

Voicing Conditional Forgiveness

by

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A Thesis Presented in Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for the Degree
Master of Arts

Approved February 2011 by the
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ARIZONA STATE UNIVERSITY

May 2011

ABSTRACT

The current study is the first qualitative investigation aimed solely at understanding what it means to communicate conditional forgiveness in serious romantic relationships. Conditional forgiveness is forgiveness that has been offered with the stipulation that the errant behavior cease. It is a provocative topic because some argue genuine forgiveness is not conditional, but recent discoveries that have associated its use with severe transgressions and relational deterioration suggest it is a critical site for investigation. This inductive analysis of open-ended data from 201 anonymous surveys identified both distinctions between and intersections of conditional forgiveness, forgiveness, and reconciliation. A relational dialectics analysis also revealed that reconcilable-irreconcilable was the overarching tension for conditional forgivers and six additional tensions also were also discovered: individual identity-couple identity, safety-risk, certainty-uncertainty, mercy-justice, heart-mind, and expression-suppression. Of particular intrigue, the current analysis supports the previous discovery of implicit conditional forgiveness—suppressing conditions, sometimes in response to physical and substance abuse. Ultimately, the current analysis contributes to the enduring conversation aimed at understanding the communication and pursuit of forgiveness and reconciliation. It addresses one of the basic instincts and paradoxes of existing with others—the balance between vulnerability and protection.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

This piece of scholarship is the amalgamation of many perspectives and contributions. All of them deserve my acknowledgment. First and foremost, I extend my deepest gratitude to the chair of my committee, Dr. Vincent Waldron. You consistently model to me the hallmarks of stellar scholarship. You pursue the greater good with quiet, persistent, graceful, patience. You have an uncanny insight of students, people, justice, mercy, forgiveness—and yes, me. Working with you has been a gift—a profound joy really.

I also thank my entire committee. Dearest Dr. Douglas Kelley, you and the magic you create in the classroom supplied the initial spark—both for scholarship and for peace. Thank you. I marvel at the depth and breadth of your subject knowledge, and your capacity for grace and compassion. I aspire to your faith. Dr. Kassing, I am grateful for your pragmatism, candor, and kindness, and will strive to be as efficient, expedient, and organized as you. Most of all, I have been grateful for your hospitality. Early in my program, you welcomed me with your respect. You inspired me to want more from people like you. Dr. Fisher, thank you for encouraging me to answer the big question up front. You were right. Thank you for your time and generously sharing your expertise and reading lists with me.

I also owe gratitude to so many other ASU faculty. Dr. Ramsey Eric Ramsey, Dr. Lindsey Mean, Dr. Heather Canary, Dr. Diane Gruber, Dr. Judd Ruggill, Professors Cynthia Gaffney and Meg McConnaughy, thank you each for

supporting this project. And, to all of you, thank you for broadening my perspective. It is what I came searching for.

Special thanks to so many others: My MACS comrades, Carmen, Nicki, Josh, Kathleen, and so many others. Studying and sharing with you has been a privilege. To the dear women who add insight to everything I do, Melissa, Jody, Kathy, Danielle, Angie, Chris, and Mom, to name a few. Annika, you are a gift. Thank you for caring and organizing, as a start.

To my wonderful husband, Butch, and amazing kids, Brok, Jake, and Madison—the love, laughter, and tenderness we share is such a soft place to fall. Without you, none of this would feel nearly as sweet. Thank you.

Last, but certainly not least, I would like to thank those who completed the survey. Your words inspired and filled the remainder of this analysis. I will do my best to tell your story.

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Forgiveness is considered essential to maintaining intimate relationships (e.g. Enright, 2001; Fennel, 1993; Hargrave, 1994; Waldron & Kelley, 2008; Worthington, 2006), and has been positively associated with physical and mental health (e.g. Lawler et al., 2005; Temoshok & Wald, 2005). In a survey of 381 mental health professionals, 88% reported forgiveness is an important topic for clients (Konstam et al., 2000). Forgiveness has been explored from psychological, therapeutic, (e.g. Enright, 2001; Fincham & Beach, 2001; Hargrave, 1994a; Worthington, 2006), and philosophical perspectives (Arendt, 1958; Derrida, 2001; Wolfendale, 2005); and of course, theological conceptualizations of forgiveness undergird many of these processes and philosophies. The quest to understand more about this phenomenon has inspired discoveries by communication scholars about the strategies forgivers report using in intimate relationships (e.g. Bachmann & Guerrero, 2006; 2010; Kelley, 1998; Kelley & Waldron 2005; Merolla, 2008; Waldron & Kelley, 2005; 2006; 2008).

The current study was centered on the forgiveness granting strategy of conditional forgiveness (Kelley, 1998). This is forgiveness that has been offered with the caveat that the offender's behavior improves or changes. Its use has been associated with relational history (Guerrero & Bachmann, 2010), transgression severity (Merolla, 2008; Waldron & Kelley, 2005), and despite the perception of a sincere apology (Merolla & Zhang, in press). Of particular intrigue to communication scholars, the communication of conditional forgiveness had deleterious effects on relational outcomes above and beyond the effects of

transgression severity and was used by 30% of romantic partners (Waldron & Kelley, 2005). Other findings indicate that it is sometimes expressed, other times implied (Kloeber, 2008), and has been frequently used in serious romantic relationships when previous relational satisfaction was high (Guerrero & Bachmann, 2010).

Although this type of forgiveness has been critiqued and considered paradoxical to pure forgiveness (Enright, 2001; Derrida, 2001), previous research provided evidence that among the serious transgressions that incite its use were physical and substance abuse (Kloeber, 2008). This is especially important in light of a cross-sectional survey of 1152 patients recruited from family practice clinics from February 1997 to January 1999, which indicated that 53.6% reported experiencing some form of intimate partner violence (Coker, Smith, Bethea, King & McKeown, 2000). Consequently, it was necessary to suspend the philosophical debate so that researchers can understand the communication of conditional forgiveness in serious romantic relationships.

This investigation was a qualitative study of the conditional forgiveness practices of 201 serious romantic partners. It was organized into the following sections: 1) literature review and rationale summary, 2) theoretical framework, 3) method, 4) analysis section one, 5) analysis section two, 6) discussion, and finally 7) the limitations and concluding thoughts.

Review of Literature

The overall purpose of this section was to present a synthesis of forgiveness literature that contextualized and articulated the rationale for the current study. To that end, the first section of this literature review presented definitions that guided the current study; the second discussed the various research perspectives that inform forgiveness research; the third section highlighted the contributions made by communicative scholars; the fourth concentrated on the discoveries relevant to conditional forgiveness; finally, the literature review revealed how relational dialectics theory (RDT) provided the analytical framework for the current examination.

Definitions

Understanding how forgiveness and reconciliation are distinct but related concepts helped guide this analysis. A central component of this review was to discuss how scholars currently define conditional forgiveness.

Forgiveness. Scholars have been challenged to reach a consensual definition of forgiveness and the crux of this dilemma is capturing the right tension between the behavioral and cognitive components (Worthington, 2005, p. 4). Pioneering forgiveness scholar, Enright (2001), favors a definition derived from philosopher Joanna North which acknowledges the pain and anger felt by the victim, but still emphasizes the choice to grant mercy. It is also based on the supposition that imperfection is ubiquitous, and mutual respect should be as well (p. 26). Some scholars favor definitions that frame forgiveness as a behavior or

intention (e.g. DeBlasio, 1998; Hargrave, 1994), whereas others emphasize the emotional transformation from negative to positive (e.g. Enright, 2001; Worthington, 2005).

Definitional ambiguity was prevalent among clinical practitioners (Anderson, 2007) and Cosgrove and Konstam (2008) urged researchers to search for definitions grounded in forgiveness as it is experienced in relationships. “Focusing on the lived experience of forgiveness may help researchers and counselors avoid unhelpful dichotomizations such as ‘authentic vs. inauthentic’ forgiveness” (p. 1). Likewise, the current study operates from a communicative framework and definition that blends perspectives, despite the fact that there is a lingering “squabble” about the role of communication within forgiveness (Worthington, 2005, p. 5):

Forgiveness is a relational process whereby harmful conduct is acknowledged by one or both partners; the harmed partner extends undeserved mercy to the perceived transgressor; one or both partners experience a transformation from negative to positive psychological states, and the meaning of the relationship is renegotiated, with the possibility of reconciliation. (Waldron & Kelley, 2008, p. 19)

This communicative definition is appropriate for several reasons: 1) it illustrates the relational aspect of negotiating forgiveness, but does not require it, 2) it acknowledges the cognitive transformation that scholars universally describe,

and 3) it articulates reconciliation as a possibility, but not a requirement of forgiveness.

Reconciliation. Reconciliation is a prevalent research theme among forgiveness scholars; however, surprisingly, little literature has presented a concise definition of reconciliation. For forgiveness scholar Enright (2001), “*Reconciliation* is the act of two people coming together following separation” (p. 31). He also added, “Reconciliation is the restoration of the relationship after the anger quells” (p. 273). Ahmed & Braithwaite (2006) agree that relationship restoration is at the heart of understanding reconciliation (p. 351). The following scholar elaborated by acknowledging that reconciliation frequently includes conversation about future relationship standards. “Reconciliation...reflects the mutual interest of two parties and embodies a willingness to reengage in the relationship in the belief that further injury is less likely to occur and that the benefits of new association outweigh the risks (Hawk, 2007, p. 302).” As such, because our topic is centered on negotiating conditions, this definition will guide the current study.

