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Negotiating Forgiveness in Nonvoluntary Family Relationships

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"Forgiveness Isn't a Simple Process: It's a Vast Undertaking": Negotiating and Communicating Forgiveness in Nonvoluntary Family Relationships

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Abstract

This study examined the ways in which individuals communicatively negotiate the process of forgiveness in nonvoluntary (family) relationships. Drawing from relational dialectics theory (RDT) as well as other dialogic perspectives on forgiveness (e.g., Waldron & Kelley, 2008), we examined the complexity of communicating forgiveness in nonvoluntary relationships. Participants' experiences supported the idea that forgiveness is an ongoing process of communicative negotiations between and among family members. Consistent with previous research, participants also noted that they generally did not explicitly verbalize forgiveness of a family member. Ultimately, the degree to which participants judged their forgiveness as successful often depended on whether the hurtful situation or forgiveness itself was centered in the family relationship. Furthering our understanding of communicating forgiveness in nonvoluntary relationships expands our perspective on the complex nature of families.

The relationships we maintain with family and friends affect the quality of our lives and perhaps as a result, are often wrought with conflicting emotions (Baxter, 2004; Baxter & Braithwaite, 2010). Although close relationships can be rewarding and beneficial, they also have the potential to include relational transgressions (Afifi & Metts, 1998; Kelley & Waldron, 2005; Metts, 1994) and hurtful messages (Vangelisti & Crumley, 1998). These types of hurtful events occur in a variety of relational contexts, including both voluntary and nonvoluntary relationships. Voluntary relationships are those in which individuals freely engage with each other without contractual or biological obligations (Cupach & Metts, 1986; Nussbaum, 1994), and include friendships and dating relationships. In contrast, nonvoluntary relationships exist without a conscious choice to enter them and/ or when individuals believe they have no viable option but to maintain them (Hess, 2000), and include family and to a lesser extent, marital relationships. Both voluntary and nonvoluntary relationships can be satisfying and challenging; the primary difference between the two pertains to individuals' perception of the personal and social obligations for their maintenance (Hess, 2000). Thus, although individuals in both voluntary and nonvoluntary relationships experience events that require forgiveness, differing expectations and obligations regarding the future of the relationship potentially alter how forgiveness is enacted.

A significant body of research has focused on the communicative processes associated with forgiveness in romantic relationships (e.g., Bachman & Guerrero, 2003; Fincham & Beach, 2002; Kelley, 1998; Kelley &Waldron, 2005; Metts & Cupach, 2007; Waldron & Kelley 2005a, 2005b, 2008). In voluntary relationships, individuals have a multitude of options for responding to a hurtful situation. Depending on the severity of the event, they may decide whether or not to forgive their relational partner, whether or not they would like to continue the relationship (Hess, 2000; Kelley, 1998), and may consider other options such as de-escalation, relational repair, or even revenge (Bachman & Guerrero, 2003). However, individuals in *nonvoluntary* relationships may face distinct challenges when forgiving family members due to the relatively permanent nature of families (Galvin & Cooper, 1990; Vangelisti & Crumley, 1998).

To date, the vast majority of research focused on the communicative processes associated with forgiveness has been within the context of romantic relationships (e.g. Bachman & Guerrero, 2003; Kelley & Waldron, 2005). Scholars have devoted significantly less time to understanding how, if at all, forgiveness is negotiated through family communication. Yet, individual responses to hurtful messages do vary as a function of relationship type; indeed, hurtful messages from family members are often perceived as even more hurtful than if they were received in a different relationship context (Vangelisti & Crumley, 1998).

The interplay between the nonvoluntary nature of family relationships and the extent to which they can be potentially hurtful creates an interesting context for the study of forgiveness. In other words, familial relationships may be the most hurtful, but they are also the most enduring. Thus, the central goal in the present study was to gain insight into the communicative processes that are used to enact forgiveness in family relationships.

Forgiveness

Forgiveness is conceptualized as an interpersonal process of constructive communicative acts that, over time, allow individuals to respond positively to hurtful situations (Kelley & Waldron, 2005; Metts & Cupach, 2007; Worthington, Van Oyen Witvliet, Pietrini, & Miller, 2007). Specifically, forgiveness is an active choice to release resentment and bitterness (Hope, 1987), avoid vengeful behavior, and progress toward conciliatory behavior (McCullough, Worthington, & Rachal, 1997), which often leads to reconciliation (Fincham & Beach, 2002; Waldron & Kelley, 2005b). Forgiveness is rarely a singular event; rather, it requires an active and ongoing decision to incorporate these sentiments into the relationship (Waldron & Kelley, 2008).

Opportunities for forgiveness arise from a variety of circumstances broadly referred to as hurtful events. Bachman and Guerrero (2003) described hurtful events as any actions or words that violate relational rules and cause emotional pain to the relational partner. Hurtful events are often further divided into the two specific subcategories of *relational transgressions* (Afifi & Metts, 1998; Metts, 1994) and *hurtful messages* (Vangelisti & Crumley, 1998).

