of revenge and avoidance. Second, we examined real rather than hypothetical offenses. Third, we tested another potential mediator by including a measure of commitment to the perpetrator. Fourth, we examined the potential effects of apology to the victim and perpetrator amends to the victim or to the third-party on the third-party forgiveness effect.

Interdependence theory (Rusbult & Arriaga, 2000; Thibaut & Kelley, 1959) describes the interactions and outcomes of mutually dependent individuals. A high degree of commitment to a relationship leads to transformation of motivation, in which individuals who may be tempted to act on immediate self-interest instead adopt a more pro-relationship orientation. The investment model of commitment (e.g., Le & Agnew, 2003; Rusbult, Martz, & Agnew, 1998), an outgrowth of interdependence theory, focuses on the antecedents and consequences of felt commitment to a relationship. Commitment, defined as including a long-term orientation toward the relationship, psychological attachment to the partner, and intent to persist in the relationship, stems from relationship satisfaction, degree of investment in the relationship, and perceived quality of alternatives to the relationship (Rusbult, Olson, Davis, & Hannon, 2001). Consequences of commitment include a number of relationship-enhancing cognitions and behaviors that may be relevant to the different forgiveness experiences of victims (first parties) versus third parties who feel close to the victim.

Highly committed partners idealize their partner and consider their relationship to be superior to others' relationships (Buunk & Van Yperen, 1991). Such partners also derogate potential alternative partners (Simpson, Gangestad, & Lerma, 1990) and exhibit more cognitive interdependence—a collective self-and-partner mental representation (Agnew, Van Lange, Rusbult, & Langston, 1998). Additionally, commitment is associated with increased accommodation, defined as responding to a partner's negative behavior with constructive rather than destructive behavior (Yovetich & Rusbult, 1994), and with greater willingness to sacrifice or forgo immediate self-interest (Van Lange et al., 1997). Of particular relevance to the present article, Finkel et al. (2002) found that commitment is positively associated with forgiveness. In both cross-sectional and interaction record studies, greater commitment was associated with greater forgiveness. Moreover, an experiment that primed high versus low commitment demonstrated a causal link between commitment and forgiveness.

Accordingly, victims (first parties) who are highly committed to partners who betray them are more likely to be concerned with the welfare of the perpetrator, to have a long-term orientation to their relationship with the perpetrator, and to engage in pro-relationship transformation of motivation (e.g., to sacrifice, accommodate, or forgive). It is reasonable to suggest that third parties (e.g., friends or relatives of the victim) typically lack the same degree of commitment to the perpetrator as first-party victims. In our research, we examine third-party forgiveness (the extent to which individuals forgive people who commit an offense against their friends) versus first-party forgiveness

(the extent to which individuals forgive their own partners when their partners commit an offense against them). Building on interdependence theory research linking commitment to forgiveness and considering that first parties are likely more committed to their relationship with the perpetrator (compared to the extent that third parties are committed to their relationship with the perpetrator), we predict that (a) third parties (vs. first parties) will be less relationally committed to the perpetrator, and (b) this difference in commitment may mediate the third-party forgiveness effect.

Past research has verified that apology (McCullough et al., 1998; Weiner, Graham, Peter, & Zmuidinas, 1991) and making amends (Zechmeister, Garcia, Romero, & Vos, 2004) can facilitate forgiveness and reduce the likelihood of retaliation (Zechmeister et al., 2004). Empathy and perspective-taking (Takaku, 2001) may mediate the effects of apology on forgiveness. "Apology . . . allows victims to recognize their own transgressions and respond on the basis of commonalities rather than differences" (Armour & Umbreit, 2005, p. 497). Do apology or perpetrator amends (to either the victim or the third party) facilitate forgiveness by third parties?

