2010

Face Needs, Intragroup Status, and Women's Reactions to Socially Aggressive Face Threats

Erin K. Willer
University of Denver, ewiller@du.edu

Jordan Soliz
University of Nebraska-Lincoln, jsoliz2@unl.edu

Face Needs, Intragroup Status, and Women's Reactions to Socially Aggressive Face Threats

Erin K. Willer[1] and Jordan Soliz[2]

1. Department of Communication Studies, University of Denver
2. Department of Communication Studies, University of Nebraska–Lincoln

Corresponding author – Erin K. Willer, Department of Communication Studies, University of Denver, 2000 E. Asbury Avenue, 299 Sturm Hall, Denver, CO 80208, email ewiller@du.edu

Abstract

Given the potential negative consequences of being a recipient of such behavior, the role of positive face needs, intragroup status, and the face-threatening nature of social aggression in predicting correlates of negative affect experienced as a result of being a target of SAFTs, including the face threat of the response, forgiveness, and well-being was investigated. On the basis of the survey responses from 199 college-aged women, findings indicated that targets' positive face needs and intragroup status are directly and indirectly associated with forgiveness and overall well-being. Implications for these findings in relation to theorizing about face and intragroup identity as well as limitations and suggestions for future research are provided.

Social aggression is a process that damages a person's identity, including her self-esteem and/or social standing in a group and includes behaviors such as rejection, rumor spreading, and social exclusion (Galan & Underwood, 1997). In this study, we use the theoretical framework of *face* (Brown & Levinson, 1987; Goffman, 1967), focusing on Kowalski's (2007) suggestion that the face-threat model does not adequately address the interactional development process between targets and perpetrators and ignores targets' reactions to being victimized. Likewise, recognizing the association between aggression and social group identity (Ojala & Nesdale, 2004), we attend to the role of identity and status in college women's peer groups in differentiating reactions to socially aggressive acts. We focus on

personal and social (i.e., identity) factors that are associated with targets' affect, communicative responses, feelings of forgiveness, and overall well-being. We focus on college-aged women because research suggests that relational aggressiveness in college women is associated with internalizing and externalizing difficulties (Burton, Hafetz, & Henninger, 2007; Werner & Crick, 1999) and because females tend to be more indirectly aggressive than they are physically aggressive (for a review, see Card, Stucky, Sawalani, & Little, 2008). In addition, we aim to extend research on social aggression which typically focuses on children (Werner & Crick, 1999).

Social aggression as face-threatening acts

Face refers to the self or image that people present and expect others to maintain or support during interactions (Cupach & Metts, 1994; Goffman, 1967). Individuals have two face desires, including *positive* and *negative face needs*. Positive face needs refer to an individual's desire for approval and appreciation as well as the desire for others to consider them likable. Negative face needs refer to an individual's desire to be unconstrained, including freedom from action and imposition (Brown & Levinson, 1987). Although people normally expect and assume that others will behave in ways that support their positive and negative face needs, sometimes individuals threaten these desired preferences. *Positive face threats* are particularly relevant and similar to socially aggressive messages, given that both assume a threat to an individual's desired identity (Kowalski, Howerton, & McKenzie, 2001). Willer and Cupach (2008) argue that relationally aggressive messages typically communicate relational devaluation (Cupach & Carson, 2002) and therefore threaten positive face in particular. We conceptualize socially aggressive messages as positive face threats and, thus, as *socially aggressive face threats* (SAFTs). Although it is clear that SAFTs are related to negative affect (Owens, Shute, & Slee, 2000; Willer & Cupach, 2008), what is less apparent is how these feelings are associated with other individual and communicative outcomes.

Correlates of negative affect surrounding SAFTs

Negative affect experienced as a result of social types of aggression may have implications for targets' feelings of forgiveness, the face-threatening nature of their response to social aggression, and their overall well-being (e.g., McCullough, Worthington, & Rachal, 1997; Rusbult, Verette, Whitney, Slovik, & Lipkus, 1991).

Negative affect and forgiveness

Emotional responses to relational transgressions often include hurt and perceived attacks, characterized by affects such as fear and worry as well as feelings of righteous indignation, characterized by anger, contempt, and thoughts of retaliation toward the partner (Gottman, 1993). Thus, before forgiving or feeling motivated to behave benevolently toward a perpetrator of a SAFT, it may be likely that young women feel motivated to retaliate or avoid interpersonal or psychological contact (McCullough et al., 1997; Rusbult et al., 1991). Owens and colleagues' (2000) research further supports this argument given that girls who experienced indirect aggression felt a desire to avoid perpetrators and seek revenge as a result. Given these findings, it seems likely that the extent to which a target experiences

negative affect resulting from a SAFT is associated with her feelings of forgiveness toward the perpetrator.

> H1: Targets' negative affect experienced as a result of SAFTs is negatively associated with feelings of forgiveness.

Negative affect and face threat of the response
Closely related to feelings of forgiveness, which are cognitive in nature, is the manner in which targets communicatively respond to SAFTs. Research on children has revealed that targets respond to social types of aggression by ignoring or confronting the perpetrator, attempting to deescalate or diffuse the aggressive episode, retaliating with physical and nonphysical aggression, making justifications and excuses, smiling and laughing, and withdrawing (Putallaz, Kuperschmidt, Coie, McKnight, & Grimes, 2004; Tapper & Boulton, 2005). Taking negative affect into consideration in relation to these communicative responses is important given Goffman's (1967) argument that "emotions [such as anger] function as moves, and fit so precisely into the logic of the ritual game" of interaction (p. 23). Along these lines, targets tend to respond to social types of aggression and their resulting negative feelings most often in vengeful as opposed to forgiving ways (e.g., Kowalski, 2007). Thus, it is important to take into consideration that targets' negative affect is a predictor of their communicative reactions to social aggression.

> H2: Targets' negative affect experienced as a result of SAFTs are positively associated with the face-threatening nature of their response.

Negative affect and well-being
Researchers suggest that there is a clear link between the experience of negative affect and health-related symptoms. Bullying research has demonstrated its stressful nature (Beane, 1998) and stress about hurtful events leads to rumination, perpetuating negative affect and harmful physiological effects (Witvliet, 1997; Worthington, 1998). Long-term effects of victimization include loneliness, low self-esteem, anxiety, fear, depression, and physical health problems (see Kowalski, 2007, for a review).

> H3: Targets' negative affect experienced as a result of SAFTs is negatively associated with their well-being.

There are also individual, social, and communicative factors that may be associated with negative feelings resulting from a SAFT. These may predict forgiveness, the face-threatening nature of the target's response, and her well-being, not only directly but also indirectly by way of her negative affect.