Relational transgressions are acts that negatively violate the expectations or rules of a specific relationship (Afifi & Metts, 1998). Within a family context, transgressions might include irresponsible or immature parental behavior or an action constituting a breach of trust between siblings. In contrast to these action-based transgressions, hurtful messages include any specific verbalizations that cause emotional pain and are likely more common in family interactions due to their lengthy relational history (Vangelisti

& Crumley, 1998). Hurtful messages within families might include statements that de-value another family member's perspective or personal worth. Given the duration of the relationship and the degree of closeness that may be present in nonvoluntary relationships, it seems likely that both types of hurtful situations have the potential to occur in families.

Forgiveness in family relationships. Family members may interpret hurtful messages differently than those in voluntary relationships because most family members retain their membership in the family indefinitely (Vangelisti & Crumley, 1998). Thus, it is possible that family members allow a greater degree of freedom to engage in hurtful behaviors, due to the unlikelihood of the relationship dissolving. Intriguingly, Vangelisti and Crumley (1998) found that hurtful messages in family relationships were significantly more painful than messages in any other type of relationship, even after controlling for closeness, similarity, amount of contact between family members, and relational satisfaction.

It may be that forgiving a family member is more challenging than forgiving other close relational partners, given the tension between the obligation to continue the relationship and pain caused by hurtful messages within the relational context. Individuals might minimize the importance of forgiving family members because the relationship itself is often considered relatively permanent. At the same time, forgiving a family member might be viewed as obligatory because of the enduring nature of the relationship, regardless of the pain caused by the hurtful situation.

Clearly, the decision of whether or not to forgive becomes exponentially more complicated within the context of family relationships. Because of the nonvoluntary nature of families, it is likely that individuals faced with the decision to forgive a family member must strike a balance between their sense of obligation to continue the relationship (Lucas, 2007) with the emotional pain caused by the hurtful situation (Vangelisti & Crumley, 1998). Additionally, because family relationships are generally more enduring than voluntary relationships, family members likely have a greater number of opportunities to forgive, as the potential occurrence of hurtful events exists over the lifespan of the relationship. Coupled with relational factors that influence the forgiveness process such as closeness, commitment, and satisfaction (Kelley, 1998), it stands to reason that communicating forgiveness is an important but challenging aspect of maintaining family relationships.

Communicating forgiveness. Researchers suggest that communication plays a central role in negotiating forgiveness (Waldron & Kelley, 2005a, 2008; Waldron, Kelley, & Harvey, 2007), regardless of relational context. Indeed, researchers have outlined six communication processes essential to understanding forgiveness, including revealing and discovering relational transgressions, managing emotions about the hurtful event, sense-making, seeking forgiveness, granting forgiveness, and managing the relational transition after forgiveness is granted (Waldron & Kelley, 2008; Waldron et al., 2007). These communicative negotiations take place within the context of a relationship, but are also influenced by relational history and the anticipated relational future, suggesting that a variety of elements define what is (and is not) considered hurtful in any given relationship. Moreover, Waldron and Kelley (2008) indicate that although relational partners often talk *about* a hurtful situation, a communicative act can also be hurtful in itself. Other communicative acts, such as apologies, can be used to begin the process of forgiveness and introduce opportunities for reconciliation.

Despite the significant role of communication in the forgiveness process, relational partners generally do not explicitly grant their forgiveness (e.g., Waldron & Kelley, 2005b, 2008). More frequently, the impact of a hurtful event is minimized, discussed, or acknowledged nonverbally. A multitude of direct, indirect, and conditional strategies are used to grant and negotiate forgiveness (Kelley, 1998). *Direct* strategies include mutual discussion of hurtful situations, including the explicit expression of "I forgive you." *Indirect* behavior is often used to nonverbally minimize transgressions through facial expressions, head nods, and eye gaze. A *conditional* approach to forgiveness indicates that forgiveness is granted with qualifications.

More recently, Waldron & Kelley (2005a) suggested that there are distinct approaches within each of these broader categories, and proposed a revision of these categories to include nonverbal displays, conditional responses, minimizing, discussion, and potentially, explicit forgiveness. Thus, communication remains central to understanding the overall forgiveness process (Kelley, 1998; Waldron & Kelley, 2008).

Inherent to the communicative process is a tension between the obligation to forgive and the often significant feelings of pain caused by hurtful situations in the family context. In light of this tension, relational dialectics theory (RDT) provided a theoretical lens from which to examine the complex nature of communicating forgiveness in nonvoluntary relationships.

Theoretical Perspective: Relational Dialectics in the Forgiveness Process

We situated the present study within the interpretive paradigm using relational dialectics theory (RDT) (Baxter & Braithwaite, 2010; Baxter &Montgomery, 1996) to expose potentially relevant concepts existing in the unique experience of the participants (Lindlof & Taylor, 2002). RDT allows researchers to examine a unique perspective on the communicative process of forgiveness in family relationships, as it focuses on gaining a situated or contextual understanding of meaning through discourse (Baxter & Braithwaite, 2010). Because negotiating forgiveness is an ongoing process of dyadic meaning-making, dialectical theory is particularly useful because it creates space for multiple, often contradictory, and competing emotions (Waldron & Kelley, 2008).