In summary, the first aim of Experiment 2 was to replicate the third-party forgiveness effect in the context of actual offenses and with a different forgiveness measure (the Transgression-Related Interpersonal Motivations Scale, which assesses revenge and avoidance motivations; McCullough et al., 1998). The second aim was to test the hypothesis that relationship commitment may mediate the third-party forgiveness effect. The third aim was to explore the role of apology and perpetrator amends in third-party forgiveness.

## METHOD

### Participants

Introductory psychology students ($N = 130$; 81 women) participated in partial fulfillment of a course option. Participants were informed that the study concerned dating relationships and that in order to participate, it was necessary that they currently be dating someone for at least 4 weeks. Participants ranged in age from 18 to 29 ($M = 19.47$ years old), and 88% were either freshmen or sophomores (62% freshmen, 26% sophomores, 8% juniors, and 4% seniors). Approximately half of them were Caucasian (53% Caucasian, 23% African American, 5% Latino, 13% Asian, and 6% Other). Participants in the first-party condition ($n = 65$) reported that their romantic relationships had lasted an average of 22 months (median = 17 months; range = 1 month to 8 years); 93.5% categorized their relationships as "regular dating," "dating steadily,"

or "engaged/married"; and 94% reported that the relationship was completely exclusive (i.e., neither the participant nor the partner dated other people). Participants in the third-party condition ($n = 64$) reported that their close friends had been in a relationship with their partners for an average of 18 months (median = 13 months; range = 1 month to 7 years); 95% categorized the close friends' relationships as "regular dating," "dating steadily," or "engaged/married"; and 72% reported that the close friend's relationship was completely exclusive. Chi-square analyses revealed no significant differences between first and third parties in relationship duration or in relationship status (e.g., regular dating versus engaged/married). However, participants in the third-party condition reported more nonexclusive relationships ($n = 18$) than participants in the first-party condition ($n = 4$), $\chi^2 = 11.25$, $p < .05$). Accordingly, relationship exclusivity was used as a control variable in subsequent analyses.

### Procedure

As in Experiment 1, we manipulated relationship type between participants such that half of the participants completed measures from a first-party perspective (about an offense committed against them by their romantic partner) and the other half of the participants completed measures from a third-party perspective (about an offense committed against their friend by their friend's romantic partner). Participants first completed questionnaires assessing trait-level variables related to forgiveness (i.e., trait forgivingness and empathy) and then completed an assessment of their commitment to their relationship with the perpetrator (their commitment to their own dating partner or to their close friend's dating partner). They then recalled and wrote several sentences about a recent (in the past 3 months) actual offense in their own romantic relationship (first-party condition) or in their close friend's romantic relationship (third-party condition). Participants reported their perception of the severity of the offense; in addition, coders (who were blind to hypotheses) rated the severity of reported offenses on a 5-point scale. For example, a disagreement about what color shirt to wear was rated a 1, calling an ex-girlfriend was rated a 3, and sexual infidelity was rated a 5. Additionally, we wanted to directly examine our prediction that first parties feel more negative affect about an offense than third parties but are still more likely to forgive. Therefore, after the severity assessment, participants completed a three-item negative affect measure. Participants also reported whether the perpetrator apologized to the victim or proffered amends to either the victim or to the third party. Last, participants completed the forgiveness measure and provided some demographic information.

### Individual Difference Measures

As in Experiment 1, participants completed two individual difference measures to include as control variables in our analyses: the Trait Forgivingness Scale ($\alpha = .68$; Berry et al., 2005) and a Trait Empathy Scale ($\alpha = .79$; Davis, 1983).

### Commitment to the Perpetrator

To measure commitment to the perpetrator of the offense, we used the Rusbult et al. (1998) measure of relationship commitment, which is composed of six items (e.g., "I am oriented toward the long-term future of my relationship [for example, I imagine being close to my partner several years from now]"). For the third-party condition, the Commitment Scale was modified appropriately (e.g., "I would feel very upset if my relationship with my friend's partner were to end in the near future"). Participants indicated their agreement with each item on a 9-point scale (0 = *do not agree at all*; 8 = *agree completely*). Items for the scale were averaged to create a composite index for commitment, $\alpha = .98$.