Individual, social, and communicative factors and negative affect
In Brown and Levinson's (1987) conception of positive and negative face, they suggested that three situational factors influence their threatening nature, including the relative

power differential and the relational distance between communicators as well as the cultural and personal estimation of the rank of the threat (Metts, 2000). Brown and Levinson and others suggest that researchers should take additional features into consideration when determining the severity of face-threatening acts, such as requests and other types of messages (Metts, 2000; Tracy, 1990). Given the association between socially aggressive types of messages and negative affect, one of our goals in this study is to investigate relevant social factors that may predict negative affect: (a) the target's desire for positive face support, (b) the intragroup status of the target and the perpetrator, and (c) the severity of the face threat.

Positive face needs and negative affect
Given that positive face needs involve the desire for appreciation and approval, they are particularly relevant to young women. During adolescence girls develop an amplified desire to be well liked, showing an increased concern for others' opinions of them as well as increases in self-consciousness (Rosenberg & Simmons, 1975). Moreover, regardless of age and gender, everyone has a need to belong and be included in desired social groups (Baumeister & Leary, 1995; Tajfel & Turner, 1986). However, those individuals who have a stronger desire to be accepted and included suffer the most as a result of being victimized (Kowalski, 2007). Thus, one important factor to take into consideration when determining the negative emotional implications of a face threat is an individual's trait positive face needs (Erbert & Floyd, 2004; Metts, 1990). Individuals who are sensitive to rejection are likely to see relational transgressions as signs of personal rejection and relationship devaluation, prompting significant anxiety and emotional or maladaptive reactions (Ayduk, Downey, Testa, Yen, & Shoda, 1999; Downey, Feldman, & Ayduk, 2000).

    H4: Targets' positive face needs are positively associated with negative affect resulting from SAFTs.

Target's intragroup status and negative affect
Guided by social identity theorizing (Hornsey, 2008), previous research has investigated the aspects of social identity and group influence on aggression (e.g., Gini, 2007; Ojala & Nesdale, 2004) by focusing on social aggression as a manifestation of social competition between one's social ingroup and outgroup. However, we believe there are important *intra*group considerations given that aggression is not limited to members of distinct social outgroups and often occurs in one's own social network (Willer & Cupach, 2008). It is not only a matter of the social group with which an individual identifies but rather their social status in that group that may be associated with negative affect resulting from SAFTs. Although group status has been shown to explain aggressive acts (i.e., more popular girls may be more aggressive; Cillessen & Mayeux, 2007), we focus on how the perceived status of the target compared to the perpetrator (i.e., intragroup status) may influence outcomes associated with SAFTs.

    Previous research indicates a link between the social status of perpetrators and targets and negative affect. For example, Keltner, Young, Oemig, Heerey, and Monarch's (1998) study of fraternity members showed that low-status participants displayed more facial

embarrassment, pain, and fear than high-status participants. Furthermore, high school girls in Willer and Cupach's (2008) study reported that relationally aggressive messages perpetrated by more popular peers were perceived as more face threatening and led to higher degrees of negative affect than messages that were delivered by equally popular or less popular girls. Collectively, this research and theorizing highlights the significance of identity and identity threat in aggression (Kowalski, 2007).

> H5: Targets' intragroup status is associated with negative affect resulting from SAFTs, such that targets who have a lower status than perpetrators experience a higher degree of negative affect.

Face threat of SAFT and negative affect
Another important factor to take into consideration is the face-threatening nature of social aggression. Given that individuals are emotionally attached to their faces (Goffman, 1967), face threats are frequently associated with negative affect. In relation to previous research on social types of aggression, studies have demonstrated this relation. For example, Willer and Cupach (2008) found a significant correlation between the degree of positive face threat of relationally aggressive acts and negative affect. In Tracy and Tracy's (1998) study, *face attacks*, acts considered intentionally threatening, were clearly linked to negative affect including irritation, hostility, and anger.

> H6: Targets' perceptions of the degree of positive face threat are positively associated with negative affect experienced as a result of SAFTs.

The hypotheses put forth represent a mediated model (Figure 1) in which the relations between the individual, social, and communicative factors (i.e., positive face needs, intragroup status, and degree of face threat of SAFT) and the correlates of negative affect (i.e., forgiveness, face threat of the response to social aggression, and well-being) will be clarified by targets' negative affect resulting from SAFTs.

Method

Participants
We solicited college women from communication studies courses at a large Midwestern university for participation in order to receive course credit. To qualify, participants had to have had an experience within the last 6 months where another female from one of their social networks did something that was socially aggressive to them. In line with Galan and Underwood's (1997) conceptualization, social aggression was defined for potential participants as behaviors that are nonphysical in nature and are intended to harm a person's sense of self and/or a person's relationship with other people (e.g., friends, acquaintances, boyfriends, and coworkers).

The total sample for this study included 199 college females ranging in age from 18 to 28 years ($M = 20.38$, $SD = 1.72$) who were mostly White/non-Hispanic (87.9%). The remaining participants were Asian/Pacific Islander (6.0%), Black/non-Hispanic (1.5%), Hispanic

(1.5%), and 3.0% did not report or indicated "other." Participants responded to an episode of social aggression that took place an average of 7.84 (*SD* = 6.46) weeks prior to completing the survey. Participants indicated perpetrators ranged in age from 17 to 32 years old (*M* = 20.44, *SD* = 2.29) and that they were mostly White/non-Hispanic (91.5%) but also included Asian/Pacific Islander (4.0%), Black/non-Hispanic (2.5%), Hispanic (1.0%), and 1.0% indicated "other."

Procedures
Participants who qualified for the study completed an online survey. To begin, they were asked to think of the specific incident they experienced when another female from their social network did something socially aggressive to them. In order to help the participants recall the details of the episode, participants provided a description of the interaction. The description was referenced as they completed the questionnaire. Participants completed a series of measures of variables associated with SAFTs as well as general demographic items. Intercorrelations for the variables are presented in Table 1.

Measures

Positive face needs
We measured positive face needs with two measures. The first scale was Erbert and Floyd's (2004) *trait positive needs* measure which consists of 12 items measured on a 5-point Likert-type scale (1 = *strongly disagree* to 5 = *strongly disagree*). Sample items include: "It is very important to me that people think that I am competent at what I do" and "If I thought someone didn't respect me, it would really bother me" (α = .82). Higher scores represented greater desire for positive face support (*M* = 3.78, *SD* = .55). The second measure we used as an indicator of positive face needs was the *fear of negative evaluation* scale (Watson & Friend, 1969). The scale consists of 30 items measured on a 4-point Likert-type scale (1 = *not at all like me* to 4 = *very much like me*). Sample items include: "I am frequently afraid of other people noticing my shortcomings" and "I become tense and jittery if I know someone is sizing me up" (α = .93). Higher scores represented greater fear of negative evaluation (*M* = 2.58, *SD* = .48).