Previous researchers have employed RDT to identify a variety of discourses within a variety of family relationships; for example, in stepfamily relationships, children indicated a dialectic of *freedom-constraint* in that they wished to be centered in the family environment, while avoiding feeling caught between their parents (Braithwaite, Toller, Daas, Durham, & Jones, 2008). Similarly, Baxter et al. (2004) identified a dialectic of *individual-collective* in the discourse of stepchildren discussing the remarriage of their parents, suggesting that family members often feel torn between personal desires and a sense of allegiance to the family. From a broader relational perspective, Waldron and Kelley (2008) point to dialectical theory as particularly salient when examining the "complex and often conflictual discourses" inherent to the process of forgiveness (p. 57), and offer several suggestions for tensions that may be salient in forgiveness, including *mercy-justice, remembering-forgetting, heart-mind*, and *trust-risk.*

Relational dialectics emerged out of the work of Russian philosopher Mikhail Bakhtin. Through his work, Bakhtin's "lifelong intellectual project was a critique of theories and practices that reduced the unfinalizable, open, and varied nature of social life in determinate, closed, and totalizing ways" (Baxter, 2004, p. 108). The most recent iteration of RDT (Baxter, 2010) focuses on meaning-making as a discourse-based process comprised

of multiple, often contradictory, worldviews expressed and reinforced through language (Baxter & Braithwaite, 2010).

Within the context of close relationships in general, and family relationships in particular, these competing discourses rarely occupy equal status. These discourses are constantly in a power struggle to be the only accepted discourse and at any given moment, one discourse is dominant over more marginalized discourses. When discourses are given more weight, they take the *centripetal* position. These centripetal discourses are centered in the meaning-making process, legitimized and conceptualized as normal, typical, and natural, and reflected and reinforced through context-specific dialogue (Baxter, 2010; Baxter, Foley, & Thatcher, 2008).

When discourses are given less power, they take the *centrifugal* position.

These centrifugal discourses get pushed to the margins, are considered as non-normative, unnatural, or deviant, and often interact and grapple with centripetal forces (Baxter, 2010; Baxter et al., 2008). Through the interplay of centripetal and centrifugal discourses, meaning is made. Centripetal discourses are more powerful than centrifugal discourses because they are legitimated as social reality (Baxter, 2010). The most recent iteration of RDT is concerned with the process of how people give some discourses power over others in interaction. For example, a common discourse in family relationships is that of autonomy-connection (Baxter & Montgomery, 2006). Through their interaction, family members may privilege their desire for autonomy, allowing this to be centered and become centripetal. However, because the tension in this discourse is felt simultaneously, their need for connection is necessarily pushed to the periphery, becoming centrifugal. These discourses are rarely static and often jockey for position through discourse.

Examining the communicative negotiation of forgiveness in families through the lens of RDT highlights the potential for discursive struggle as a result of their nonvoluntary nature. Given that families are characterized by a sense of commitment to continue the relationship, it seems likely that this obligation affects the process of forgiveness. Researchers often conceptualize forgiveness as a choice made after a hurtful situation (Kelley, 1998; Kelley & Waldron, 2005); however, this perspective assumes that there is freedom between forgiving and not forgiving. From a dialogic perspective, whether or not to forgive a family member after a hurtful situation may not be this straightforward. Specifically, whereas negotiating forgiveness in voluntary relationships centers on the relational dyad, the discourse of forgiveness in family relationships may be located within the family network (e.g., Kelley, 1998). By examining the language used when negotiating forgiveness, RDT provides a framework useful in illuminating the discursive struggle that exists in family relationships. Although previous research has indicated that hurtful messages are received differently in family situations (Vangelisti & Crumley, 1998), the way they are communicatively negotiated remains unclear. Thus, the following research question guided our work in this study:

RQ: What are the dialectical tensions associated with communicating and negotiating forgiveness in nonvoluntary (family) relationships after a hurtful situation?

Methods and Procedures

Grounded in RDT, the overarching goal of this interpretive study was to explore and discover how individuals co-construct meaning from competing discourses to communicate and negotiate forgiveness with a family member following a hurtful situation. Given

that interpretive researchers seek to understand the perspective of the actors themselves to identify commonalities in meaning (Creswell, 1998; Leininger, 1994), the experiences highlighted by participants in our study helped us understand forgiveness from the "native's point of view" and render these actions intelligible (Baxter & Babbie, 2004).

Participants

Because interpretive researchers purposively choose participants who have experienced the phenomenon of interest (Baxter & Babbie, 2004; Creswell, 1998), we selected participants who (a) were at least 19 years of age and (b) had experienced a hurtful situation following which they had chosen to forgive a family member. After seeking and receiving permission from the university's Institutional Review Board, each author conducted 15 interviews individually, resulting in a total of 30 interviews.