Distinction between forgiveness and reconciliation. Perhaps some of the definitional ambiguity stems from a general discord between theological and secular conceptualizations of reconciliation and forgiveness. Some theological scholars insist that forgiveness must include reconciliation. By contrast, forgiveness scholars highlight the important distinction between forgiveness and reconciliation (i.e. Enright, 2001; Fincham & Beach, 2001; Waldron & Kelley,

2008; Worthington, 2005), but also acknowledge these terms are frequently used interchangeably (i.e. Balkin, Freeman, & Lyman, 2009; Hawk, 2007, p. 302). Frise and McMinn (2010) conducted a quantitative and qualitative analysis and concluded that religious persons are more likely to equate forgiveness and reconciliation, whereas more secular persons maintain distinctions between the two, while also acknowledging an inherent connection. Balkin, Freeman, and Lyman (2009) present a model of forgiveness that places the decision to reconcile as primordial to the forgiveness process. If reconciliation is the desire or option, forgiveness is then a mutual negotiation; if reconciliation is deemed not safe or desirable, then the process of forgiveness is different. However, because in many instances uncertainty shrouds reconciliation, and partners will sometimes take time to forgive and reconcile, the following explanation will inform the current study:

Forgiveness is a process undertaken by one person in relation to another, with or without interaction with that person. On the other hand, reconciliation is a process of reestablishing relationship, renewing trust, settling differences so that cooperation and sense of harmony are restored. Reconciliation brings two parties together in a way that forgiveness may not. (Hawk, 2007, p. 302)

Making these fine distinctions is critical because, “Some people advise against forgiving because they mistakenly believe that forgiveness and reconciliation must occur together” (Freedman & Knupp, 2003, p. 137).

There are additional nuances important to understanding the connection between forgiveness and reconciliation. First, forgiveness can exist without reconciliation (Balkin, Freeman, & Lyman, 2009), and it does not necessarily guarantee reconciliation (Enright, 2001). For instance, someone may forgive an abuser and choose not to harbor ill-feelings, but discontinue the relationship. Similarly, as noted by Freedman and Knupp (2003), “One can choose not to reconcile and hope that the offender will change his or her hurtful behavior” (p. 137-138). This would be considered forgiveness without reconciliation. Tough love in response to addiction is an example of this.

Alternately, people may choose to appear reconciled and stay in a relationship, without having truly forgiven (Fincham, Hall, & Beach, 2006). A Waldron and Kelley (2008) interviewee shared that she had stayed married to her husband, but admitted she had never forgiven him for uprooting their family without her consent. Enright (2001) warned that “remnants of resentment” can be barriers to intimacy and full reconciliation (p. 263-264). He also added, “In my view, giving and receiving forgiveness precede genuine reconciliation” (p. 263). As such, forgiveness has been shown to increase the likelihood of reconciliation (Hall & Fincham, 2006). Enright (2001) added other substantive insight about reconciliation.

Those who actively work together on the processes of giving and receiving forgiveness are far along the journey toward reconciliation. Nevertheless, there are several issues involved in rebuilding the

relationship beyond forgiveness: trust, open communication while rewriting the contract, and restored justice. (p. 264)

It is critical that scholars continue the search to clearly define forgiveness and its related concepts because, “Misunderstandings of forgiveness often lead to unwarranted conclusions that forgiving is psychologically unhealthy or unwise” (Freedman & Knupp, 2003, p. 137). This led nicely to the topic of the current study, which is another understudied and misunderstood phenomenon.

Conditional forgiveness. Conditional forgiveness has been defined as forgiveness given with stipulations or qualifications (Kelley, 1998; Waldron & Kelley, 2005; 2008). The offended partner links forgiveness to the future, contingent to the offender’s improved behavior. For example, “I forgive you as long as you never hurt me like that again.” The conditions might entail guarantees that the same behavior will not be repeated. For example, “I forgive you as long as you promise to never do that again.” Others will require their partner to make additional changes such as, “I will forgive you, but you need to start attending AA meetings.” Waldron and Kelley (2005) elaborated further, “The aggrieved partner asserts relational control and attempts to make the relationship more predictable by stipulating an if/then state of affairs: If you change your behavior, then I will forgive you” (p. 734).

Although scholars and philosophers have argued that genuine forgiveness does not include stipulations (e.g. Derrida, 2001; Enright, 2001; Fincham & Beach, 2001; Wolfendale, 2005), and other scholars contend that Christian

conceptualizations of forgiveness exclude conditions (Cohen, Malka, Rozin & Chermas, 2006), the review of literature continued to reveal that the prevalence and context of conditional forgiveness make it a noteworthy subject.

Multiple Perspectives of Forgiveness

Forgiveness research is an amalgamation of multiple perspectives. While it is far beyond the scope of this paper to comprehensively review the theological, philosophical, psychological, and therapeutic voices that encompass the current culture of forgiveness, a synthesis and some interesting highlights will help contextualize the current study.

Theological contributions. Forgiveness is a topic that most religions address and value and there is evidence that religious individuals also tend to favor forgiveness. Fox and Thomas (2008) sampled 475 Christians, Jews, Muslims, and secular individuals and found that regardless of the religion, the degree of “religiosity (faith, interpretation, prayer and attendance) correlated significantly and positively with three forgiveness measures” (Fox & Thomas, 2008, p. 182), concluding that the strongest predictor of forgiveness was a belief in God (p. 184). Similarly, forgiveness is a central theme of Christianity (e.g. Casey, 1998), and scholars have sought to establish a positive correlation between religiosity and forgiveness (Jose & Alfons, 2007). In a study aimed at understanding the power of religious teachings and forgiveness, Exline (2008) collected data from a Baptist sample and reported that greater interpersonal

forgiveness was predicted by the belief that God will only forgive those who forgive others and that “God says we must turn the other cheek” (p. 136).

Can religious individuals withhold forgiveness? Although there is evidence linking positive dispositions toward forgiveness with religiosity, the literature also provides Christian perspectives compelled to critique overly simplistic conceptualizations of forgiveness. The overall argument is that when used inappropriately, or without careful contextualization, cultural pressure to forgive can perpetuate harm (Exline, 2008). Protestant Scholars searched for ways to reconcile the issue of forgiving sexual abuse perpetrated by clergy and argued that “The path to truth leads to questions that press hard and require discernment” (Evinger & Yoder, 2002, p. 72). They used case studies to point out that misunderstandings about forgiveness and abuses of power are a complication surrounding the rhetoric of forgiveness. To illustrate this more thoroughly, Christian scholar Crisp (2007), herself a sexual abuse survivor, argued that misinterpretations influence Christians to feel unduly pressured to forgive their perpetrators, withhold anger, and for various reasons suppress their voices. Similarly, Casey (1998) shared the following about her feelings of paradox:

Yet, through my years of Christian discipleship I have found myself unable to come to terms with the expectation placed upon me, not only as a Christian, but also as a survivor of abuse, that I must undertake the action of forgiveness if indeed I am to be forgiven myself. (Casey, 1998, p. 224)

This testimony raises our awareness that perplexity exists about the limits of forgiveness even within religious perspectives. Synthesizing across religions yields even greater bewilderment.

Religious variation. Tackling an intelligent and responsible analysis of the variations among religious perspectives of forgiveness is an undertaking too grandiose for this paper. As a start, it would delve into the distinctions between religions' definitions, beliefs, and requirements of forgiveness. Consequently, this literature review will concentrate on highlighting a few disparities of particular relevance to the current investigation. Cohen, Malka, Rozin and Cherfas (2006) point out that by Christian standards forgiveness should not be conditional, require repentance, or be confused with justice. In fact, all sins are forgivable in Christianity. By contrast, they argue that, "In Judaism, some offenses are just too bad to be forgiven" (p. 91), and that sincere repentance is a condition of forgiveness.

Not only does variation exist among religious perspectives; secular voices contribute to forgiveness dialogue. Olivett and Powers (2009) collected qualitative data from inpatient mental health patients to gain an understanding about how they conceptualized both giving and receiving forgiveness. They made an intriguing connection between their results and the results of another study, (Brenneis, 2002), which also happened to be the model of their own. They noted that Brenneis (2002) collected narratives from clergy who were receiving inpatient psychiatric care and only five percent of those respondents used

behavioral characteristics to describe the act of forgiveness; by contrast, 63% of the respondents included behavioral characteristics to describe forgiveness in the study of non-clergy inpatient psychiatric patients (Olivett & Powers, 2009). In other words, clergy tend to consider forgiveness an intrapersonal endeavor; whereas non-clergy consider forgiveness interpersonal. They argued that that this evidence emphasized the disparity between theological and lay conceptualizations of forgiveness. The extent to which this could be generalized more broadly is unclear given that both samples were inpatient mental health patients. However, it did raise awareness that secular individuals may be more inclined to consider behavior change a requisite of forgiveness.

Consequently, it is a formidable challenge to present forgiveness research that synthesizes perspectives; doing so was, and should be, a delicate balance that resists the urge to privilege one voice over others.

Philosophical contributions. Because of its association with monotheism, forgiveness is sometimes shunned by secular thinkers. Fortunately, Hannah Arendt's words (1958) inspire those from varying perspectives to abandon ideological debate in favor of the greater good:

The discoverer of the role of forgiveness in the realm of human affairs was Jesus of Nazareth. The fact that he made this discovery in a religious context and articulated it in religious language is no reason to take it any less seriously in a strictly secular sense (p. 238).