Table 1. Intercorrelations for variables associated with socially aggressive face threats (SAFTs)

Variables	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12
1. Trait positive face needs	—											
2. Fear of negative evaluation	.59**	—										
3. Relative likability	−.19**	−.23**	—									
4. Relative influence	−.19**	−.29**	.75**	—								
5. Positive face threat (of SAFT)	−.07	−.11	.07	.06	—							
6. Negative affect	.21**	.25**	−.18*	−.23**	.11	—						
7. Revenge	−.06	−.19**	.08	.07	−.12	−.35**	—					
8. Avoidance	.04	−.01	−.15*	−.11	−.41**	−.26**	.48**	—				
9. Benevolence	.06	−.02	−.16*	−.11	−.37**	−.27**	.54**	.78**	—			
10. Positive face threat (of response)	−.12	−.02	−.01	−.11	.05	.08	−.13	−.20**	−.19**	—		
11. Perceived stress	−.26**	−.43**	.21**	.34**	.12	−.21**	.14	−.06	−.08	−.17*	—	
12. Self-esteem	−.27**	−.53**	.25**	.35**	.21**	−.19**	.10	−.05	−.09	−.08	.57**	—
13. Mental and physical health symptoms	−.26**	−.33**	.25**	.26**	.11	−.26**	.16*	−.04	−.07	−.17*	.65**	.47**

$* p < .05$, $** p < .01$

Intragroup status

We measured participants' perceived intragroup status at the time the socially aggressive act took place with relative likability and influence scales based on Lease, Musgrove, and Axelrod's (2002) conceptualization of social status. Each scale was measured on 5-point Likert-type scales (1 = *strongly disagree* to 5 = *strongly agree*). The *relative likability* scale consists of three items (i.e., "Others in my social network were more fond of me than they were of X," "X was more liked by others in our social network than I was," [reverse coded] and "In the eyes of others in our social network, I was more accepted than X"; α = .86). The *relative influence* scale consists of three items (i.e., "Others in our social network took me more seriously than they did X," "X had more influence over others in our social network than me," [reverse coded] and "Others in our social network were more likely to go along with what I said more often than they were to go along with what X said; α = .84). Higher scores represented greater relative likability (*M* = 3.79, *SD* = .95) and influence (*M* = 3.62, *SD* = 1.01), indicating higher intragroup status.

Face threat of SAFT and face threat of response

To measure the face-threatening nature of perpetrator SAFTs and target responses, participants completed two versions of Cupach and Carson's (2002) *positive face threat* measure by rating the socially aggressive act and their own response. Each measure consists of 10 items measured on a 7-point Likert-type scale (1 = *strongly agree* to 7 = *strongly disagree*). Sample items include: "X's/My actions were rude" and "X's/My actions were insensitive" (α = .71 for face threats; α = .84 for responses). Higher scores represented greater face threat of SAFT (*M* = 5.95, *SD* = .79) and greater face threat of response (*M* = 3.27, *SD* = 1.14).

Negative affect

We measured negative affect with a modified version of Watson, Clark, and Tellegen's (1988) 10-item *negative affect* schedule previously used in Willer and Cupach (2008). The scale consists of 13 items including Watson and colleagues' 10 negative-affect items (e.g., "guilty" and "nervous"), as well as three items added by Willer and Cupach (i.e., "angry," "hurt," and "embarrassed") based on previous research suggesting that social aggression is associated with such emotional reactions (e.g., Owens et al., 2000). All items were measured on a 5-point Likert-type scale (1 = *very slightly or not at all* to 5 = *extremely*) that asks participants to indicate the extent to which they felt each response after the socially aggressive experience occurred (α = .88). Higher scores represented greater degrees of negative affect (*M* = 2.71, *SD* = .80).

Forgiveness

We used three scales designed by McCullough and colleagues (1998) and McCullough and Hoyt (2002) in order to assess three correlates of forgiveness—*revenge, avoidance*, and *benevolence*. We measured all three dimensions on a 5-point Likert-type scale (1 = *strongly disagree* to 5 = *strongly agree*). The revenge scale consists of five items and samples included: "I'll make her pay" and "I'm going to get even" (α = .90). Higher scores represented lesser feelings of revenge (i.e., greater forgiveness; *M* = 4.00, *SD* = .96). The avoidance scale consists of seven items such as, "I don't trust her" and "I withdraw from her" (α = .95). Higher

scores represented lesser feelings of avoidance (i.e., greater forgiveness; M = 2.61, SD = 1.24). The benevolence scale consists of seven items such as, "I have given up my hurt and resentment" and "I want us to bury the hatchet and move forward with our relationship" (α = .94). Higher scores represented greater feelings of benevolence (i.e., greater forgiveness; M = 2.90, SD = 1.07).

Well-being

We measured the overall well-being with three scales. The *perceived stress* scale (Cohen, Kamarch, & Mermelstein, 1983) consists of 14 items measured on a 5-point Likert-type scale (1 = *never* to 7 = *very often*) that asks participants to indicate how often they experienced a number of feelings in the past month. Sample items include: "been upset because of something that happened unexpectedly" and "felt that you were unable to control the important things in your life?" (α = .83). Items were reverse coded so that higher scores represented lower perceived stress (i.e., greater well-being; M = 3.21, SD = .52). We measured *self-esteem* with Rosenberg's (1965) scale that consists of 10 items evaluated on a 7-point Likert-type scale (1 = *strongly disagree* to 7 = *strongly agree*). Sample items include, "I feel I have a number of good qualities" and "I am able to do things as well as other people" (α = .88). Higher scores represented higher self-esteem (i.e., greater well-being: M = 5.53, SD = .97). We measured *mental and physical health symptoms* with Dornbusch, Mont-Reynaud, Ritter, Chen, and Steinberg's (1991) scale that consists of 14 items assessed on a 4-point Likert-type scale (0 = *never* to 3 = *three or more times*), which asks participants to indicate how often they have felt a number of different symptoms during a typical week. Sample items include: "feel nervous or worried" and "have a headache" (α = .81). Items were reverse coded, so higher scores represented fewer health symptoms (i.e., higher well-being; M = 2.91, SD = .53).