The 30 participants averaged 20 years of age, with a range of 19–25 years of age. In our sample, 26 identified as female and four identified as male. Of the 30 participants, 27 chose to talk about an immediate family member (parent or sibling) and three chose to talk about an extended family member (cousin or grandparent). All but four of the participants self-identified as White, with the remaining four participants identifying as Black, Hispanic, half-Filipino/half- Norwegian, and Asian.

Data Collection

The present study used in-depth, semi-structured interviews to gain a detailed picture of each participant's experiences regarding forgiveness in nonvoluntary relationships (Lindlof & Taylor, 2002; McCracken, 1998; Rubin & Rubin, 2005; Smith, 1995). Using McCracken (1998), Rubin and Rubin (2005), and Smith's (1995) guidelines for producing an interview protocol, we (a) created a structured and organized protocol, (b) used open-ended questions operating from the interpretive paradigm, and (c) prompted our participants to describe and explain the forgiveness process through their own stories and examples using Waldron and Kelley's (2008) interview protocol as a model.

Specifically, we asked participants to discuss the history or story of one situation that prompted them to forgive, the effect that forgiveness had on their relationship, and why they chose to forgive. We also asked them about their communicative practices and choices regarding forgiveness throughout the process of forgiving a family member, including what they said or did that worked well, how their family member communicated with them during this process, what (if anything) they would choose to change about the forgiveness process, and how they might respond to a similar hurtful situation if it occurred in a voluntary relationship such as with a friend or dating partner. This process resulted in 30 interviews, each lasting between 45 minutes and one hour.

Data Analysis

Data for the present study were 514 pages of double-spaced interview transcripts. Using RDT as a sensitizing framework for the data analysis and Smith's (1995) guidelines for a qualitative thematic analysis, we engaged in a systematic process to discover the meaning within the data. First, we read through each transcript in its entirety to gain a holistic perspective and establish familiarity with the data set (Tesch, 1990).

We then read through the transcripts a second time and noted emerging themes within the transcripts in light of our research question (Smith, 1995), evaluating each to ensure it met Owen's (1984) criteria of: (a) recurrence, (b) repetition, and (c) forcefulness. Drawing from traditional dialectical theory as well as Waldron and Kelley's (2008) dialectical tensions often present in forgiveness, we identified and analyzed themes based on competing discourses emerging in these data (Lindlof & Taylor, 2002). For example, we noted that some participants emphasized forgiveness as an individual decision, whereas others saw forgiveness as necessitated by their obligation to their family values, leading us to identify "choice-obligation" as a discourse. We then clustered similar themes, pairing each with direct quotations from our participants and exemplar illustrative statements (Baxter & Babbie, 2004; Creswell, 1998; Strauss & Corbin, 1998). Finally, we looked for connections among them using RDT as a conceptual framework, resulting in three larger discourses, each with several subthemes as discussed in the results section later.

Using Strauss and Corbin's (1998) theoretical saturation as our measure of completeness, we analyzed each participant's experience as part of the data collection process, concluding the interviews when (a) no new or relevant data emerges in a category; (b) the properties of each category are well developed and variations within categories are recognized and developed; and, (c) relationships among categories are established and validated.

Verification

We assessed the validity of our results using an interactive data conference (Baxter & Babbie, 2004; Creswell, 1998). At the data conference, we discussed our results with several experts in qualitative research methods and RDT theory and invited them to offer critical feedback related to our interpretation of the data. As discussed in the sections that follow, one important distinction that emerged from this data conference was that in our participants' experiences, centering any of these tensions into the centripetal position had the potential to enact forgiveness in family relationships. In other words, the path to forgiveness was very much a unique experience, often affected by family members' relational history, beliefs, and networks. History, beliefs, and networks determined how family members gave some tensions power over others in interaction and ultimately how family members enacted the process of outweighing or silencing some tensions.

Results

Using relational dialectical theory as a lens, our analysis resulted in the identification of three overarching discourses experienced by the participants interviewed in this study. Of these discourses, one is unique to the present study (i.e., choice-obligation), one has emerged in previous studies on forgiveness (i.e., trust-risk; Waldron & Kelley, 2008), and the final discourse is commonly identified in existing research using RDT (i.e., openness-closedness.)Within each of these larger discourses, participants discussed how they communicated in a way that either supported or hindered the forgiveness process, resulting in several subthemes identified as tensions and discussed below. At least one and usually multiple discourses were identified in all 30 interviews and are discussed in order of frequency within participants' experience.

The Discourse of Choice-Obligation

The first overarching discourse we identified was the discourse of choice-obligation. To manage this discursive struggle, some participants discussed how they centered their desire for choice during the forgiveness process while minimizing or downplaying an overall sense of obligation, whereas others centered a sense of obligation as a means of valuing their family connection. Interestingly, even participants who marginalized obligation still discussed it as part of their forgiveness process. Within this overarching discourse of choice-obligation, participants discussed the struggle between their heart and mind as they negotiated the forgiveness process with their partner.