One of the most enduring reflections of Arendt's (1958) book, *The Human Condition* is her belief in humanity's capacity for renewal (Canovan, 1998, p. vii). As such, Arendt argues that without forgiveness, every person would "be confined to one single deed from which we could never recover" (p. 237) and despair would inevitably befall humanity. The threat that political action imposes on forgiveness is not lost to Arendt. She warns that forgiveness is best left to the realm of human affairs, given that the invocation of forgiveness on behalf of groups or interests has been exploited. This is a concern also expressed by other philosophical perspectives (Bernstein, 2006; Derrida, 2001).

Aporia of forgiveness. Philosophers have argued that our culture is in a state of "unknowing" in regards to forgiveness because of atrocities such as the Holocaust and countless other genocides (Arendt, 1958; Bernstein, 2006; Derrida, 2001). French philosopher Derrida (2001) exclaimed, "The concept of the 'crime against humanity' remains on the horizon of the entire geopolitics of forgiveness" (p. 30). Derrida's contention is that history continues to change the face of forgiveness (Bernstein, 2006). As such, defining forgiveness perpetually eludes; hermeneutics is at the core of this philosophical debate. However, Derrida (2001) implores, "*Forgiveness must have a meaning*" (p. 36). Reflecting back to the survivor of abuse cited above, when forgiveness is misunderstood, it does not "free a person from abuse, only perpetuates it" (Casey, 1998, p. 228).

For Derrida, another pivotal barrier to forgiveness is that it requires forgiveness of the unforgivable (p. 32), and therefore we are left with a sense of

aporia (32-33). This impasse or uncertainty traps forgivers between a desire to forgive (“To forgive is divine”) and the need to be treated with respect (“Don’t be a doormat”). We are then seduced by the desire to prescribe conditions to our forgiveness—“that the guilty one repents, mends his ways, asks forgiveness, and thus would be changed by a new obligation” (Derrida, 2001, p. 38). Derrida asks, “In this case, can one still speak of forgiveness” (p. 39). His point here is that requirements of forgiveness are in fact antithetical to pure forgiveness. “Must one not maintain that an act of forgiveness worthy of its name, if there ever is such a thing, must forgive the unforgivable, and without condition?” (p. 39). He goes on to say, “Even if this radical purity can seem excessive, hyperbolic, mad?” But, he also contends that in the face of the madness forgiveness is “perhaps, the only thing that arrives, that surprises, like a revolution, the ordinary course of history, politics, and law” (p. 39). Consequently, despite the philosophical critique and aporia of forgiveness, both Arendt and Derrida dare to dream of forgiveness. For Arendt (1958), “The freedom contained in Jesus’ teachings of forgiveness is the freedom from vengeance” (p. 241). For Derrida, impossibility looms, “Unless it becomes possible from the moment that it appears impossible” (Derrida, 2001, p. 36).¹ As such, profound thinkers from both religion and philosophy shape and inspire scholars to pursue the investigation of forgiveness from social science paradigms.

¹ Personal communication with Ramsey Eric Ramsey (Spring, 2008) guided the author’s connection of philosophical literature and conditional forgiveness.

Psychological contributions. The field of psychology has expended considerable effort investigating how forgiveness is both physically and psychologically beneficial. However, other scholars acknowledge that complex variables make it difficult to make universal claims about the cause and effect of forgiveness on health.

Physical and psychological benefits. This body of work contributes a vast amount of evidence that highlights the physical and mental health benefits of forgiving. First, forgiveness is considered essential to maintaining intimate relationships (e.g. Fincham & Beach, 2001; Worthington, 2006), and satisfying relationships have been associated with both longer and healthier lives. Forgiveness has been linked with myriad physical health benefits (e.g. Harris & Thorsen, 2005) such as reduced blood pressure and heart rate (Lawler et al., 2005), improved sleep quality (Stoia-Caraballo et al., 2008), and has been reported to improve mental health (Bono, McCullough & Root, 2008; Toussaint & Webb, 2005; Tse, 2009). Whited, Wheat and Larkin (2010) found that blood pressure stabilized more quickly in people with more dispositional forgiveness.

It is difficult to know the cause and effect relationship between forgiveness and physical health, but researchers continued to argue that the choice to forgive is a spiritual and psychological experience that enhances psychological health (Cioni, 2007). Temoshok and Wald (2005) examined the forgiveness experiences of persons living with HIV/AIDS to demonstrate that forgiveness is a component of holistic living that improves the quality of life.

Qualitative researchers have provided some concrete examples that may help make sense of quantitative distillations. Baker (2005), herself a Hospice social worker, shared a case study about facilitating reconciliation between a dying elderly patient and his estranged daughter, who had been molested by her older brother. Baker recognized sadness in her dying patient despite a somewhat pleasant disposition and seemingly supportive family. Upon inquiry about his absent third daughter, she described his strong reaction when asked: “With all of the energy in his weak body, grabbed my hand, and with tears filling his eyes, nodded his head, yes” (p. 89). She added, “As tears slid from Mr. Smith’s eyes to his pillow, I wondered how best to proceed” (p. 89).

With much cajoling she convinced the family to let her contact the daughter in order to allow Mr. Smith a peaceful death. Baker said, “It was quite an emotional phone call that lasted about two hours and hails as the single most effective counseling event of my career” (p. 91). The daughter shared both her own regret for pain she had caused her father, and her lingering resentment about the molestation that had not been acknowledged. While the incident does not come close to healing the entire family, Baker noted that both Mr. Smith and his daughter experienced some relief from this last gesture “His eyes, which were gently fixed directly on Lori’s, seemed to offer her the comfort of forgiveness as they slowly and peacefully lowered shut for the last time” (p. 93). Baker’s argument was that Mr. Smith was finally able to die peacefully because of

forgiveness. She was also encouraged by Lori's commitment to seek more thorough resolution with the assistance of future family therapy.

Is forgiveness always psychologically beneficial? A group of psychologists, similar to the aforementioned philosophers and theologians, acknowledge there are barriers to forgiveness. Luchies, Finkel, McNulty, and Kumashiro (2010) found that forgiveness can sometimes have harmful effects for the forgiver. Their analysis included the results of four studies; study one was a five-year longitudinal study of 72 recently married couples (participants reported their self-respect approximately every six to eight months); study four was a six-month longitudinal examination of dating partners. Study one results illustrated that when remorse and partner respect were high, "greater forgiveness predicted bolstered self-respect over time" (p. 13). On the contrary, when the offending partner was low in agreeableness (remorse, respect for partner's feelings), "greater forgiveness predicted significantly diminished self-respect over time" (p. 13), providing evidence that supported their "doormat effect" sub-hypothesis.

Illuminating evidence such as this supported the argument that forgiveness scholars should continue to think critically about research questions and paradigms. Additionally, the methods and assumptions about forgiveness should be interrogated. For example, forgiveness in many contexts should inform results. Fortunately, some highly relevant forgiveness scholars continue to urge researchers to think critically and do this work. Worthington (2005) urged researchers, "Instead of reading as a forgiveness advocate, read as a dedicated

detractor” (p. 9). Hargrave (1994a) also argued that violent and destructive acts, among other chronic irresponsible behaviors, pose challenges for forgivers.

The aforementioned evidence and scholarly commentary emphasized the importance that forgiveness is complicated and remains misunderstood. In light of that, forgiveness scholars have also aimed to illustrate that increased education about forgiveness can help bridge those gaps. For example, forgiveness scholar Enright (2001) believes that genuine forgiveness does not bind forgivers to hurt or perpetuate it, but instead gives them the freedom to remove themselves. The key is learning what genuine forgiveness is. Likewise, DiBlasio and Benda (2008) found preliminary evidence that couples who learned a step-by-step decision-based approach in a three-hour forgiveness session may be more inclined toward marital satisfaction. Education is one way of advancing knowledge. However, people often need guidance to navigate the mines and pitfalls associated with forgiveness. Counselors can help facilitate this education.

Therapeutic contributions. As such, forgiveness is a skill Worthington (2005) believes therapists should teach. Of course, much of the psychological literature informs the therapeutic approaches, but it is important to illustrate how therapeutic perspectives have been used to advance applied forgiveness in family relationships and couple’s therapy. However, it was also important to emphasize that even psychotherapists have a difficult time defining forgiveness (Anderson, 2007), which was illustrated by the variety of therapies described below.

Family therapies. Family forgiveness therapy has garnered attention from researchers. This is critical because there is abundant evidence that family environments have an impact on mental health and general well-being (e.g. Martin & Ross, 2005; Schrodtt, Ledbetter, & Ohrt, 2007; Schrodtt, Witt, & Messersmith, 2008). Hargrave (1994a) advanced family forgiveness theory by detailing four stations of forgiveness: insight, understanding, giving the opportunity for compensation, and the overt act of forgiveness. He also outlined a guide for practitioners to use in family forgiveness work. His therapeutic model stemmed from his theoretical framework that identified two broad categories that frame forgiveness: *exonerating* (insight, understanding), and *forgiving* (giving the opportunity for compensation and the overt act of forgiveness).

Other researchers have made contributions to family forgiveness literature. Murray (2002) demonstrated with the use of a case study that intergenerational forgiveness can be used to disrupt vicious cycles of abuse, anger, and pain. Gordon, Hughes, Tomcik, Dixon, and Litzinger (2009) found that when parents had more positive forgiveness attitudes, parent alliances were stronger, whereas more negative forgiveness decreased parenting alliance. There was also evidence that forgiveness between divorced co-parents was associated with more favorable outcomes for families (Bonach, 2009). Bonach established this by conducting a quantitative analysis that measured predictor variables (blame, offense severity), control variables (remorse, perception of hostile divorce, prior conflict, satisfying financial settlement), and dependent variables (quality parenting).