Results

We tested the hypothesized model using Mplus, Version 4.2 (Muthén & Muthén, 2006) and a two-step structural equation modeling approach (Anderson & Gerbing, 1988). In the first step, we performed a confirmatory factor analysis to test the relation between latent constructs and indictors. In this step, all latent constructs were free to vary. To account for measurement error in single-indicator latent constructs (Figure 1), we employed a technique put forth by Bollen (1989) and discussed by Stephenson and Holbert (2003) in which measurement error is set using the formula $(1 - \alpha) \times$ Variance. In the second step, we tested the structural model depicted in Figure 1. In doing so, we tested the hypothesized paths as well as direct paths from exogenous variables to the outcome variables (e.g., positive face needs → face threat of response) to address full or partial mediation. To test the goodness of fit of the model, we inspected the chi-square statistic as well as other fit indices recommended by Hu and Bentler (1999), that is, > .95 for comparative fit index (CFI), < .06 for root mean square error of approximation (RMSEA), and < .08 for standardized root mean square residual (SRMR). Thus, the structural model showed acceptable goodness of fit, $\chi^2(N = 199, 49) = 92.93$, $p < .001$; $\chi^2/df = 1.896$, CFI = .95, RMSEA = .07 (90% CI = .046 − .088), SRMR = .06, accounting for approximately 16% of the variance in negative affect, 2.5% of

face threat of response, 35% of forgiveness, and 44% well-being. The CFA and the structural model have the same goodness of fit because we tested a completely saturated hypothesized model. Completely standardized loadings for the latent indicator and residual parameters are provided in Table 2. Structural parameters for direct and indirect effects are presented in Table 3.
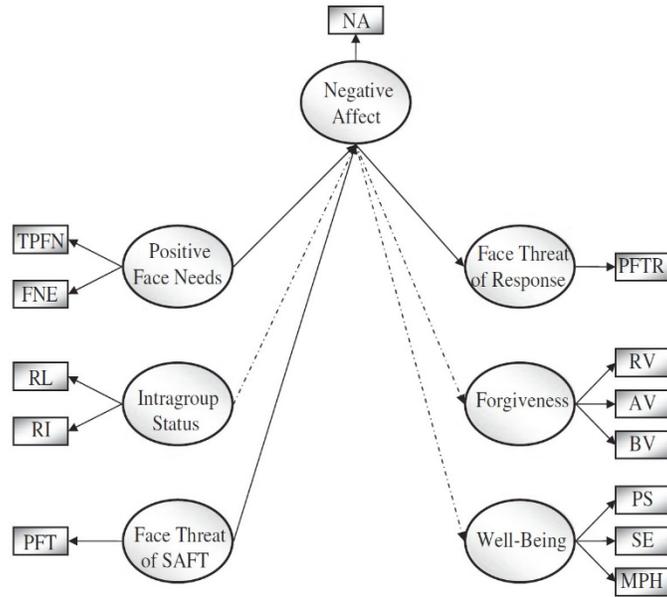

Figure 1. Hypothesized model of individual, social, and communicative factors associated with socially aggressive face threats. **Note:** Solid lines indicate positive relations and dashed lines indicate negative relations. PFN = trait positive face needs; FNE = fear of negative evaluation; RL = relative likability; RI = relative influence; PFT = positive face threat of SAFT; NA = negative affect; PFTR = positive face threat of response; RV = revenge; AV = avoidance; BV = benevolence; PS = perceived stress; SE = self-esteem; MPH = mental and physical health symptoms.

Table 2. Estimates for latent indicator and residual parameters

Parameter	Standardized estimate
Latent indicator parameters	
Trait positive face needs—Positive face needs	.85
Fear of negative evaluation—Positive face needs	.71
Relative likability—Intragroup status	.87
Relative influence—Intragroup status	.85
Positive face threat—Face threat of SAFT	.85
Negative affect—Negative affect	.94
Revenge—Forgiveness	.58
Avoidance—Forgiveness	.87
Benevolence—Forgiveness	.89
Positive face threat—Face threat of response	.91
Perceived stress—Well-being	.83
Self-esteem—Well-being	.70
Mental and physical health symptoms—Well-being	.74
Residual parameters	
Trait positive face needs—Positive face needs	.27
Fear of negative evaluation—Positive face needs	.50
Relative likability—Intragroup status	.24
Relative influence—Intragroup status	.28
Positive face threat—Face threat of SAFT	.27
Negative affect—Negative affect	.13
Revenge—Forgiveness	.67
Avoidance—Forgiveness	.24
Benevolence—Forgiveness	.20
Positive face threat—Face threat of response	.16
Perceived stress—Well-being	.32
Self-esteem—Well-being	.51
Mental and physical health symptoms—Well-being	.46

Table 3. Estimates for structural parameters

	Standardized estimate	Estimate/*SE*
Structural parameters → Direct effects		
Positive face needs → Negative affect	.29*	3.15
Positive face needs → Forgiveness	−.06	−0.63
Positive face needs → Face threat of response	−.12	−1.18
Positive face needs → Well-being	−.48*	−4.86
Intragroup status → Negative affect	−.17*	−1.98
Intragroup status → Forgiveness	−.20*	−2.45
Intragroup status → Face threat of response	−.08	−0.82
Intragroup status → Well-being	.21*	2.53
Face threat of SAFT → Negative affect	.19*	2.19
Face threat of SAFT → Forgiveness	−.45*	−4.74
Face threat of SAFT → Face threat of response	.04	0.40
Face threat of SAFT → Well-being	.14	1.70
Negative affect → Forgiveness	−.29*	−3.33
Negative affect → Face threat of response	.11	1.21
Negative affect → Well-being	−.12	−1.52
Structural parameters → Indirect effects		
Positive face needs → Negative affect → Forgiveness	−.08*	−2.34
Intragroup status → Negative affect → Forgiveness	.05	1.68
Face threat of SAFT → Negative affect → Forgiveness	−.05*	−1.97
Positive face needs → Negative affect → Well-being	−.02	−1.23
Intragroup status → Negative affect → Well-being	.02	1.20
Face threat of SAFT → Negative affect → Well-being	−.02	−1.23

Note: SAFT = socially aggressive face threat.

* $p < .05$

Correlates of negative affect surrounding SAFTs

Our first three hypotheses predicted that the college women's experience of negative affect would be positively associated with the face-threatening nature of their responses (H2) and negatively associated with their feelings of forgiveness (H1) and their well-being (H3). H1 was supported in which negative affect was negatively associated with feelings of forgiveness, indicated by lower feelings of revenge and avoidance and higher feelings of benevolence. We did not find support for H2 and H3. Thus, the relation between negative affect and forgiveness was significant, but the relations between negative affect and face threat of response and well-being were not.