### Reactions to the Offense: Perceived Severity, Negative Affect, and Apology or Amends

After describing a specific offensive incident, participants responded to the following perceived severity measure: "How serious for the relationship's future do you consider the situation that you just wrote about?" (1 = *not very serious at all*; 5 = *extremely serious*). Participants also responded to a three-item negative affect measure of how hurt, sad, and depressed they felt regarding the offense on 11-point scales (1 = *describes me very little*; 11 = *describes me a lot*). Responses to the three items were averaged to create a composite index for negative affect, $\alpha = .85$. Participants then answered two questions about the perpetrator's behavior after the offense (i.e., "As far as you know, has your friend's partner apologized to your friend?" [apology to the victim measure; third-party condition], yes or no; "Has your partner tried to make up with you in any way?" [amends to the victim measure; first-party condition], 1 = *not at all*; 5 = *very much*). Participants in the third-party condition responded to an additional question: "Has your friend's partner tried to make up with *you* in any way?" (amends to the third party measure).

### Forgiveness

Participants completed the Transgression-Related Interpersonal Motivations Scale, which includes measures of revenge and avoidance (McCullough et al.,

1998). They indicated their agreement with items using a 5-point scale (1 = *strongly disagree*; 5 = *strongly agree*). Five items assessed motivation to seek revenge against the offender (e.g., "I want to see him/her hurt and miserable"), and seven items assessed motivation to avoid the offender (e.g., "I do not trust him/her"). Items were averaged to create a composite index for an overall score of unforgiving motivations, or (un)forgiveness, α = .94.

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

### Preliminary Analyses: Perceived Severity and Negative Affect

We examined differences between first and third parties in terms of severity of the offense and in terms of negative affect as a result of the offense. Two measures assessed severity of the offense: participant ratings of perceived severity and research coder ratings. An interesting finding was that third parties ($M = 3.00$, $SD = 1.34$) rated the offense as being significantly more severe relative to first parties ($M = 2.47$, $SD = 1.23$), $t(127) = 2.34$, $p < .05$.

Two independent coders rated the severity of offenses on a 5-point scale, with higher numbers indicating greater severity.[1] Coders initially agreed on 78% of offenses (Cohen's $K = .73$); 99% of ratings were within 1 point of the other's rating, and discrepancies were resolved via discussion. An interesting finding was that relationship type (first party vs. third party) did not have a significant effect on coder-rated severity of the offense, $t(122) = 0.41$, $p < .68$. It seems that first parties did not report less severe offenses than third parties; however, first parties perceived the offenses as less severe—an important distinction.[2] Nevertheless, we controlled for perceived severity in subsequent analyses to ensure that first parties' presumably lowered perceptions of severity do not illustrate some form of preforgiveness that accounts for the third-party effect.

We also examined whether relationship type predicted the degree to which participants reported negative affect (i.e., sadness, hurt, depression). We expected that first parties would feel more negative affect about the offense compared to third parties (even though first parties perceived the offense as being less severe). As expected, first parties reported feeling greater negative affect ($M = 2.42$, $SD = 2.07$) compared to third parties, $M = 1.49$, $SD = 1.74$; $t(127) = -2.75$, $p < .01$.

### Third-Party Forgiveness Effect

In an attempt to replicate the third-party forgiveness effect, we performed an independent samples $t$ test to compare mean differences in unforgiving motivations based on relationship type (first party vs. third party).

As predicted and consistent with Experiment 1, individuals reported fewer unforgiving motivations (i.e., greater forgiveness) for offenses committed against them by their own dating partners ($M = 1.31$, $SD = 0.53$) than for offenses committed against their close friends by the friends' dating partners ($M = 1.83$, $SD = 1.03$), $t(127) = -3.67$, $p < .001$. Even though first parties reported feeling greater negative affect than third parties about the offense, they also reported greater forgiveness.