DiBlasio (1998) detailed a case study that outlined a family forgiveness episode that began when a 35-year old mother of three sought counseling for depression and reported plans for suicide. Upon discovering that unresolved issues with her father and brother were a primary source of strife, a family forgiveness intervention was planned that included the following steps: perceptions of past family, definitions and contracting, statement of the offense, questions and explanation about the offense, disclosure of hurt and pain, plan to stop/prevent offensive behavior, caution to the forgiver, formal request, and a ceremonial act.

Initially, DeBlasio wrote, “During the asking and granting of forgiveness, father and daughter shed tears and hugged one another for the first time that either could remember” (p. 92). He subsequently added that years later the family participated in a forgiveness conference and “They described it as a life-changing experience” (p. 92). He also added, as a result, they had enjoyed years of “Peaceful and enjoyable family visits and holidays together” (p. 92).

Interestingly, in the limitations of this case study, DiBlasio shared the revelation that in a follow-up interview, it became clear that this family was still pursuing genuine forgiveness. He speculated that perhaps they had misunderstood forgiveness or that “pseudo-forgiveness” had occurred. His conjecture is difficult to confirm or deny. What was more obvious is that this case exemplifies the formidability of forgiveness—a reminder that in complicated family systems with serious transgressions, the pursuit of forgiveness often occurs over years, even

decades, as indicated by previous scholars (i.e. Enright, 2001; Hargrave, 1994a; Waldron & Kelley, 2008; Worthington, 2005). In some instances, fortunately, families can release themselves from generations of anger and cycles of abuse by learning the tools of forgiveness (DiBlasio, 1998; Hargrave, 1994a).

Couple therapies. Numerous research has advanced what is known about romantic partners and the forgiveness process. Marriage researchers have found that forgiveness is an indelible part of long-term healthy relationships (Waldron & Kelley, 2008; Worthington, Lerner, & Sharp, 2005) and forgiveness is considered by married couples (over 20 years duration) to be among the most important characteristics of a happy marriage (Fennel, 1993). Forgiveness scholar Worthington (2005) pointed out that couples respond well when they receive professional therapy aimed at improving forgiveness communication skills and conflict management. Greenburg, Warwar, and Malcolm (2010) studied 12 couples longitudinally with an emotion focused forgiveness therapy intervention and found that in 11 couples, most factors improved (except trust).

Olmstead, Blick, and Mills (2009) used a qualitative methodology of interviews with ten licensed therapists' approaches with couples recovering from infidelity. Reviewing relationship history and uncovering the latent relational issues were critical in establishing the likelihood of a chronic pattern. Therapists also identified that inconsistencies between partners' perception of forgiveness posed challenges to this process. That is, what language do they use to describe the forgiveness? What does forgiveness mean to each partner? Time was also a

salient topic—1) that forgiveness takes time, which is highly consistent with what so many forgiveness scholars have argued and demonstrated (i.e. Enright, 2001; Fincham & Beach, 2001; Hargrave, 1994; Kelley, 1998; Waldron & Kelley, 2008), and 2) that therapists should be highly sensitive to cues that couples are ready to broach the subject of forgiveness.

More concretely, practitioners have reported the successful models they have used when assisting couples with forgiveness. Barnett and Youngberg (2004) used a case study to advance the use of a therapeutic intervention aimed at guiding couples toward forgiveness in response to infidelity and neglecting the relationship. They use an activity and metaphor that involves a potted plant. After the initial emotional venting, couples are required to dig up their soil if they revisit the event, which of course delays germination. Theoretically, this is meant to “Reinforce how important it is that things remain buried” (Barnett & Youngberg, 2004, p. 17). This illustrates the lingering cultural pressure (whether perceived as productive or not), to forgive and forget.

Alternately, other practitioners prefer to encourage continued discussion and sense-making. Hill (2010) used clinical vignettes to advance the claim that forgiveness is a discovery process rather than a decision. As many forgiveness scholars agree, empathy is critical to the discovery process and Hill illustrated how therapists can promote a “gentle sharing” that may often lead to forgiveness (p. 173). He goes on to warn that empathy can only be cultivated in equitable relationships where neither party is marginalized or “disenfranchised” (p. 173).

Case (2005) advanced a similar therapy that he has used for seven years with clients recovering from infidelity, among other things. While his process is thorough, he emphasizes the importance that sincere apology is imperative to affect empathy. Interesting insight came from Gordon, Baucom, and Snyder (2005) who also observed that couples who had an easier time regulating their emotions tended to respond more favorably to forgiveness therapy. They also shared that many couples came to them after leaving other therapists where at least one partner reported having felt judged by a therapist. Perhaps these findings are related to the research above about timing. For example, maybe intense emotion signals that the timing is not yet right.

Theological, philosophical, psychological, and therapeutic perspectives have advanced knowledge about forgiveness. What has been overlooked is how forgiveness is enacted in non-therapeutic settings. Consequently, the current study seeks a more concrete way of understanding the enactment of forgiveness: The communication of forgiveness.

Toward a Communicative Perspective

As evidenced by the literature thus far, scholars from myriad perspectives have substantively contributed to forgiveness research. Theology and philosophy underpin both scholarly and lay understandings of forgiveness; the field of psychology has carved an indelible imprint in the way forgiveness is conceptualized; vast and varied approaches to and philosophies of therapy have been advanced. Nonetheless, many forgiveness questions remain unanswered.

Also indicated by literature, disagreement and even confusion about what constitutes forgiveness (and does not) also abounds. Among the lingering questions are: How does one forgive? Is forgiveness always appropriate? How do people forgive without inviting chronic cycles of abuse? What is the relationship between forgiveness and reconciliation?

The unanswered questions have incited scholars to discover more about the way people enact forgiveness in their personal relationships. Scholars and practitioners have written and warned that forgiveness is difficult (Enright, 2001). Consequently, capturing and understanding this process is critical; because, ultimately, how people engage in the forgiveness process informs and influences the future of forgiveness. The language of forgiveness is a dialogue—an unfolding dialogue. Consequently, over the last decade, communication scholars have begun the process of understanding how forgiveness is communicated in interpersonal relationships (e.g. Bachmann & Guerrero, 2006; Guerrero & Bachman, 2010; Kelley, 1998; Kelley & Waldron, 2006; Kloeber, 2008; Merolla, 2008; Merolla & Zhang, in press; Waldron & Kelley, 2005; 2008).

One of the seminal contributions to this quest came from Kelley (1998). He collected narratives from married couples, parents, children, extended family, friends, dating couples, coworkers, and stranger/acquaintances, to glean insight as to how and why people communicate interpersonal forgiveness. Interested in understanding the relational component, 304 narratives were collected for incidents when the participant had granted forgiveness, as well as an incident

when the participant had sought forgiveness. Through the use of analytic induction and subsequent coding, granting strategies fell distinctly into one of three categories: direct, indirect, or conditional forgiveness. Forgiveness seeking resulted in the same three categories: direct, indirect, or conditional. Forgivers' and offenders' motivation was also ascertained. Kelley's research helped incite myriad communicative forgiveness research.

In a follow-up study, Waldron and Kelley (2005) focused on the romantic relationship and used principle components analysis to identify five categories: explicit, discussion, conditional, nonverbal, and minimization. Among other interesting results was how forgiveness granting strategies were associated with relational outcomes (strengthen, weaken, normalize). Of particular relevance to the current study, conditional forgiveness was found to have a moderate association with relational deterioration, and will be developed more fully in a subsequent section. This powerful information provided additional evidence that scholars should continue the quest to understand more about the power of forgiveness communication. Forgiveness seeking results from the same sample were reported in Kelley and Waldron (2005) and resulted in the following categories: explicit, nonverbal, compensation, explanation, and humor.

Dating partners were the subject of the Bachmann and Guerrero research (2006), and like previous methods (Waldron & Kelley, 2005), they used various scales in combination with some open-ended data. This study used Likert-type scales to measure apologies, and forgiveness; the type of hurtful event was

considered significant and gathered by coding a narrative using the Metts (1994) list of relational transgressions and Vangelesti (1994) list of hurtful events. The hurtful events included things such as break ups, sexual infidelity, negative valuations of worth/value, deception, dating or flirting with others, negative expressions of desire/preference, forgotten occasion/change of plans, unfair accusations, threat of harm, and violations of confidence. They found integrative communication to be a significant predictor of forgiveness, but also found evidence that suggests that “the severity of the hurtful event may sometimes preclude forgiveness, even when the errant partners tries to make amends” (2006, p. 53). More specifically, and not necessarily surprising, when a partner felt they had received a sincere apology, forgiveness was more likely (Bachmann & Guerrero, 2006).

Bachmann and Guerrero (2006) revealed other noteworthy findings. Results indicated that forgiveness was most difficult for partners when the transgression involved infidelity or a break up. Sexual infidelity and relational break up were considered the least forgivable by participants, and surprisingly, threats of harm were considered one of the more easily forgiven transgressions. They posited that perhaps actual physical violence would be viewed less favorably, but that remains to be empirically discovered. They also found evidence that the perception of a sincere apology often accompanied integrative or distributive communication. An important caveat – only integrative communication was positively associated with forgiveness. In their discussion,

they suggested future research include additional discovery about hurtful events. Findings specifically related to the current topic, conditional forgiveness, will also be more fully developed in subsequent sections.