Individual, social, and communicative factors and negative affect

In addition to exploring the correlates of negative affect, we also investigated individual, social, and communicative predictors of negative affect, including direct and indirect (i.e., mediated) paths to the correlates. Specifically, we tested a mediated model to determine whether negative affect clarified the relation between the individual, social, and communicative factors (i.e., positive face needs, intragroup status, and face threat of SAFTs) and

the correlates of negative affect (i.e., forgiveness, face threat of the response to SAFTs, and well-being).

Positive face needs

H4 suggested that there would be a positive association between positive face needs and negative affect. This prediction was supported in which positive face needs—indicated by trait positive face needs and fear of negative evaluation—was associated with more negative affect. We also examined direct and indirect paths and effects to determine if negative affect served in a mediating role (Figure 2). Results suggest that negative affect completely mediates the relation between positive face needs and forgiveness as the direct path between positive face needs and forgiveness was not significant. This mediation was also supported in which the indirect effect was significant. In sum, higher levels of face needs predicted higher levels of negative affect, resulting in decreased levels of forgiveness. We also examined the positive face needs → well-being path. There was a significant direct effect in which positive face needs was associated with lower levels of perceived well-being. Because negative affect did not significantly predict well-being (H3), there was not a significant indirect effect between positive face needs and well-being. Finally, there were no direct or indirect effects for positive face needs when considering face threat of response.
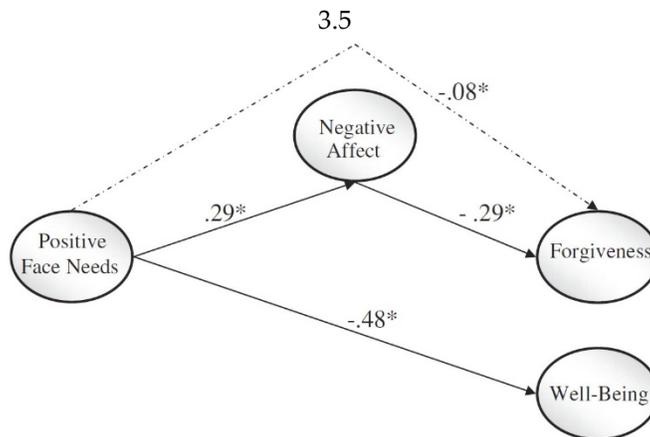

Figure 2. Correlates of positive face needs. **Note:** Dashed lines indicate indirect effects. *$p < .05$

Intragroup status

H5 predicted that targets with lower intragroup status than perpetrators would experience higher degrees of negative affect as a result of perpetrators' SAFTs. This prediction was supported in that as targets' intragroup status increased, negative affect decreased (Figure 3). Furthermore, when examining the mediated effect, higher intragroup status was positively associated with forgiveness in which intragroup status resulted in less negative affect, which is associated with a greater likelihood to forgive. This indirect effect was not significant (although it approached significance). However, the direct path between intragroup status and forgiveness demonstrates that as status increases, the likelihood to

forgive decreases. These findings suggest that although intragroup status is associated with less negative emotional affect, perceived likability and influence may be better determinants of forgiveness.
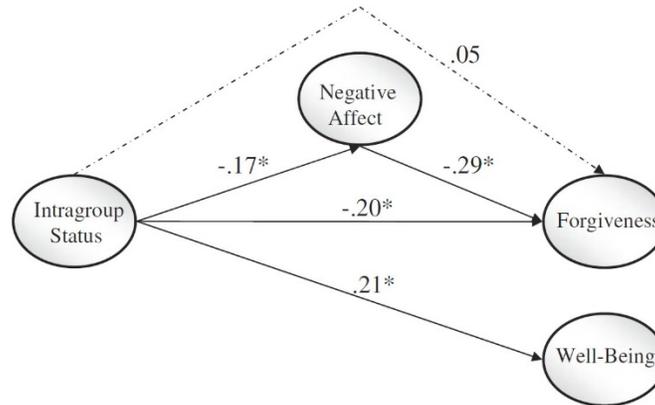

Figure 3. Correlates of intragroup status. **Note:** Dashed lines indicate indirect effects. *$p < .05$

There was also positive relation between intragroup status and well-being, suggesting that there are physical and mental health benefits to having a positive position in a social group. Although intragroup status was associated with negative affect, the indirect effect on well-being was not significant. Finally, there were no significant direct or indirect paths with face threat of response.

Face threat of SAFT
H6, which suggested that there would be a positive association between the degree of positive face threat of perpetrators' social aggression and targets' negative affect, was supported. Examining the direct and indirect effects (Figure 4), there was a negative relation between the face threat of the SAFT and forgiveness in which participants indicated they were less likely to forgive the perpetrator when face threat was high. Thus, given the significant indirect effect, face threat may influence forgiveness directly and by increasing feelings of negative affect following the episode. There were no direct or indirect effects on well-being and face threat of response.[1]
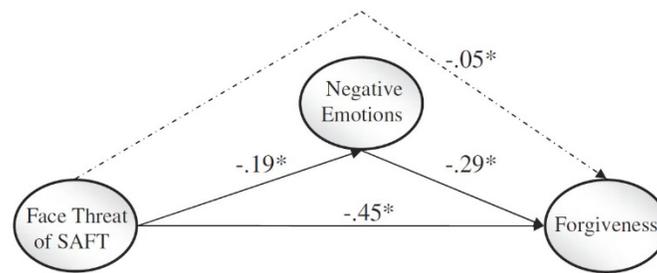
Figure 4. Correlates of face threat of socially aggressive face threat (SAFT). **Note:** Dashed lines indicate indirect effects. **p* < .05

Discussion

On the basis of our theorizing in this study, we positioned negative affect as an important cognitive function needing to be investigated in the context of positive face needs, intragroup status, and the face-threatening nature of aggressive messages in order to understand outcomes associated with SAFTs.

Positive face needs
The results suggest that young women who especially desired positive face support and who feared the evaluation of other people had lower overall well-being scores. These conclusions are important on a number of levels. First, they provide further support for the argument that it is important to take individual-level face needs into consideration when determining perceived degree of and responses to face threats (Erbert & Floyd, 2004). Although Brown and Levinson (1987) did not take individual face needs into consideration in their original explication of the theory, these findings suggest that they play a major role in the complex social context of positive face threats. Second, although girls in middle childhood are especially concerned with being socially accepted (Rosenberg & Simmons, 1975), these findings also suggest that young women may continue to desire this approval into adulthood. Thus, as opposed to a focus on children and younger adolescents per se, more research that focuses on the developmental nature of the desire for positive social identification over time is warranted. Third, given the findings that increased positive face needs are associated with negative health outcomes, it may seem intuitive that health care professionals and interventionists begin to take steps to reduce social aggression across college campuses (e.g., dorms and sororities). However, the results of this study suggest that SAFTs in and of themselves do not damage well-being. Rather, the findings seem to imply that young women who are especially invested in seeking the approval of others and who recognize that their positive faces have been diminished by an individual who has the power to harm their social identities are hurt the most by SAFTs. Simply seeking to reduce social aggression may be an inadequate means of addressing a larger problem. Thus, rather than aiming to reduce social aggression, health care professionals on college campuses may need to do more to cultivate a positive sense of self in their female students.