### Commitment as a Mediator of the Third-Party Forgiveness Effect

To examine whether commitment to the perpetrator mediates the third-party forgiveness effect, we used the standard regression approach recommended by Kenny and colleagues (Baron & Kenny, 1986; Kenny et al., 1998). In the first step of the hierarchical regression, we controlled for trait forgivingness, trait empathy, perceived severity of the offense, and relationship exclusivity. Relationship type (first party vs. third party) significantly predicted unforgiving motivations, $β = -.20$, $t(122) = -3.67$, $p < .05$. As expected, first parties reported fewer unforgiving motivations relative to third parties, even with trait forgivingness, $β = -.27$, $t(122) = -3.42$, $p < .001$; trait empathy, $β = .05$, *ns*; perceived severity of the offense, $β = .29$, $t(122) = 3.64$, $p < .001$; and relationship exclusivity, $β = -.14$, $t(122) = -1.72$, $p < .09$, in the model. In the second step, relationship type (first party vs. third party) significantly predicted commitment to the perpetrator, $β = .66$, $t(117) = 10.04$, $p < .001$. As expected, first parties reported greater commitment to the perpetrator relative to third parties, even with trait forgivingness, $β = -.04$, *ns*; trait empathy, $β = .09$, *ns*; perceived severity of the offense, $β = -.14$, $t(117) = -2.14$, $p < .05$; and relationship exclusivity, $β = .22$, $t(117) = 3.23$, $p < .01$, in the model. In the third step, when relationship type (third vs. first party) and commitment were included together in the model, commitment (the mediator) accounted for unique variance in unforgiving motivations above and beyond relationship type, $β = -.40$, $t(116) = -3.65$, $p < .001$. As commitment increased, individuals reported fewer unforgiving motivations. When the variance accounted for by commitment was partialled, the association between relationship type and unforgiving motivations was significantly reduced, $β = .02$, *ns*; Sobel $z = -3.34$, $p < .01$ (Sobel, 1982; see Figure 2). In short, commitment to the perpetrator mediated the third-party forgiveness effect.

### The Role of Apology and Amends in the Third-Party Forgiveness Effect

In addition to attributions about the offense and commitment to the perpetrator, apology to the victim and perpetrator amends (to victim or third party) may play a role in the third-party forgiveness effect.
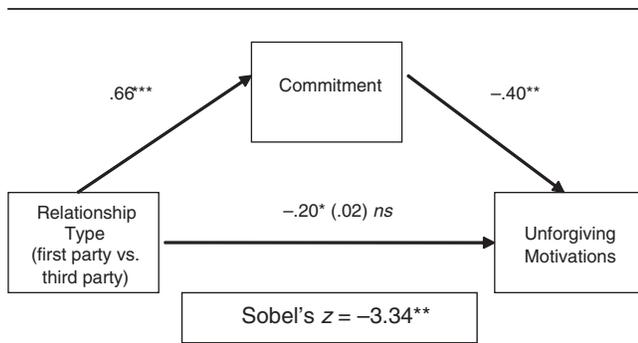
**Figure 2**    Experiment 2: Commitment as a mediator of the third-party forgiveness effect.

NOTE: The values in the figure represent standardized regression coefficients. The coefficient in parentheses represents the association of relationship type with unforgiving motivations when the variance from commitment is partialled.

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

*Apology to victim.* We first examined the effect on forgiveness of the perpetrator apologizing to the victim. A preliminary chi-square analysis revealed a nonsignificant relationship between relationship type (first vs. third) and the one-item measure assessing whether an apology for the offense was offered by the perpetrator to the victim with a binary (yes/no) outcome. Specifically, in the third-party condition, 72% of participants reported that their friend's partner had offered an apology to the friend; in the first-party condition, 73% of participants reported that their own partner had offered an apology to them. It appears that third parties are aware of apologies being offered to victims; therefore, lack of awareness of apology is not an explanation for the third-party forgiveness effect.