In their (2010) study, Guerrero and Bachmann narrowed their sample to only serious dating partners, this time with a longitudinal approach, and quantitative questionnaire data. Phase one measured prior relational value, satisfaction, commitment, investment, and quality of alternatives. Approximately three months later, phase two was used to collect follow-up data only from phase one participants who had forgiven an errant partner since the initial questionnaire. Their creative method allowed them to parse out the influence that relational history and overall quality has on ensuing forgiveness communication. (See also Waldron & Kelley, 2008 forgiveness model.) This study also employed a hybrid of expectancy violations theory and an investment model. Similarly, Kloeber (2008) used a close relative of IM (social exchange theory) in a small secondary study to examine the use of conditional forgiveness in romantic relationships, which will also be discussed more carefully in sections to follow. Both of these investigations revealed that forgivers appear to qualitatively compare the perceived benefits and rewards of their relationships as they consider forgiveness. For example, Kloeber (2008) cited a participant's use of the phrase, "I had invested a lot of time and energy in this relationship. I didn't want to see it wasted" (p. 11). Sidelinger and Booth-Butterfield (2007) used a similar approach and found evidence that romantic partners were more likely to forgive their

partners when they felt their partner had a high perceived mate value. In these instances, the partner who felt of less value perceived that their relational alternatives were also limited.

Merolla (2008) and Merolla and Zhang (in press) have also investigated the role of communication within forgiveness. Merolla's initial study (2008) sampled friends and dating partners. His results indicated that dating partners were more likely to use direct or conditional strategies, while friends were more likely to use indirect strategies. Indirect and conditional strategies were more likely used as transgression severity and blameworthiness increased. Among Merolla's significant contributions is what he identified as ongoing negative affect (ONA), which is the phenomenon that occurs when partners express forgiveness, yet still continue to harbor negative feelings or resentment related to the transgression. Likewise, ONA was most likely when the transgression was severe (Merolla, 2008, p. 129).

In a subsequent study, Merolla and Zhang (in press) expanded the sample to include offended partners in close relationships (partners, friends, siblings, mothers, and fathers), and specifically asked people to report on a hurtful communication episode. Results of structural equation modeling indicate that the offense and offender variables (severity, blame, offender response) influence the forgiveness strategy (i.e., direct, indirect, and conditional), which closely relates to the results of Guerrero & Bachmann (2010). Merolla (2008) and Merolla and Zhang (in press) provide substantive detail about conditional forgiveness which

will also be thoroughly developed in ensuing sections. When taken as a whole, the empirical findings thus far provide evidence that the way forgivers communicate is important. It is indicative of relational history; it impacts the current transgression and forgiveness; it influences the trajectory of the relationship. What remains unclear is some of the richness of the forgiveness experience. For example, how do people communicate indirectly? In what ways do they manage uncertainty, reestablish trust, or attain a sense of justice? Qualitative methods have begun to help bridge this gap.

Waldron and Kelley (2008) conducted interviews with long-term married couples in an effort to understand how couples reflect on their marriage triumphs and tribulations. Forgiveness was among the salient themes that emerged from these couples, and in their book *Communicating Forgiveness*, was bountiful evidence collected from both parties' perspectives. Their interviews were structured so that each partner spoke both privately with an interviewer, and some interviewing was done with both parties present. The strength of this type of data was multi-fold. For some, long-term married couples are considered role models. In retrospect, couples' narratives can summarize the natural ebb and flow that long marriages inevitably endure. But, as with all perspectives, there were limitations. Memories may have distilled the hardship of the forgiveness episode; cohort effects may restrict the applicability to today's generations (i.e. gender roles); and for these couples, commitment to staying married may have superseded other measures of satisfaction.

In addition to detailing and analyzing the couple interviews, *Communicating Forgiveness* was informed by a decade's worth of quantitative and qualitative survey data, and made a number of substantive contributions to forgiveness literature. First, Waldron and Kelley advanced the first communicative definition and communicative model of forgiveness. Second, they synthesized forgiveness literature from myriad perspectives. Third, these scholars provided multiple theoretical lenses from which the communication of forgiveness could be analyzed. Fourth, they presented the Communicative Tasks of Forgiveness model. And finally, Waldron and Kelley introduced negotiating morality theory (NMT), and posited ten moral functions of forgiving communication. The work advanced in their book provides a heuristic framework from which scholars interested in understanding the central role communication plays in understanding forgiveness can begin.

Communication scholars revealed the use and prevalence of conditional forgiveness. In turn, its association with relational deterioration makes it a subject worth investigating further. The next section delved more deeply into these findings and provided the final contextualization for the current study.

Conditional Forgiveness Discoveries

Conditional forgiveness, its prevalence and correlative data, and subsequent conjecture about its purpose and use are among the significant discoveries by communication scholars. This section first reviewed the debate about conditional forgiveness. Next, it detailed and made connections among the

post-positivist and sparse interpretive findings. Finally, it illustrated the subsequent gaps in the literature.

Is conditional forgiveness a paradox? Philosophers and scholars of forgiveness have spent a considerable amount of time debating the topic of conditional forgiveness (e.g. Derrida, 2001; Enright et.al, 1994). Central to this argument is that whereas Christian conceptualizations require unconditional forgiveness, Judaism does require repentance of its offenders (Cohen, Malka, Rozin, & Cherfas, 2006). As discussed earlier in this literature review, in his essay, *On Forgiveness*, Jacques Derrida (2001) interrogates this debate. He highlights the inherent paradox that pure (Christian) forgiveness requires—to forgive the unforgivable—an impossibility. He exposes the inevitable hypocrisy of expecting “that the guilty one repents, mends his ways, asks forgiveness, and thus would be changed by a new obligation” (Derrida, 2001, p. 38). However, to a large extent, the purpose of this study is to simply acknowledge the paradox, set aside the debate, and continue the quest to uncover what it means to those who are using it. In that light, this review turns to some of the social scientific discoveries that provide proof of the significance and relevance of this communicative strategy.

Post-positivist scholars have begun to address various conditional forgiveness questions: Who is using conditional forgiveness? When do they use it? Why are they using it? What happens when they use it?

Who uses conditional forgiveness? Comparing the prevalence of conditional forgiveness use from different data collections and contexts is noteworthy. Of the three types of forgiveness strategies initially identified by Kelley (1998), Merolla's (2008, p. 127) sample of dating partners and friends found that conditional forgiveness was used by 12% of forgivers. Looking more closely at his results, dating partners used it 16% of the time, and friends used it in only 7% of the instances. This is in contrast to the nearly 30% identified in the Waldron and Kelley (2005) romantic partners. Perhaps this is a reflection that different relational expectations and heightened accountability apply to dating partners or friends as opposed to serious romantic partners. Likewise, this may also suggest that as the seriousness of the romantic relationship increases, conditional forgiveness is more likely. This is likely due to closer intimacy and increased interdependency as well as the nature and consequences of the offense and the residual effects of the pain.

When do they use it? A few studies have revealed various correlations to conditional forgiveness that help researchers understand the circumstances that incite its use. For example, relational history and uncertainty have been studied in relation to conditional forgiveness.

Relational history. As discussed earlier, Guerrero & Bachmann (2010) designed a longitudinal study that measured relational variables prior to the transgression. Results indicated that conditional forgiveness was likely when participants had initially reported positive levels of relational satisfaction ("high

quality, high investments, and low alternatives”) (p. 815). This provides evidence that when a partner judges a relationship worth saving, but at risk, forgivers opt for communicating conditions of forgiveness. Insight about low alternatives also suggested that perhaps the forgiver perceived him or herself in a subordinate position (principle of least interest) which is something Kloeber (2008) also noted. In light that the average relationship length of the Guerrero and Bachmann (2010) sample was 10.2 months, and that the most severe transgression was infidelity, additional research will be needed to understand whether or not these findings hold true for longer-term relationships, as well as in response to transgressions such as substance, physical, and emotional abuse. Judging the detrimental effects of a longer relational history that is marred by numerous transgressions is important to study (Worthington, 1998, p. 62).

Uncertainty. Guerrero and Bachman (2010) also noted that “Uncertainty was the strongest predictor of conditional forgiveness” (p. 819). However, among what remains unknown is the range of concerns that incite the uncertainty. For example, assessing a partner’s commitment; perhaps feeling too physically or psychologically vulnerable may increase uncertainty. The evidence that links conditional forgiveness with investment, equity, and weighing alternatives all indicate that conditional forgivers are experiencing an impasse in their relationship.

Why are they using it? Scholars have investigated the possibility that there are certain qualities of the transgressions or characteristics of the apology

that correlate with conditional forgiveness. Some intuitive and some counterintuitive findings have resulted.

Transgression severity. Transgression severity correlated with the use of conditional forgiveness (Merolla, 2008; Waldron and Kelley, 2005), which is related to the other research that found that transgression severity resulted in “more partner-blame and less forgiveness” (Freisen, Fletcher and Overall, 2005, p. 73). Schultz, Tallman, and Altmaier (2010) also found that transgression severity makes forgiveness more difficult. Exline, Kraft, Baumeister, Zell and Witvliet (2008) reported that the severity of the offense influences the ability to perceive an offense as understandable. As a reminder, despite the fact that threats of harm were reported in their sample, Guerrero and Bachmann (2010) participants characterized relational infidelity as the most serious transgression. Surprisingly, threats of harm were not perceived as severe by their respondents.

Sincere apology. Contrary to what was hypothesized, a sincere apology positively predicted conditional forgiveness (Merolla & Zhang, in press). In other words, when individuals perceived their partner’s apology as sincere, they used conditional forgiveness. This may suggest and is likely related to the findings that despite communicative efforts to allay hurt, forgiveness was thwarted when the hurt was severe (Bachmann and Guerrero, 2006). Merolla and Zhang (in press) suggested that this might also be due to the direct nature of conditional forgiveness – it implies that the direct communicative style that includes a sincere apology essentially invites additional directness from the offended partner.