The tension between heart and mind. Consistent with Waldron and Kelley (2008), participants often spoke of this dialectic as the pull between heart and mind, emotions versus intellect. Often, relational transgressions elicited an initial emotional response, which was then moderated by more rational and pragmatic influences as the forgiveness process continued. These competing tensions were evidenced in both the way participants framed their discussion about the hurtful situation, but also in their discussion of the transgression with their family member. For example, one 19-year-old female participant talked about the challenges she faced when forgiving her father who was suffering from Alzheimer's disease. She described feeling hurt and disappointed in him as a father, while simultaneously struggling with the knowledge that his actions were likely caused by his disease:

> [Our] bills didn't get paid. We almost lost the house, and he always interrogates my mom saying that she's cheating, and everyone tells my mom to leave but she believes in death do us part, so. … But everything that my dad has put us through, I know that he doesn't really know what's going on so I have to try to forgive him. … I don't really know why he says or does what he does … I know that I keep telling him that I love him. I have forgiven him for the small things he's done, but the big things, I'm still in the process (17).

Similarly, another female participant who also forgave her father spoke of the process through which she came to terms with his alcoholism. By separating his addiction from him as an individual, she was able to create space for her own emotional pain caused by his words while attributing those behaviors to his drinking and begin the process of forgiveness.

> … As I got older [I realized] that he didn't really mean the things he said to me because he was underneath the condition. … He wasn't fully there when he was saying the things that he was saying and doing the things that he was doing … I didn't understand that when I was younger; I didn't know what alcohol really was until I got to junior high and what it could really do to you (2).

As an expression of the larger dialectic tension associated with choice and obligation, these participants' experiences speak to the power of family ties. Specifically, the tension between this participant's emotions about her father's hurtful actions and the knowledge that they were related to his disease seemed to be complicated by a overarching sense of obligation to him as her father. Thus, for this participant and many other adult children who discussed forgiving their parents, the dialectic of heart and mind in the forgiveness process was situated within the context of obligation and choice, inextricably linking the two.

For other participants, the process of managing the tension between heart and mind was both intentional and purposeful. Despite their feelings of hurt, many of our participants spoke of the forgiveness process as involving a holistic perspective on their relationship. In other words, they looked at all of the positive and negative characteristics of their relationship with their family member and ultimately decided that the good outweighed the bad. Thus, their choice in the forgiveness process was to privilege logic over emotions, and in some ways, mind over heart. An illustrative example from another 19-year-old female participant who forgave her father reported this choice to us this way:

> He's a very hard-working man. … He's obviously paying for college for me and I saw that. … He's giving me a lot despite all of these arguments that we've had so I was just gonna try to do whatever I could to put away our arguments. … It seems like once we [did that] … we kinda got past it (6).

Importantly, participants who discussed making the decision to forgive based on their previously positive relationship often mentioned that this choice was one they returned to again and again. Several participants spoke of forgiveness as occurring over a significant period of time, often several months to a year, even after their own initial intention to forgive.

Whereas some participants viewed forgiveness as an intentional choice to leave the hurt in the past and move forward, others saw forgiveness as a responsible and important way to fulfill an obligation they valued. Several of our participants reported that they received encouragement from their family network to forgive their family member, either implicitly or explicitly. An illustrative example from a 20-year-old female participant, who forgave her grandfather, reported this obligation to us this way:

> My family's really close, and we've always had a saying in our house that you don't go to sleep angry. You have to work it out. … I think it's important to forgive, especially your family. I think that family is constant in your life. They'll be there, hopefully, throughout your life, but I feel like because they are so constant in your life, it's important to have the best relationships with them that you can (28).

Interestingly, this participant's "choice" was to honor her family commitment. She spoke of her obligation to her family as rooted in love and saw the forgiveness process as a testament to that commitment. Thus, the process of forgiving her grandfather was more about respecting her larger family network than maintaining that specific relational bond.

When viewed through the lens of choice-obligation, our participants' experiences of forgiveness were clearly unique to the context of family. When asked about the way they would respond to a similar hurtful situation if it occurred with a close friend or romantic partner, nearly all of them stated that they would find it more difficult to forgive. In particularly hurtful situations, many participants stated that they would likely dissolve the friendship or romantic relationship under similar circumstances. One 19-year old participant who forgave her parents after several years of emotional abuse explained:

> So, if my boyfriend or my best friend had been treating me like my parents do? I definitely wouldn't have been friends with them. From the get-go, I probably would've been like, fine, BYE. If I had a friend or a boyfriend that treated me like that, it wouldn't work (16).

Similarly, another participant who forgave her sister struggling with drug addiction stated:

> Well, I would've pushed them away totally … with [my sister], I would still call her from time to time just to see if she's okay, but with a friend, I would have just distanced my-self cause you don't have to have that common ground (25).

The Discourse of Trust-Risk

The second overarching discourse we identified from our participants' experience was that of trust-risk (see Waldron & Kelley, 2008). Many participants discussed the challenge of achieving balance between fostering enough trust for the relationship to continue while also minimizing their risk of being hurt again. To manage this discursive struggle, some participants discussed their need for physical or emotional distance as inherent to the forgiveness process. In some cases, participants viewed forgiveness as a means to regaining and even increase closeness after the hurtful situation. For others, this distance seemed to provide them with a sense of perspective that allowed them to move toward what they believed would be conciliatory behavior.