We performed a 2 Relationship Type (first party vs. third party) × 2 Apology to Victim (yes vs. no) analysis of variance (ANOVA) to examine the effects on unforgiving motivations. As expected and consistent with the *t* test reported earlier, the main effect for relationship type was significant, $F(1, 122) = 19.10, p < .001$. Likewise, the main effect for apology to the victim was significant, $F(1, 122) = 13.10, p < .001$; specifically, individuals reported lower unforgiving motivations when there was an apology to the victim ($M = 1.39, SD = 0.65$) than when there was not an apology ($M = 1.91, SD = 1.06$). An interesting finding was that the interaction of relationship type with apology to victim was marginally significant, $F(1, 122) = 3.12, p < .08$. Follow-up tests revealed that the simple effect for apology was significant for third parties; third parties reported lower unforgiving motivations when there was an apology to the victim ($M = 1.58, SD = 0.84$) than when there was not an apology to the victim ($M = 2.37, SD = 1.19$), $t(60) = -2.93, p < .005$. Similarly, the simple effect for apology was significant for first parties; first parties reported lower unforgiving motivations when they received an apology ($M = 1.20, SD = 0.28$) compared to when they did not receive an apology ($M = 1.47, SD = 0.70$), $t(62) = -2.23, p < .03$. However, because the apology variable was not randomly assigned, the cell size for the apology condition ($n = 47$) was quite different from the cell size for the no-apology condition ($n = 17$), and the equal variances across conditions assumption was not met for the first-party condition. For first parties, the simple effect for apology was not significant for the *t* value where equal variances are not assumed. Overall, it appears that apologies to the victim had a greater impact on third-party forgiveness relative to first-party forgiveness.

*Amends to victim.* In parallel fashion, we examined the effect on forgiveness of the perpetrator making amends to the victim. In addition to reporting yes or no regarding whether an apology was offered, participants responded to the question: "Has your partner tried to make up with you in any way?" [first-party condition], $1 = not at all; 5 = very much$. We performed a simultaneous multiple regression analysis predicting forgiveness from relationship type (third party vs. first party), perpetrator amends, and their interaction term. As in previous analyses, we controlled for trait forgivingness, empathy, perceived severity, and relationship exclusivity. As before, the effect for relationship type was significant; $\beta = -.26, t(108) = -3.25, p < .01$. Similar to the apology finding reported above, unforgiving motivations were reduced if the perpetrator made amends to the victim, $\beta = -.50, t(108) = -3.91, p < .001$. Also similar to the apology finding above, there was a significant interaction of relationship type with amends, $\beta = .38, t(108) = 3.01, p < .01$. Tests of simple slopes (Aiken & West, 1991) revealed a nonsignificant association of amends with forgiveness for first parties, $\beta = -.12, t(64) = -.98, p < .33$, but a significant association of amends with forgiveness for third parties, $\beta = -.38, t(60) = -3.20, p < .01$. In summary, close friends of victims (third parties) are more likely to forgive perpetrators who apologize or make amends to the victim.

*Amends to the third party.* Are third parties more forgiving to the degree that the perpetrator attempts to make amends with them directly? Participants in the third-party condition responded to an additional question: "Has your friend's partner tried to make up with *you* in any way?" The majority of third parties (60%) reported that the perpetrator did not make amends with them directly. However, a regression analysis revealed that whether the perpetrator made amends directly with the third party did not significantly predict the third party's unforgiving motivations, $\beta = -.20, t(60) = -1.54, p < .13$. In summary, perpetrator apology or amends to the victim increases third-party forgiveness, but perpetrator amends to the third parties themselves do not increase third-party forgiveness.