Taking a closer look. Merolla's (2008) sample consisted of friends and dating partners whereas the Waldron and Kelley (2005) study focused on the romantic relationship. In both of these studies, transgression severity was measured with the use of scales. Consequently, the nature of these transgressions was not reported. Taking a closer qualitative look at the Waldron and Kelley (2005) data in a secondary study, the use of implicit conditional forgiveness appeared in instances of physical and substance abuse (Kloeber, 2008). For example, one participant shared, "I felt that if he would stop drinking, this behavior would cease" (p. 31). Another reported that during an argument, her boyfriend pushed her so hard that he knocked her to the ground. These unanticipated results indicated that much more needed to be learned about the use of conditional forgiveness. It also provided the initial rationale for taking an inductive approach. Hearing the voices of conditional forgivers was imperative in the search for more insight.

What happens when they use it? Scholars have found interesting correlations associated with the use of conditional forgiveness. Some results suggest that the communication of forgiveness may independently influence the outcome of the relationship.

Relational deterioration. As previously mentioned, Waldron and Kelley (2005) found that conditional forgiveness was the only forgiveness granting strategy associated with relational deterioration. Subsequent studies found similar findings. Merolla and Zhang (in press) found a positive relationship between

conditional forgiveness and relational damage. Because they have also found conditional forgiveness more likely when the offense is considered highly blameworthy, they suggest that some of the relational damage could be due to the seriousness of the offense.

However, of particular intrigue, Waldron and Kelley (2005) controlled for transgression severity; therefore, concluding that the communication strategy itself has an impact on the relational outcome. As acknowledged by previous scholars, this would indicate that conditional forgiveness, in and of itself, might positively predict relational deterioration, and they posited that this might be due to 1) a heightened sense of manipulation, or 2) face threat (Merolla & Zhang, in press; Waldron & Kelley, 2005).

Both explanations have negative connotations. The former assigns negative attribution to the conditional forgiver; it implies that the conditional forgiver is not operating altruistically, and instead intends to exact perpetual control or perhaps revenge on their partner. The latter acknowledges that communicating conditions threatens the offender as most ultimatums do. Both of these explanations might explain the ongoing negative affect (ONA) identified by Merolla (2008), especially in light that ONA was more prevalent among conditional forgivers than it was for direct and indirect forgivers (Merolla, 2008). Additionally, Guerrero and Bachmann (2010) reported that conditional forgiveness “was the only form of forgiving communication not positively related

to forgiveness” (p. 810). However, what still remains unknown is how finer details animate these outcomes.

Qualitative paradigms begin unpacking conditional forgiveness.

Although conditional forgiveness has tangentially appeared in forgiveness research, to date, few scholars have delved in to the intricacies of this controversial strategy. An exception is Kloeber (2008) who conducted a secondary analysis of the Waldron and Kelley (2005) data set in search of trying to understand more about this phenomenon. Specifically, Kloeber focused on 28 participants who claimed they used conditional forgiveness as a granting strategy; twenty four provided narrative about the language they used to employ it; four others provided surprising insight about unexpressed or implicit conditions.

Interesting findings resulted and three overarching categories were identified: 1) conditional forgiveness with a supportive connotation (e.g. “I told her I still love her, but hope she’s learned her lesson and would promise never to do it again.” 2) Conditional forgiveness with a threatening/combative connotation (e.g. “I told him that I would [forgive]. But understand that once you screw up, admit it and don’t let it happen again”), and 3) implicit conditional forgiveness which participants described as a belief that their partner would change, yet each claimed they avoided explicitly stating the conditions. As a reminder, all four participants in this implicit category described an incident that involved substance, alcohol, or physical abuse. These were significant findings because forgiveness must be cautiously conceptualized in relation to abuses that include

psychological, physical, and sexual abuse (Frommer, 2005). In their work, Waldron and Kelley (2008) have also warned that when transgressions are extreme and involve abuse, forgivers should seek professional support as they consider forgiveness.

Thinking critically about conditional forgiveness. Critics of conditional forgiveness claim it is not forgiveness and that the traditional and religious underpinnings of forgiveness are anchored to unconditional altruism (e.g. Wolfendale, 2005; Fincham & Beach, 2001). However, Frommer (2005) argued that cultural pressure to forgive without conditions leaves victims of serious transgressions caught in a paradox. Other scholars have indicated that conditional forgiveness is significant to the study of forgiveness because it appears to be a strategy employed by forgivers who are facing serious transgressions or perhaps chronic transgressions (Waldron & Kelley, 2008). Although Enright (2001) argued forgiveness is not conditional, he also acknowledged the importance of reestablishing trust and said this, “You may need to determine in what areas the person should not be trusted. The compulsive gambler should not be trusted with even just a small loan if gambling remains a problem” (p. 265). This insight might feel paradoxical to forgivers who conflate forgiveness and reconciliation.

Rationale Summary and Research Expectations

To summarize, Kelley (1998) discovered conditional forgiveness in his initial qualitative inquiry of the communication of forgiveness, and Guerrero and Bachmann (2010) found that serious dating partners with high quality, high

investments, and low relationship alternatives were most likely to use it. Uncertainty also prompted the use of conditional forgiveness among dating partners (Guerrero & Bachmann, 2010), and despite a sincere apology, conditional forgivers (couples, parents, siblings, friends) were still inclined to place stipulations (Merolla & Zhang, in press). Controlling for transgression severity, Waldron and Kelley (2005) found that when forgivers employed this strategy, their relationships tended to weaken. Similar results were found in dating partners and friends; however, transgression severity was not ruled out as the cause (Merolla, 2008).

Perhaps as important to preserving quality relationships, is the issue of escaping abusive ones. This is especially important in light of the previously cited evidence that an alarming number (53.6%) of romantic partners reported experiencing some form of intimate partner violence (Coker et al., 2000). Misunderstanding forgiveness, conflating forgiveness and reconciliation, or misconception about the use of conditional forgiveness and what it signals could perpetuate abuse. Consequently, if, among our objectives as scholars is to end abuse and give marginalized voices a way to stand up to and/or walk away from their abusers, then we must be sensitive to research opportunities that suggest correlative phenomenon. To do so, we must understand more about what their relationships and experiences mean to them. Given what researchers have revealed thus far, conditional forgiveness is a site where this likely occurs.

All of these findings are significant to the current study, not only because they correlate with conditional forgiveness, but also because examining details will help tell the story about what conditional forgiveness means to its users. What are they saying to their partners? What are they not saying? Why do they feel conditions are necessary? What is the nature of their relationship? Why do they choose to communicate conditions? Why not? Who are conditional forgivers and what transgressions incite conditions? These are questions best answered in rich detail from their users. Waldron and Kelley (2005) have urged qualitative researchers to undertake the topic of conditional forgiveness in romantic relationships (p. 739-740). It is time to conduct an inductive investigation that thoroughly explores the range of this experience. Consequently, the following research question is in order:

RQ1: What does conditional forgiveness mean to those who have used this strategy in a serious romantic relationship?

To answer this question, it is necessary to discuss the theoretical framework that will anchor this research.

A Relational Dialectics Framework

Relational dialectics theory (RDT) guided the conception and analysis of the current study. Dialectical theories take myriad forms. The framework proposed by Baxter and Montgomery (1996) is but one of the dialectical perspectives of interpersonal communication, all of which are committed to the principles of contradiction, change, praxis, and totality. However, Baxter and

Montgomery initially contended that what made their interpretation unique was its reliance on Bakhtin's dialogism (p.xiv). While it is commonly understood dialectically that individuals have binary contradictory states (i.e. closedness-openness, autonomy-connection), instead (RDT) is concerned with what Baxter and Montgomery term "multivocal" oppositions.

Although the body of relational dialectics research and theories spans disciplines, the Baxter and Montgomery (1996) dialogically based theory has been a popular choice among communication scholars. Baxter, Braithwaite, Golish, and Olson (2002) analyzed the dialectical tensions present among wives of husbands with dementia. A few similarities between their study and the current analysis substantiate the current study's rationale. First, although the method was interviewing, the data they collected represented only the wives' perspectives. Likewise, other researchers have argued that one perspective was a valid alternative and sometimes necessary for an RDT analysis (Braithwaite & Baxter, 2006). Second, Baxter et al. (2002) data revealed the presence of a supra-tension (presence-absence). Third, as detailed in the methods section, the framework for detailing the nuances of the current study's dialectics was inspired by their model.

Baxter and Erbert (1999) used a slightly different approach. They explained six different dialectics to their participants (i.e. autonomy-connection, predictability-novelty, openness-closedness, inclusion-seclusion, conventionality-uniqueness, and revelation-concealment), and had participants indicate on graphs the presence of these dialectics during their turning point episode. Their

methodology intersected with the current study in several ways: 1) They collected retrospective data, 2) The romantic relationship was the context, 3) Turning points are events that can alter the trajectory of a relationship—similar to what has been said about forgiveness episodes (Waldron & Kelley, 2008), and 4) They also urged researchers to carefully consider totality (knot of myriad interdependent contradictions) in future dialectical research. For other literature that has established that retrospective accounts are useful to dialectical research, see Toller and Braithwaite (2009).

When taken as a whole, what became increasingly evident from previous literature was that relational dialectics was a framework that presented suggestions for researchers without steadfast prescriptions. The context of the communication phenomenon has, and should, influence the researcher's creativity which is highly encouraged by advocates of interpretive paradigms (i.e. Denzin & Lincoln, 2005; Lindlof & Taylor, 2002).