The tension between closeness and distance. During the process of forgiveness, partici-pants often discussed the role of relational closeness and distance as a way to rebuild trust lost after a relational transgression, while also diminishing the likelihood that they would be hurt again. Some participants spoke of the forgiveness process as an act of trust in itself, and reported that their relationship became significantly stronger as a result. For example, a 22-year-old participant who forgave her brother described their newfound closeness as follows:

> I think it made us stronger, because now he knows that I will forgive him, that our rela-tionship is strong enough for that. I mean, I don't want to be doing it all the time, but he knows that I won't just cut him off and … disown him anytime we have a disagreement. I think he's learned from it all, and so have I. (30).

In other cases, participants explained the necessity of distancing themselves from the family member that hurt them as part of the forgiveness process. Creating and manag-ing boundaries was a way for these participants to minimize the risk of being hurt again. Although forgiveness provided an opportunity for reconciliation for some, other partic-ipants emphasized that, despite forgiveness, the relationship with their family member would be different in the future. An illustrative example from a 19-year-old female partic-ipant who forgave her mother captures this theme:

> I think [the forgiveness process] will definitely affect the kind of communication that we will have later on. It will be more distant for sure just because there's been so much … that I've missed out on her life and she's missed out on my life especially at this point in my life. I'd say [our relationship will] be more distant in the long run (11).

Despite the increase in distance, participants emphasized that without a way to man-age their relational risk, they would likely not have a relationship with their family mem-ber at all. Thus, although this hurtful situation did harm the quality of their relationship, maintaining distance allowed the forgiveness process to begin, perhaps creating space for a closer relationship in the future.

The Discourse of Openness-Closedness

The third overarching discourse we identified was that of openness-closedness. Participants often discussed the tension between their desire to fully understand the circumstances surrounding the hurtful situation, while also indicating some reluctance to talk about it. For some participants, forgiveness originated from remembering the hurtful situation and discussing it, whereas others spoke of forgetting past hurt as necessary to forgive. Often, participants spoke of this dialectic as evolving over the forgiveness process, and indicated that the nature of their communication with their family member changed over time.

The tension between remembering and forgetting. In negotiating the forgiveness process, some participants spoke of the need to be open with their family member about their feelings. Even when the hurtful situation occurred years earlier, several participants mentioned that they needed to remember their previous feelings and discuss them with their family member as a path to begin the forgiveness process. In many cases, open communication about the hurt caused by their family member occurred nearly simultaneously with the beginning of the forgiveness process. The ways in which family members enacted openness about the hurtful situation were varied; some spoke directly with their family member, whereas others chose to communicate their feelings via writing. A 21-year-old participant who discussed how she forgave her father via letter explained:

> I think words can say a lot more than … being face to face with somebody. … I think sometimes if you write a letter you could impact somebody a lot more because they have more time to think about it and process it. They can see the words written down and they know I think if something's written they know you really mean it. … I think by sending him letters and writing letters to him made him realize some stuff that he hadn't realized. (2)

After beginning their initial contact in writing, this participant was able to begin speaking to her father and gradually their spoken communication became more open. She stated: "It was like we could talk about things and be very open with each other and have fun and laugh and be like how we used to be and it wasn't like short, quick, to the point sentences" (2).

Whether written or spoken, most participants discussed forgiveness through open communication over time. The following account, provided by a 21-year-old participant who forgave her sister represented this theme.

> [Forgiveness is] a very hard thing. … It's not something you can just sit down, schedule it, and do in a day. It's something you have to come to terms with. It's a process. It's not a *simple* process. I guess it's kinda a vast undertaking. (15)

For other participants, negotiating forgiveness was accomplished by restraining their true feelings and attempting (often unsuccessfully) to forget the hurtful elements of the transgression. An illustrative example from a 20-year-old participant who forgave her father explained:

> Sometimes I wish I could just tell him how bad he hurts me all the time, but he just takes that as I'm putting something on him, or I'm making him the problem, so I just kinda let [it] go. (19)

Some participants make a conscious choice not to bring up the particulars of the hurtful situation again so that wounds could heal and the forgiveness process could begin. For example, a 19-year-old participant who forgave her father captures this theme:

> Sometimes I wish that we would have just talked about it openly, because even though there was an understanding, sometimes I feel like we just skirted around the issue. Sometimes I wish I would've just asked: What were you thinking? Why did you do that? Or just got everything out there. I don't know if we'll ever do that. … [I feel like it's] in the past and if we brought it up, it would just reopen wounds and we would have to deal with it all over again. I think that we're still dealing with it separately, but to talk about it openly just brings everything to the forefront, and all those emotions we felt all those years ago would be new again. (20)

For other participants, they centered closedness about the hurtful situation simply because they were uncertain how to communicate openly with their family member. The following illustrative account, provided by a 22-year-old female participant who forgave her father represents this theme.