Intragroup status

Given the typical emphasis on *inter*group aggression in the literature and research, we believe an emphasis on *intra*group (e.g., social status) characteristics enhances the understanding of enactment, responses, and outcomes of SAFTs. Such an intragroup approach aligns with and extends theorizing about face. For example, although young women may desire for others to consider them likable, they do not simply want to have their positive face needs met by anyone, but by those who they consider relevant to their particular goals (Brown and Levinson, 1987). Specifically, young women's desire for likability is related to their desire for acceptance from individuals who they and others in their social network consider popular and powerful (Willer & Cupach, 2008); however, individuals who are more well liked and more influential in their peer group may engage in aggression as a way to maintain their position within the social hierarchy (Lim, 1994).

Given that powerful peers have the authority to influence lower status peers' popularity, if a more powerful peer perpetrates social aggression against a lower status target, the consequences can be detrimental, not only for the individual but for her relationship with others in the social network (Willer & Cupach, 2008). Our findings support this theorizing in which higher likability and influence of the target when compared to the perpetrator are associated with less negative affect as a consequence of SAFTs and overall well-being in general. However, the findings suggest that with high intragroup status comes a diminished probability of forgiveness. These findings may indicate that individuals who are more likable and more influential within the context of their social ingroup have more to lose when lower status peers threaten their face. As a result, they may experience heightened feelings of revenge and avoidance toward perpetrators. However, perhaps this finding indicates that more powerful targets have the luxury of feeling unforgiveness toward perpetrators. Although low-status targets may forgive higher status perpetrators out of necessity in order to maintain their position within the ingroup, more powerful targets may have the added bonus of not forgiving because their status may not be at stake. However, it is important to keep in mind that in the present investigation we measured participants' cognitive forgiveness as opposed to their communicative forgiveness (see Waldron & Kelly, 2008, for a review). Therefore, future research should explore whether intragroup status influences the ways that targets communicate their forgiveness as well. This juxtaposition of cognitive and communicative forgiveness may reveal that although less powerful group members may experience feelings of revenge and avoidance, they may be more likely to communicate forgiveness, even if it is not genuine, as a means of maintaining their relationship with their social networks.

Face threat of SAFTs

Contrary to predictions and counterintuitive to theorizing about social types of aggression, the face threat of SAFTs did not predict targets' overall well-being in this study. Although targets' individual well-being was not associated significantly with the gravity of SAFTs, it is possible that the target's and perpetrator's relational well-being is related to the face-threatening nature of SAFTs. Research on hurt often takes relational-level factors into consideration when assessing the impact of hurtful messages (see Vangelisti, 2007, for a review). Researchers who study aggression include relational damage in their conceptualizations

of the phenomena; however, they typically do not investigate the extent to which social damage occurs. Thus, future researchers should seek to investigate the impact of the face threat of social aggression on friendships, for example.

Another possible avenue for exploration includes investigating targets' *attributions* for perpetrators' social aggression. Attributions are forms of evaluation that occur as individuals try to understand and describe others' behavior (Manusov, 2001) and perhaps may moderate the relation between face threat and well-being. For example, previous research indicates that targets who make hostile attributions for perpetrators' aggression are more likely to seek revenge (Crick, Grotpeter, & Bigbee, 2002), an emotion that has been linked to negative mental and physiological health symptoms (Witvliet, Ludwig, & Laan, 2001). Given these findings, future studies should explore targets' attributions as a means of revealing another piece of the complex social context of SAFTs.

That the degree of face threat of social aggression was not associated with well-being may also indicate that individual SAFTs do not have the power to affect more long-term outcomes such as self-esteem and mental and physical health. Rather, as previous research demonstrates, it may be repeated victimization that is most detrimental for targets (Kawolski, 2007), an aspect of SAFTs not assessed in this study. Moreover, some research suggests that the intermittent expression of aggression can have beneficial consequences and lead to positive outcomes for ingroup associates. For example, within-group aggressive encounters can promote reconciliation and increased coherence among members (Vaughn & Santos, 2007). Therefore, in relation to this study's focus on individual as opposed to repeated SAFTs, there may be a functional component that mitigates negative outcomes. Future studies should aim to unveil such possibilities.

Additional limitations and future directions

There are other considerations that should be taken into account when interpreting the results of this study. First, counter to our theorizing, none of the constructs we examined were associated with the face threat of the response to SAFTs. We believe this may be a reflection of the method of assessment rather than a refutation of the literature in which, overall, participants tended to report that perpetrators' SAFTs were relatively face threatening ($M = 5.96$), whereas their own responses were relatively low on face threat ($M = 3.27$) in comparison. This finding aligns with the results of Kowalski, Walker, Wilkinson, Queen, and Sharpe's (2003) study comparing target and perpetrator narratives of aversive behavior situations. Ratings of perceived aversiveness, relational damage, and guilt were higher for victims as opposed to perpetrators. Future research would benefit from a more objective assessment of the nature of responses to SAFTs.

Although some may consider the fact that we did not include college men in our sample as a limitation, we did not do so because previous research indicates that college women suffer some different consequences than men in regard to relational aggression (e.g., Burton et al., 2007; Werner & Crick, 1999). However, it is important to keep in mind that males and females both perpetrate indirect aggression with similar frequencies (Card et al., 2008). Therefore, future studies should replicate our research in an effort to understand college men's experiences with SAFTs. Also in relation to the sample, future research should replicate this study with younger samples, as children may be more likely to forgive when

perpetrators experience the same degree of harm inflicted by the transgression (i.e., revengeful forgiveness), whereas adults are motivated to forgive based on higher cognitive reasoning (e.g., forgiveness out of love; Enright, Santos, & Al-Mabuk, 1989).