Communication and forgiveness scholars have identified several dialectical tensions (e.g. mercy - justice, trust-risk, heart-mind) inherent in the forgiveness process and have recommended RDT as a theoretical lens for future forgiveness research (Waldron & Kelley, 2008, p. 67). Others have argued that how people manage the dialectical opposites of extreme unforgiveness and an equally troubling over-dependency on forgiveness is a needed avenue of research (Frommer, 2005). More specifically, Waldron and Kelley (2008) argued that the

use of stipulations was a site where dialectical tensions are salient, and in need of further investigation.

The role of speech behavior in expressing dialectics of forgiveness requires study in more detail. We have seen that participants use communication *tactics* to manage oppositional forces, for example, by offering conditional forgiveness to build trust and protect against additional hurt (Waldron & Kelley, 2008, p. 67).

Recall that critics of conditional forgiveness claim it is not forgiveness, yet scholars find evidence of its use. This can cause a paradox for forgivers. Conditional forgivers appear to be communicating to their offenders that unabashed forgiveness or mercy feels inadequate, too risky, or unjust. An exemplar of this comes from a participant in the Kloeber (2008) study, “I’m not sure I’ll be as understanding next time. I’m afraid I will just put up this wall and not let you in.” RDT provided tools that allowed the analyst to examine the experience of this multivocality—the simultaneous need for some certainty, juxtaposed with the inherent uncertainty that is common in interpersonal relationships. Before explaining the principles of RDT, it is also important to introduce some of its most recent developments.

In her most recent iteration of RDT, *Voicing Relationships: A Dialogic Perspective*, Baxter (2011) argued that although RDT has been a popular choice among communication scholars, she noticed a tendency toward an overdependence on the tensions themselves, therefore relegating the

multivocality to the background—something she hopes will be rectified in future RDT based research. In response to this concern, the current analysis worked to weave unique components of RDT throughout the analysis. The objective was to produce a nuanced understanding of conditional forgiveness—both a macro and micro way of analyzing conditional forgiveness. To that end, this section provided a focused description of previous RDT principles and some recent clarifications and contributions (Baxter, 2011). Ultimately, the objective was to provide a synthesized analysis of both the initial and most recent RDT tenets.

Contradiction

Most basically, contradiction implies terms that are oppositional in meaning such as closedness and openness. This project focused on highlighting that the “contradiction comes from the interplay” (Baxter, 2006, p. 138). With reference to forgiveness, someone may display the simultaneous desire to extend mercy, but see justice served.

Dialectical Change

Change is also an inherent feature of many dialectical ways of thinking. However, Baxter and Montgomery (1996) highlighted two important differences between their dialogic-based theory and that of previous scholars. They argued that causation is better understood through Aristotle’s “formal cause” (no predetermined occurrence as a result of a previous phenomenon), rather than “efficient cause” which implies more linear “antecedent-consequent relationships” (Baxter & Montgomery, 1996, p. 11). For example, efficient cause

would make a claim such as, “Relational satisfaction increased because the couple was having more sex.” Whereas formal cause would suggest that the relationship between the two events was more complex (i.e. spending more time together, enjoying conversations, reduced extraneous stress).

Praxis

Praxis is the simultaneous enactment of habits, customs, knowledge or theories (Baxter & Montgomery, 1996), by both relational partners (Montgomery & Baxter, 1998). In other words, “Individuals both act and are acted on” (Montgomery & Baxter, 1998, p. 9). Praxis works concurrently with contradiction, change, and the constitutive quality of dialectical theories. Some functions of praxis are considered dysfunctional, whereas others are considered more productive. *Denial* and *disorientation* are considered to be dysfunctional praxis. The more functional praxis are: *spiraling inversion*, *segmentation*, *balance*, *integration*, *recalibration*, and *reaffirmation* (Baxter & Montgomery, 1996, p. 61-66), all of which will be used to inform the analysis of participant data. Each of the praxis noted above is outlined in more detail in the analysis section. Baxter (2011) prefers to think of praxis as the centripetal-centrifugal struggle, which was explained more thoroughly below.

Totality

Totality means a cluster of tensions often coalesce as partners dialogue (Baxter & Montgomery, 1996, p. 15). For example, as noted earlier from Toller and Braithwaite (2009), bereaved parents experienced both (a) the tension

between grieving together-grieving apart, and (b) the tension between needing openness and closedness with their partner after the death of a child. As mentioned earlier, researchers have urged future studies to undertake illustrating totality (Baxter & Erbert, 1999) and some have begun to do this by explaining the knot of contradictions (i.e. Baxter et al., 2002).

Another principle of RDT is that *dialogue is a constitutive process* (Baxter & Montgomery, 1996; Baxter, 2006; 2011). Meaning is continually produced and reproduced through communication. It is constantly, historically situated. Other communication scholars use theories with similar assumptions (i.e. social constructionism, symbolic interactionism, structuration theory) (Leeds-Hurwitz, 2006; Krone, Schrodt, & Kirby, 2006), and in fact, Baxter (2011) makes connections between RDT and social constructionist perspectives.

With that in mind, this study proceeded by summarizing recent clarifications and identified RDT “Reworkings” (Baxter, 2011, p. 8-15). Rather than provide an exhaustive examination of each, this analysis focused on those that were useful to understanding conditional forgiveness: 1) false binary of public/private, 2) inattention to power, and 3) illusion of relationships as containers. As with previous iterations, discourse is central to a relational dialectics analysis. This study was guided by Baxter’s (2011) definition of discourse: “A discourse is a system of meaning—a set of propositions that cohere around a given object of meaning” (p. 2). As such, the current investigation sought to understand the discourse of conditional forgiveness.

False Binary of Public/Private

Baxter argued that private conversation is highly influenced by what happens in the broader sociocultural context, and that likewise, public discourse is influenced by what happens in the everyday happenings of our interpersonal lives. For example, a gay couple discussing the topic of marriage happens within the context of the larger socio and political climate. Likewise, a couple navigating the care of a sick child does so with influence from extended family, physicians, insurance companies, educational institutions, and so forth. With relevance to the current study, when forgivers engage in forgiveness, they inevitably do so, influenced by a host of public and private discourses that have already transpired. How did Tiger Woods apologize? Did he appear contrite? How could that couple forgive the man who murdered their daughter? How did the neighbor couple recover from infidelity? What does the pastor of my church teach me about forgiveness?

It was important to acknowledge that, for decades, other theories advanced similar connections. For instance, the interdependency between family and social structure outside the family is a tenet of Giddens' sociologically derived structuration theory, which communication scholars have adapted (Krone, Schrodt, & Kirby, 2006). The theory is highly complex, but at its most fundamental level, it addresses the intersections between larger social systems (i.e. public school system, health care, public policy, work environments) and interpersonal social systems (i.e. families).

Inattention to Power

One of the key advancements of the most recent RDT is to heighten scholars' attention to the subject of power—something that has been unattended by dialectical scholars to date (Baxter, 2011, p. 13-14). Baxter also notes that too often the contradictions (i.e. autonomy-connection) are emphasized rather than the nuances of their interplay. Baxter (2011) notes the following:

In taking the interplay of competing discourses seriously, it is difficult to assume that all discourses are equal in the play for meaning. In idealized dialogue, such equality of discursive footing is present. However, in every day talk, a more likely scenario is that competing discourses are not equally legitimated. Some are centered (centripetal), and others are marginalized (centrifugal)” (Baxter, 2009, p. 14).

Another significant distinction needed to be highlighted. Baxter (2011) located power in discourses rather than in individuals—which she considered a departure from prevalent critical interpersonal and family communication scholarship (Baxter, 2009, p. 14). To explain further, Baxter (2011) described, “The term *centripetal* refers to moving toward centralization or the center, whereas the term *centrifugal* refers to the opposite dynamic of moving away from the center toward the margins” (p. 123). As such, centripetal or centered dialogue is dubbed “normative, typical, and natural” whereas “what is marginalized is easily forgotten or silenced relative to what is centered” (p. 123).

This directly pertained to the current topic on multiple fronts. First, as established in the literature review, conditional forgiveness has been criticized because it is paradoxical. For some, pure forgiveness cannot be conditional. As such, some may avoid placing conditions on forgiveness. For others, they may have conditions, but choose not to voice them (Kloeber, 2008). Still, others voice the conditional forgiveness and scholars have posited that this is a communicative tactic meant to reassert control (Waldron & Kelley, 2008). The current analysis remained sensitive to the topic of power and worked toward advancing the understanding about the interplay of power between conditional forgivers and their partners.

Illusion of Relationships as Containers

Baxter (2011) argued that the predominant conceptualization of relationships among communication scholars is of one in a container. “Relating parties communicate within the container of their relationship, and different kinds of containers (friendships, long-distance relationships, marriages, etc.) can be compared with respect to how communication is enacted” (p. 15). Alternatively, Baxter favors a perspective that is highly influenced from a social constructionist lens. That is, relational meaning is continually reinvented through the growing discourse that occurs over days, weeks, months, years, and sometimes, decades. This abstract concept is often difficult to concretely understand. It essentially indicates that meaning is not finalized and that when discourse is voiced, new meaning emerges (Baxter, 2011, p. 15-16). For example, imagine someone who

avoids all conflict, but finally one day, resolutely places both hands on the kitchen table and says to a partner, “That’s enough.” This surprising interlude creates new meaning in that relationship.

Although Baxter stopped short of explicating a connection between the false binary of public/private and the illusion of relationships as containers, the current researcher argues there is a connection. Baxter (2011) made the following statement while explaining the container illusion: “The discursive voices of others are with us in our talk” (p. 15). Indeed, the messages received from literature, clergy, media, film, family, and neighbors, animates how forgiveness is understood and how conditional forgiveness is critiqued. Likewise, what we say at our kitchen tables, and how our relationships may morph as a result, impacts larger systems of meaning—albeit in small increments. The purpose of the current study was partially in response to the criticism that shrouds conditional forgiveness—not in defense, but in search of alternative understanding.