> I think it strained us, for a while. … I think he felt like he couldn't really bring it up, and he didn't know what to say to me which is weird because we've always had open communication. … We have several issues, like he would try to tell me what to do … father me in some way, and I would rebel, or tell him to his face that I didn't want to listen to him, and that was really strange because I never felt that way with my father. (21).

Importantly, the degree of openness enacted by our participants during the forgiveness process varied primarily with regard to the circumstances and emotions surrounding the hurtful situation. In other words, regardless of how much they talked about the hurtful situation with their family member, participants reported that they did *not* use the word "forgiveness" during this process with their family member, even when we asked them about this directly. Instead, they said they communicated their forgiveness by being open about their feelings, or by not mentioning them at all, as illustrated by the examples presented.

Discussion

In the present study, we synthesized traditional dialectical theory with forgiveness-specific tensions to better understand the dialectical tensions associated with communicating forgiveness in families after experiencing a hurtful situation. Through our analysis of the discourse of our participants, it became clear that forgiving family members represented a complicated and often conflictual process negotiated over time, rather than as a singular decision or event. Whereas speaking of forgiveness as a process was a common theme throughout the experiences of our participants, the ways in which family members negotiated this process were distinct.

Although we have specified three discourses experienced by our participants, the experience of nearly every participant reflected a combination of these dialectics during their forgiveness process. Ultimately, we argue that this study offers several contributions useful in broadening our understanding of forgiveness in family relationships, each of which will be discussed in turn.

First, of particular interest in the present study was the ways in which family members communicate forgiveness to each other. Perhaps the most striking response to this question is that family members do *not* explicitly verbalize forgiveness. When asked how they communicated forgiveness to their family member, *none* of our 30 participants reported saying the words "I forgive you." Yet, consistent with previous research (Waldron & Kelley, 2005a, 2008), nearly all of them stated that they believed their family member knew they had been forgiven through a combination of other words and actions often unrelated to the hurtful situation.

Participants discussed other forgiveness-granting strategies, such as minimizing the offense and offering nonverbal displays of affection (see Kelley & Waldron, 2005). As indicated by Waldron and Kelley (2008), explicit statements of forgiveness imply a sense of finality, that the hurtful situation is no longer salient in the current relationship. Participants' reluctance to verbalize explicit forgiveness may indicate that this process is ongoing. Within this complex discursive struggle of choice-obligation, family members discussed the ways in which they managed the discourse of openness-closedness that allowed them to continue the forgiveness process. For some participants, gathering more information about the hurtful situation was an important part of the forgiveness process.

For others, centering closedness in their discourse as a centripetal force within their relationship allowed them to maintain forgiveness by avoiding discussion of the hurtful event. Yet, even those family members centering openness in their discourse often avoided explicit discussions of forgiveness itself. It may be that individuals see explicit declarations of forgiveness as potentially face-threatening to themselves or their family member, as suggested by Afifi, Falato, and Weiner (2001). Thus, family members may perceive overt displays of forgiveness as reminders of the pain caused by the relational transgression and choose instead to push both to the periphery as centrifugal.

Second, given that forgiveness is often understood rather than explicitly communicated, it is important to consider how family members negotiated the process of forgiveness within the context of their relationship. It was clear from our analysis that the process of forgiving a family member often begins with the decision to forgive, but is also a discursive choice made multiple times over the course of the relationship. As indicated by other researchers, conceptualizing forgiveness as an ongoing, active choice was a common theme between family members (e.g., Hope, 1987; Kelley, 1998). Several participants in our study expressed this as the decision to focus on the positive aspects of their relationship with their family member while minimizing the negative parts of the relationship.

In other cases, forgiveness was viewed as an obligation that was continuously centered throughout the process. Many participants discussed forgiveness as an expectation stemming from their larger family network, but one that was often important and valued. This view of forgiveness corresponds with previous researchers' conceptualization of nonvoluntary relationships, in that family members may realize and adapt to their enduring nature (Hess, 2000).

Importantly, it seems that individuals' frame of reference for what they consider a forgivable offense may differ between family and other voluntary relationships. When asked how they would respond to a similar hurtful situation if occurring with a friend or romantic relationship, many participants expressed uncertainty that they would forgive. In several cases, participants were clear that they would not want to continue a voluntary relationship after a similar transgression. Previous researchers have indicated that families

are distinct from other types of interpersonal relationships in a variety of ways, and those differences appear to play a significant role in the forgiveness process as well (Galvin & Cooper, 1990; Vangelisti & Crumley, 1998).

An important element of negotiating forgiveness that we are able to add via our study is the closeness-distance discourse. Utilizing the most recent framework of RDT (Baxter, 2010; Baxter & Braithwaite, 2010) as a lens, some family members centered their need for distance, space, or time as a way to emotionally disconnect from the hurtful situation as a centripetal part of their forgiveness process. Many times, maintaining this distance for a period of time allowed them to return to a similar level of closeness that existed in the relationship before the hurtful situation.