## GENERAL DISCUSSION

These experiments support our proposition that forgiveness can be contextualized beyond the dyadic level. To be specific, we obtained evidence for the third-party forgiveness effect: close friends of victims (third parties) are less forgiving of the perpetrator than the victims themselves (first parties).This third-party forgiveness effect appears to be fairly robust, generalizing across both a hypothetical scenario and a self-reported offense. Moreover, our results suggest that third parties to an offense are both less forgiving and more vengeful and avoidant: Experiment 1 used a single-item face-valid measure of forgiveness, and Experiment 2 used a psychometrically well-supported assessment of unforgiving motivations (the Transgression-Related Interpersonal Motivations Scale). The methods used in the two experiments complement each other and collectively avoid some methodological pitfalls plaguing some forgiveness research (e.g., relying exclusively on either hypothetical situations or actual offenses). Taken together, these two experiments suggest that relationship to the perpetrator influences forgiveness tendencies.

In addition, we obtained evidence for two crucial mediators of the third-party forgiveness effect. Experiment 1 revealed that attributions mediate the effect of relationship type (first party vs. third party) on forgiveness, pointing to the importance of cognitive interpretations. Experiment 2 revealed that relationship commitment to the perpetrator is another mediator, illustrating the interdependent nature of the forgiveness process. The two mediators of the third-party forgiveness effect are consistent with past forgiveness research that has focused only on first-party forgiveness: Fincham et al. (2002) found that kinder attributions are associated with greater forgiveness, and Finkel et al. (2002) found that greater relationship commitment is associated with greater forgiveness. We reason that greater commitment to a relationship fosters a variety of pro-relationship cognition, including more benign attributions and altered perceptions of the severity of an offense (examined in the present work) and greater empathy (as examined in others' work; Fincham et al., 2002; Konstam, Chernoff, & Deveney, 2001). Pro-relationship cognition, in turn, should lead to increased forgiveness. We also note that first parties (who reported greater commitment to the perpetrator) reported greater negative affect (i.e., hurt, sadness, and depression) despite reporting less perceived offense severity; the willingness of those in close relationships to forgive in the face of strong hurt feelings is noteworthy (see Leary, Springer, Negel, Ansell, & Evans, 1998). In order to develop a more comprehensive model of the third-party forgiveness effect, future research should simultaneously examine the impact on forgiveness of attributions and commitment to the perpetrator.

Furthermore, our research addresses a new question: Are close friends of a victim more likely to forgive the perpetrator when the perpetrator apologizes to the victim or makes amends either to the victim or to them? Experiment 2 revealed that to gain forgiveness from the close friend of the victim, it is most critical for the perpetrator to apologize or proffer amends directly to the victim (as opposed to making amends with the friend directly). That is, the impact on forgiveness of apologies and amends to the victim is greater for third parties than for first parties. Perpetrators may engage in an array of behaviors that may or may not lead to victim (first-party) forgiveness, and first-party forgiveness also depends on relationship-relevant motivation and cognition. In contrast, third parties are less likely to be aware of the broad array of perpetrator behaviors or to experience the same degree of relationship-relevant motivation and cognition, but third parties are likely to be aware of the relatively simple distinction of whether an apology has been offered. This finding is intriguing and suggests that a third party does not expect the perpetrator to do repair work on the relationship with the third party but to instead focus exclusively on the relationship with the victim.

### Limitations, Strengths, and Future Research

We highlight several limitations of the present research. First, the current research did not use behavioral or non–self-report measures of forgiveness. Although one readily could make the case that self-reports serve as an optimal measure of forgiveness processes, our conclusions would be bolstered by replications using behavioral or physiological measures of forgiveness (e.g., Witvliet, Ludwig, & Vander Laan, 2001) or offender and informant reports of forgiveness (McCullough et al., 1998). Second, like much research in personality and social psychology, our sample was limited to university students in the United States. It seems plausible that there could be cultural differences in forgiveness based on relationship to the perpetrator (first party vs. third party). For example, it may be that third-party unforgiving motivations are especially strong in collectivistic cultures where intragroup identity is stronger or where the heroic motive is valued. Additionally, our sample was limited to primarily dating relationships with an average length of 18 months. Perhaps the third-party forgiveness effect would be attenuated in longer-term relationships if third parties (e.g., parents, close friends) are closer (and more committed themselves) to the perpetrator.