Retrospective data in this study were appropriate given we were interested in participants' attitudes, emotions, and perceptions of their relationship qualities. Likewise, we were interested in behaviors that are private to relationships and not easily accessible through direct observation of college women (Metts, Sprecher, & Cupach, 1991). Nonetheless, an additional limitation of the present investigation includes the length of time that had passed between when targets experienced their reported SAFTs and when they participated in the study. We did solicit participants who had experienced social aggression within the past 6 months in an effort to reduce any discrepancies between a participant's reports on the survey and her actual feelings and behaviors surrounding her experience at the time it occurred. Participants indicated that the reported incidents occurred approximately 8 weeks prior to survey completion. It is possible that the responses of individuals who reported on SAFTs that occurred less recently were influenced by time, especially given its impact on the tendency to forgive (Worthington et al., 2000). Narrowing the window of time that passed between the experience of SAFTs and survey completion may be beneficial in order to obtain a more homogenous sample. However, it is important to keep in mind that it may be participants' current perceptions of their stressful experiences rather than actual behaviors that affect outcomes such as well-being (see Pennebaker, 1997 for a review). Likewise, retrospective accounts may affect variables such as intragroup status, as perceptions could be influenced by the occurrence of SAFTs. Overall, the results of this study imply that much work remains in order to unveil not only the impact that SAFTs may have on women's well-being but also the influence that other individual, relational, and communicative factors may have on their health during the college years.

Note

1. Following procedures outlined by Aiken and West (1991), we examined potential interactions between indicators of intragroup status, positive face needs, and severity of face threat to identify moderating effects on the outcome variables (i.e., indicators of negative affect, face threat of response, forgiveness, and well-being). No significant interactions were found. We also examined partial correlations between relevant indicators to control for time since the SAFT. Comparison of partial correlations and zero-order correlations in Table 1 showed no notable differences.

References

Aiken, L. S., & West, S. G. (1991). *Multiple regression: Testing and interpreting interactions.* Newbury Park, CA: Sage.

Anderson, J. C., & Gerbing, D. W. (1988). Structural equation modeling in practice: A review and recommended two-step approach. *Psychological Bulletin, 103*, 411–423.

Ayduk, O., Downey, G., Testa, A., Yen, Y., & Shoda, Y. (1999). Does rejection elicit hostility in rejection sensitive women? *Social Cognition, 17*, 245–271.

Baumeister, R. F., & Leary, M. R. (1995). The need to belong: Desire for interpersonal attachments as a fundamental human motivation. *Psychological Bulletin, 117*, 497–529.

Beane, A. (1998). The trauma of peer victimization. In T. W. Miller (Ed.), *Children of trauma: Stressful life events and their effects on children and adolescents* (pp. 205–218). New York: International Universities Press.

Bollen, K. A. (1989). A new incremental fit index for general structural equation models. *Sociological Methods & Research, 17*, 303–316.

Brown, P., & Levinson, S. C. (1987). *Politeness: Some universals in language usage.* Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press.

Burton, L. A., Hafetz, J., & Henninger, D. (2007). Gender differences in relational and physical aggression. *Social Behavior and Personality, 35*, 41–50.

Card, N. A., Stucky, B. D., Sawalani, G. M., & Little, T. D. (2008). Direct and indirect aggression during childhood and adolescence: A meta-analytic review of gender differences, intercorrelations, and relations to maladjustment. *Child Development, 79*, 1185–1229.

Cillessen, A. H. N., & Mayeux, L. (2007). Variations in the association between aggression and social status: Theoretical and empirical perspectives. In P. H. Hawley, T. D. Little, & P. C. Rodkin (Eds.), *Aggression and adaptation: The bright side to bad behavior* (pp. 135–156). Mahwah, NJ: Erlbaum.

Cohen, S., Kamarch, T., & Mermelstein, R. (1983). A global measure of perceived stress. *Journal of Health and Social Behavior, 24*, 385–396.

Crick, N. R., Grotpeter, J. K., & Bigbee, M. A. (2002). Relationally and physically aggressive children's intent attributions and feelings of distress for relational and instrumental peer provocations. *Child Development, 73*, 1134–1142.

Cupach, W. R., & Carson, C. L. (2002). Characteristics and consequences of interpersonal complaints associated with perceived face threat. *Journal of Social and Personal Relationships, 19*, 443–462.

Cupach, W. R., & Metts, S. (1994). *Facework.* Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

Dornbusch, S. M., Mont-Reynaud, R., Ritter, P. L., Chen, Z., & Steinberg, L. (1991). Stressful events and their correlates among adolescents of diverse backgrounds. In M. E. Colten & S. Gore (Eds.), *Adolescent stress: Causes and consequences* (pp. 111–130). Hillsdale, NJ: Erlbaum.

Downey, G. R., Feldman, S., & Ayduk, O. (2000). Rejection sensitivity and male violence in romantic relationships. *Personal Relationships, 7*, 45–61.

Enright, R. D., Santos, M. J. D., & Al-Mabuk, R. (1989). The adolescent as forgiver. *Journal of Adolescence, 12*, 95–110.

Erbert, L. A., & Floyd, K. (2004). Affectionate expressions as face-threatening acts: Receiver assessments. *Communication Studies, 55*, 254–270.

Galan, B. R., & Underwood, M. K. (1997). A developmental investigation of social aggression among children. *Developmental Psychology, 3*, 589–600.

Gini, G. (2007). Who is blameworthy? Social identity and intergroup bullying. *School Psychology International, 28*, 77–89.

Goffman, E. (1967). *Interaction ritual: Essays on face-to-face behavior.* Garden City, NY: Anchor Books.

Gottman, J. M. (1993). A theory of marital dissolution and stability. *Journal of Family Psychology, 7*, 57–75.

Hornsey, M. J. (2008). Social identity theory and self-categorization theory: A historical review. *Social and Personality Psychology Compass, 2*(1), 204–222.

Hu, L., & Bentler, P. M. (1999). Cutoff criteria for fit indexes in covariance structure analysis: Conventional criteria versus new alternatives. *Structural Equation Modeling, 6*, 1–55.

Keltner, D., Young, R. C., Oemig, C., Heerey, E. A., & Monarch, N. D. (1998). Teasing in hierarchical and intimate relationships. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology, 75*, 1231–1247.

Kowalski, R. M. (2007). Teasing and bullying. In B. H. Spitzberg & W. R. Cupach (Eds.), *The dark side of interpersonal communication* (2nd ed., pp. 169–197). Mahwah, NJ: Erlbaum.

Kowalski, R. M., Howerton, E., & McKenzie, M. (2001). Permitted disrespect: Teasing in interpersonal interactions. In R. M. Kowalski (Ed.), *Behaving badly* (pp. 177–202). Washington, DC: American Psychological Association.