In contrast, others saw closeness and spending time together as the catalyst for forgiving their family member, which allowed them to distance themselves from the pain caused by the hurtful situation by replacing hurt with more positive sentiments. Some participants spoke of being even closer with the family member that hurt them after the forgiveness process, and nearly all expected to maintain their relationship despite the hurtful situation (Vangelisti & Crumley, 1998; Waldron & Kelley, 1998).

Thus, although hurtful situations and relational transgressions are not ideal, we have discovered that they may in fact have a silver lining in that they have the potential to bring family members closer together. Our participants' discourses highlight the challenge of explicating forgiveness from reconciliation, especially in family relationships. Because participants were reflecting on nonvoluntary relationships, the forgiveness-reconciliation connection may be much more prominent than in voluntary relationships and, as such, much of our data represents this connection. It may be that reconciling after experiencing a relational transgression underscores commitment to the relationship, which allows partners to become even closer than before the hurtful situation occurred.

Third, it seems that one important factor of whether or not family members successfully negotiate forgiveness hinges on whether forgiveness or hurt becomes the primary focus within the relationship. From our analysis, it is clear that forgiveness itself represents its own unique discursive struggle in families, as individuals often want and need to forgive, yet still experiencing the pain in the relationship precipitated by the previous hurtful event. Intriguingly, while previous researchers suggest that those in romantic relationships consider a variety of relational factors such as closeness and satisfaction during the process of forgiveness (Kelley, 1998; Kelley & Waldron, 2005), many of our participants discussed their obligation to family as primary, and their personal feelings as peripheral. Indeed, the discourses of some participants seem to equate family relationships with nonvoluntary forgiveness, yet all participants expressed a degree of satisfaction with their decision to forgive, highlighting the complexity of the forgiveness process in family relationships.

Strengths and Limitations

A particular strength of the present study is that the results contribute a rich understanding of how forgiveness is negotiated through the discourses of family members after a hurtful situation. Although forgiveness is often studied in romantic relationships, relatively few researchers have focused exclusively on forgiveness in family relationships. Because family members are involved in our first and often longest lasting interpersonal relationships, this line of research is important to understanding the communicative process of forgiveness. By allowing participants to select any hurtful situation occurring with

a family member, we were able to appreciate the forgiveness process across a variety of contexts from a native's point of view.

Whereas understanding these dialectics in family relationships clearly offers unique insight into the process of forgiveness, there are several other influential factors to consider as well. One limitation of the present study is that it considers a single relational perspective from a primarily female, relatively young, culturally similar population. Because forgiveness is a negotiated process that often occurs within a dyad or larger group, it may be important to examine other family members' perspectives on the same hurtful situation while also considering the cultural and societal influences on forgiveness. Longitudinal studies are also needed to fully understand how forgiveness and reconciliation play out as processes over the course of the relationship.

Suggestions for Future Research

Although forgiveness in family relationships is not a new phenomenon, studying it from a communicative perspective is relatively unique. Some of the unanswered questions regarding the process of forgiveness that should be addressed in future research are highlighted next.

First, it may be enlightening to consider the perspective of several family members beyond the forgiver. Because family network obligation is such a prevalent theme, understanding the mutual influence of others, including the family member who is being forgiven, would enhance our knowledge about how forgiveness is negotiated within these relationships. Additionally, understanding variations in influence of family members at different times during the process of forgiveness would add to our understanding of how forgiveness is negotiated within the family system. Variations in family values resulting from religious or cultural differences are also likely to play a role on the forgiveness process, and should be investigated in greater depth. Extending Kelley's (1998) research to better respond to questions such as "How do family members communicatively influence each other's decision to forgive after a hurtful situation?" would be beneficial.

A second area of interest for communication-oriented forgiveness researchers involves situations in which family members decided *not* to forgive. What actions, if any, do family members consider unforgivable? Are certain hurtful situations unmanageable in relational discourses? Given the complexities involved in communicating forgiveness, how, if at all, do family members communicate their decision *not* to forgive? How are these unforgivable offenses different in romantic versus family relationships?

Finally, it may be useful for future researchers to employ a turning points analysis to better understand the occurrences associated with the process of forgiveness in family relationships (Baxter & Bullis, 1986). Many of our participants spoke of specific events that influenced their forgiveness process, such as family emergencies, discussion with other family members, and religious and moral self-reflection. Representing these occurrences as turning points would provide a richer understanding of how forgiveness develops over time, while also validating individual variations in the process.

In conclusion, this study represents a starting point in understanding the challenges associated with forgiveness in family relationships. Perhaps most importantly, the experiences of the participants in this study support the idea that forgiveness is, in fact, a unique process of implicit communicative negotiations between and among family members with a multitude of competing dialectical tensions. It seems likely that process looks quite different in family relationship than in other more voluntary relationships. Given

the relative lack of dedicated research on family forgiveness, furthering our understanding of communicating forgiveness in nonvoluntary relationships expands our perspective on the complex nature of families.

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