Examining the role of transformation of motivation and the time course of forgiveness for first parties

versus third parties would add to the current findings. Individuals given limited time to respond to hypothetical incidents of betrayal by their romantic partners chose more destructive behaviors relative to individuals given ample time to respond (Rusbult, Davis, Finkel, Hannon, & Olson, 2006). It may be that first and third parties have similar initial unforgiving responses but that first parties may subsequently engage in transformation of motivation (whereas third parties may not deviate much from their initial assessment). Through the process of transformation of motivation, first parties cognitively reinterpret the offense and consider broad relationship-specific motives, such as commitment to the relationship, that lead to forgiveness (e.g., Finkel et al., 2002).

We suggest that a key strength of the current work is the potential for related future research as well as the potential for applications, from family therapy to intergroup conflicts. We hope that evidence for the importance of attributions and commitment helps to jump-start research exploring how third-party forgiveness can be facilitated. For example, would priming commitment (Finkel et al., 2002) on the part of third parties in the lab or training family members to make more benevolent attributions in a therapeutic context help to reduce or eliminate the third-party forgiveness effect? In a related vein, what is the role that close others play in a victim's decision to forgive or not forgive and their experience of emotional forgiveness (Exline, Worthington, & Hill, 2003)? Future research could examine the impact over time of an unforgiving third party on the first party's relationship with the perpetrator (as well as the relationship between the first and third parties themselves). For example, if a close friend of the victim of an offense feels that the perpetrator does not deserve forgiveness from the victim, will the friend's belief impede reconciliation between the perpetrator and the victim? If the victim nevertheless forgives the perpetrator, will the relationship between the victim and the friend become strained? Balance theory (Heider, 1958) suggests that an individual's disagreement with a friend about a romantic partner will lead to tension and pressure to resolve the imbalance.

## CONCLUSION

Experiencing partner offenses is almost inevitable in romantic relationships, and reactions to offenses (especially initial reactions, prior to transformation of motivation) frequently tend toward retaliation rather than forgiveness. Our results suggest that this response may be especially difficult for third parties to overcome. Two experiments provided convergent evidence of the third-party

forgiveness effect: First parties generally are more likely to forgive offenses than are third parties. Attributions and commitment mediate the third-party forgiveness effect, illuminating the transformation process by which first parties (vs. third parties) may reach forgiveness. Apology or amends to the victim facilitate third-party forgiveness. Rarely is forgiveness a purely dyadic process. Friends and family members decide to forgive or not to forgive, and their responses may have important consequences for personal, relational, and familial well-being. Continuing to study both first-party and third-party forgiveness through cognitive evaluations (such as attributions) as well as the interdependent nature of relationships (such as commitment) can have important implications for forgiveness-promoting interventions, thereby helping individuals reach forgiveness.

## NOTES

1. Written descriptions of offenses by a few participants were too vague to be coded accurately.

2. We conducted an exploratory analysis to examine whether participants' perceived severity of the offense mediated the third-party forgiveness effect. Perceived severity was related to unforgiving motivations, $\beta = .344$, $p < .05$; $t(128) = 4.25$, $p < .01$; greater perceived severity predicted greater unforgiving motivations. Additionally, the link between relationship type and unforgiving motivations was reduced with perceived severity in the model, $\beta = -.239$, $p < .05$; Sobel $z = -2.04$, $p < .05$. Perceived severity of the offense partially mediated the third-party forgiveness effect.

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