Kowalski, R. M., Walker, S., Wilkinson, R., Queen, A., & Sharpe, B. (2003). Lying, cheating, complaining, and other aversive interpersonal behaviors: A narrative examination of the darker side of relationships. *Journal of Social and Personal Relationships, 20*, 471–490.

Lease, A. M., Musgrove, K. T., & Axelrod, J. L. (2002). Dimensions of social status in preadolescent peer groups: Likability, perceived popularity, and social dominance. *Social Development, 11*, 508–555.

Lim, T. S. (1994). Facework and interpersonal relationships. In S. Ting-Toomey (Ed.), *The challenge of facework* (pp. 209–229). Albany: State University of New York Press.

Manusov, V. (2001). Introduction. In V. Manusov & J. H. Harvey (Eds.), *Attribution, communication behavior, and close relationships* (pp. xvii–xxi). New York: Cambridge University Press.

McCullough, M. E., & Hoyt, W. T. (2002). Transgression-related motivational dispositions: Personality substrates of forgiveness and their links to the big five. *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin, 28*, 1556–1573.

McCullough, M. E., Rachal, K. C., Sandage, S. J., Worthington, E. L., Jr., Wade Brown, S., & Hight, T. L. (1998). Interpersonal forgiving in close relationships: II. Theoretical elaboration and measurement. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology, 75*, 1586–1603.

McCullough, M. E., Worthington, E. L., Jr., & Rachal, K. C. (1997). Interpersonal forgiving in close relationships. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology, 73*, 321–336.

Metts, S. (2000). Face and facework: Implications for the study of personal relationships. In K. Dindia & S. Duck (Eds.), *Communication and personal relationships* (pp. 77–93). New York: Wiley.

Metts, S., Sprecher, S., & Cupach, W. R. (1991). Retrospective self-reports. In B. M. Montgomery & S. Duck (Eds.), *Studying interpersonal relationships* (pp. 162–178). New York: Guilford.

Muthén, L. K., & Muthén, B. (2006). *Mplus user's guide* (4th ed.). Los Angeles: Authors.

Ojala, K., & Nesdale, D. (2004). Bullying and social identity: The effects of group norms and distinctiveness threat on attitudes towards bullying. *British Journal of Developmental Psychology, 22*, 19–35.

Owens, L., Shute, R., & Slee, P. (2000). Guess what I just heard!: Indirect aggression among teenage girls in Australia. *Aggressive Behavior, 26*, 67–83.

Pennebaker, J. W. (1997). *Opening up: The healing power of expressing emotions* (Rev. ed.). New York: Guilford.

Putallaz, M., Kuperschmidt, J. B., Coie, J. D., McKnight, K., & Grimes, C. L. (2004). A behavioral analysis of girls' aggression and victimization. In M. Putallaz & K. L. Bierman (Eds.), *Aggression, antisocial behavior, and violence among girls: A developmental perspective* (pp. 110–134). New York: Guilford.

Rosenberg, F. R., & Simmons, R. G. (1975). Sex difference in the self-concept in adolescence. *Sex Roles, 1*, 147–159.

Rosenberg, M. (1965). *Society and the adolescent self-image.* Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.

Rusbult, C. E., Verette, J., Whitney, G. A., Slovik, L. F., & Lipkus, I. (1991). Accommodation processes in close relationships: Theory and preliminary empirical evidence. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology, 60*, 53–78.

Stephenson, M. T., & Holbert, R. L. (2003). A Monte Carlo simulation of observable versus latent variable structural equation modeling techniques. *Communication Research, 30*, 332–354.

Tajfel, H., & Turner, J. C. (1986). The social identity theory of intergroup behavior. In S. Worchel & W. G. Austin (Eds.), *The psychology of intergroup relations* (pp. 7–24). Chicago: Nelson-Hall.

Tapper, K., & Boulton, M. J. (2005). Victim and peer group responses to different forms of aggression among primary school children. *Aggressive Behavior, 31*, 238–253.

Tracy, K. (1990). The many faces of facework. In H. Giles & P. Robinson (Eds.), *The handbook of language and social psychology* (pp. 209–226). Chichester, UK: Wiley.

Tracy, K., & Tracy, S. J. (1998). Rudeness at 911: Reconceptualizing face and face attack. *Human Communication Research, 25*, 225–251.

Vangelisti, A. L. (2007). Communicating hurt. In B. H. Spitzberg & W. R. Cupach (Eds.), *The dark side of interpersonal communication* (2nd ed., pp. 121–142). Mahwah, NJ: Erlbaum.

Vaughn, B. E., & Santos, A. J. (2007). An evolutionary/ecological account of aggressive behavior and trait aggression in human children and adolescents. In P. H. Hawley, T. D. Little, & P. C. Rodkin (Eds.), *Aggression and adaptation: The bright side to bad behavior* (pp. 31–63). Mahwah, NJ: Erlbaum.

Waldron, V. R., & Kelley, D. L. (2008). *Communicating forgiveness.* Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

Watson, D., Clark, L. A., & Tellegen, A. (1988). Development and validation of brief measures of positive and negative affect: The PANAS scales. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology, 54*, 1063–1070.

Watson, D., & Friend, R. (1969). Measure of social evaluative anxiety. *Journal of Consulting and Clinical Psychology, 33*, 448–457.

Werner, N. E., & Crick, N. R. (1999). Relational aggression and social-psychological adjustment in a college sample. *Journal of Abnormal Psychology, 108*, 615–623.

Willer, E. K., & Cupach, W. R. (2008). When "sugar and spice" turn to "fire and ice": Factors affecting the adverse consequences of relational aggression among adolescent girls. *Communication Studies, 59*, 415–429.

Witvliet, C. V. O. (1997). Traumatic intrusive imagery as an emotional memory phenomenon: A review of research and explanatory information processing theories. *Clinical Psychology Review, 17*, 509–536.

Witvliet, C. V. O., Ludwig, T. E., & Laan, K. L. V. (2001). Granting forgiveness or harboring grudges: Implications for emotion, physiology, and health. *Psychological Science, 12*, 117–123.

Worthington, E. L., Jr. (1998). Empirical research in forgiveness: Looking backward, looking forward. In E. L. Worthington Jr. (Ed.), *Dimensions of forgiveness: Psychological research and theological perspectives* (pp. 321–339). Philadelphia: Templeton Foundation Press.

Worthington, E. L., Jr., Kurusu, T. A., Collins, W., Berry, J. W., Ripley, J. S., & Baier, S. N. (2000). Forgiving usually takes time: A lesson learned by studying interventions to promote forgiveness. *Journal of Psychology and Theology, 28*, 3–20.