In her closing remarks on the illusion of relationships as containers Baxter (2011) posed the rhetorical question: “Does (RDT) help us to see interpersonal and family communication in new ways that open up alternative understandings compared to what is available through other theories and through common sense” (p. 15). The current study sought answers to this question. More specifically, the current study sought to understand what conditional forgiveness means to those who have used it in serious romantic relationships. To date, and as previously noted, conditional forgiveness has been understood predominately from post-

positivist findings and subsequent conjecture about its meaning. The current inductive approach, with the relational dialectics lens, was poised to take a native's perspective of conditional forgiveness—to hear their voices.

Accordingly, a second and third research question also guided the study and helped inform the previously stated RQ1:

RQ 2: What dialectical tensions emerge in the use of conditional forgiveness in serious romantic relationships?

RQ3: How do conditional forgivers in serious romantic relationships give voice to these dialectical discourses?

Method

Participants and Procedures

Participants were predominately recruited from undergraduate and graduate classes at a southwestern university and additional participants were solicited through social networks. In addition to this convenience sample, purposive sampling (Babbie, 2007) was also necessary due to the following participant criteria: 1) 18 years or older, 2) use of conditional forgiveness in a serious romantic relationship, and 3) ability to recall the incident clearly. At the discretion of the professor, students in some classes were offered a small amount of research extra credit for completing an anonymous survey through SurveyMonkey. Participants were entered in a drawing for a \$50.00 gift card to The Cheesecake Factory, with the use of a separate SurveyMonkey extra credit receipt/drawing entrance.

Of the 201 participants, 133 (66.2%) were women, whereas 68 (33.8%) were men. Participant's ages ranged from 50+ to 18-years old, and the mean age was 25. By chance, all participants reported about a heterosexual relationship. Thirty-seven (18.4%) reported being married, 157 (78.1%) unmarried, 5 (2.5%) divorced, and two (or 1%) did not disclose relationship status. High-school graduates made up 1.9% of the respondents; 70.1% reported some college; 24.6% had a college degree; and 3.3% had graduate degrees.

Data Collection

Qualitative research values an amalgamation of data collection and analysis and "Privileges no single methodological practice over another" (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005, p. 6). Denzin and Lincoln (2005) also emphasized that an entire toolbox of methods are available to the qualitative researcher including survey research (p. 7). Creativity and context are essential. As such, the decision to use an anonymous survey of open-ended and closed-ended questions was given careful consideration. The most predominant factors were 1) the search for naturalistic use of conditional forgiveness in serious romantic relationships, and 2) anonymity to protect participants' disclosure of highly sensitive topics, and 3) successful use of survey data by forgiveness scholars (Waldron & Kelley, 2005).

Previous research suggested that conditional forgiveness may be indicated in instances of severe transgressions (Waldron & Kelley, 2005; 2008) and even abuse (Kloeber, 2008). As a result, anonymity was a critical factor and could not be compromised by the use of interviews or focus groups. Both of these

approaches would likely have obscured results by preemptive identity management about the transgression type, severity, the pressure to forgive, and the decision to reconcile.

Diary method was also considered, but once again, exposed participants to risk, especially those who might fear the repercussions if “caught” disclosing abuse. This issue surfaced during the pilot study, when a participant asked to complete a hard copy of the survey to reduce the risk of being discovered by a partner who monitored her computer usage. Participants are often hesitant to disclose abusive incidents due to feelings of shame, embarrassment, or risk as illustrated above (Montalbano-Phelps, 2003).

As with all research methods, trade-offs were carefully weighed. In the end, the anonymous survey provided responses in participants’ own words, unfettered by an interviewer’s judgment, or identity threats posed by face-to-face disclosure, and most importantly, with minimal risk of doing harm to participants (Baxter & Babbie, 2004). Although relational dialectics theorist Baxter (2011) has urged RDT researchers to avoid survey data collection, decreasing the risk to participants took precedence. Qualitative researchers have urged researchers to be creative and make decisions that coincide with the research topic of interest (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005; Lindlof & Taylor, 2002; Strauss & Corbin, 1998). This project reflected that qualitative precept.

Given that the opportunity to make snap adjustments was relinquished by opting for a survey instead of other qualitative methods, composing insightful

survey questions was paramount (Lindlof & Taylor, 2002, p. 67). The mere nature of qualitative research is largely inductive, emergent, and “somewhat unruly” (Lindlof & Taylor, 2002, p. 66). As such, crafting questions and imagining a conversation between researcher and participant guided the current survey creation. To maximize the likelihood of eliciting quality data, five pilot surveys were conducted and provided useful insight toward fashioning the final survey. A mix of open-ended and closed-ended questions was used and demographic information was collected. Participants were instructed to recall a specific, memorable incident when they had used conditional forgiveness. They were also asked to indicate how well they remembered the event. In an attempt to “hear” the conversations of the conditional forgivers, the survey asked participants to recall exact words and use quotation marks when possible. The survey also suggested that the participant record sequential statements (i.e. “My partner said...Then, I said...”). Some participants did, in fact, use this guided format. The entire survey is included in the Appendix.

Data Analysis

An interpretive paradigm guided the quest to understand the web of meaning (Baxter & Babbie, 2004) among conditional forgivers in romantic relationships. Consistent with qualitative research methods, this project aimed to “embrace the subjective world” of its participants (Baxter & Babbie, 2004, p. 59). The analysis process was conducted in phases, with occasional time lapses in-between phases.

Stage One. Lindlof and Taylor (2002) suggest that a rhythm of work “keeps the growth of data under control and keeps the analyst alert to the conceptual trajectory of the study” (Lindlof & Taylor, 2002, p. 214). Due to the large quantity of data, the researcher read through the data in four different sittings, which constituted the first phase of merely reading through the data to gather a sense of its entirety (i.e. Babbie, 2007; Baxter & Babbie, 2004; Lindlof & Taylor, 2002). The data was retained in the SurveyMonkey formatted pages and consisted of approximately 1206 pages. While reading, the researcher recorded asides that would later help the analysis (Lindlof & Taylor, 2002, p. 211). As the analysis proceeded, commentaries and in-process memos were also used to organize thoughts, make observations, and eventually led to making connections among the data (Lindlof & Taylor, 2002, p. 211).

Stage Two. Consistent with the guidance of Lindlof and Taylor (2002) the creation of categories was the first systematic step toward data analysis and organization (p. 214). During this active analytic phase, “labeling and breaking down” the data began (p. 210). The constant comparative method (Strauss & Corbin, 1998) informed this process as well. The perpetual objective was to ensure that differences were treated as distinct categories. Various themes emerged. Some were dialectical themes, whereas others were not (i.e. types of transgressions, forms of conditional forgiveness).

The dialectical tensions were marked by language that noted tension between contradictions (i.e. Baxter, 20110; Baxter et al., 2002; Braithwaite &

Baxter, 2006; Braithwaite et al., 2008). This sense was sometimes revealed by succinct statements; however, it was also sometimes perceived by absorbing the participant's entire response—both of which were exemplified in the results. Themes that were not dialectical contradictions were set aside for future analysis, which is also consistent with the method used by other dialectical scholars (i.e. Baxter et. al, 2002: Braithwaite & Baxter, 2006: Braithwaite et. al, 2008).

Stage Three. The primary purpose of this phase was to refine the relational dialectics category system. During this phase, it became obvious that a supra-tension existed, which has been modeled by previous dialectical research (Baxter et al., 2002). That is, one primary tension essentially overarched the other tensions. During this phase, two tensions were also eliminated because as the analysis progressed, it became apparent that they did not reflect a competing discourse. Baxter (2011) warned researchers of this pitfall (p. 164). This left a total of seven dialectical tensions of conditional forgiveness. Each of these categories provided an organized way to proceed toward framing the interpretation (Lindlof & Taylor, 2002, p. 210). Also included in this phase was the process of extracting exemplars for the analysis of each tension.

Stage Four. During stage four, the researcher returned to the themes that had been excluded by the dialectical analysis during stage two. These concerned the distinctions and connections between conditional reconciliation and conditional forgiveness. Again, with the use of the constant comparative method, a systematic review of the first 50 survey responses was made to double-check the

interpretation. It was clear that saturation had been reached (Baxter & Babbie, 2004, p. 79). These results were reported as section one of the analysis because understanding the definitional distinctions and connections would help the reader throughout the subsequent dialectical analysis.

Analysis Section I

The literature established that scholars predominately consider forgiveness and reconciliation related, but distinct concepts; the comparative understanding of these concepts between theologians and lay groups is more complicated. Likewise, the data in the current study reflected a variation of conditional forgiveness and conditional reconciliation conceptualizations. Section one of this analysis summarized those variations.

Conditional Forgiveness

Some participants described the use of conditional forgiveness without mentioning reconciliation. The following excerpts illustrated this: 1) “I forgive you as long as you never say anything like that about parental roles again” (192:2), 2) “I told her that I would forgive her if she promised never to drink and drive again” (046:2), and 3) “I told her I would forgive her if she promised me she (would) never do that again” (043:2). Someone else shared:

I said I was willing to move past the discussion and not to continue fighting, but that he was never to do something like that and said, ‘I want to enjoy our trip here, so I will put it out of my mind, but please never do that again because it is disrespectful and dangerous.’ (018:2)

Another participant elaborated about her conditional forgiveness. “I believe that I forgave him to the best of my abilities but it was conditional because the fact that he would never do it again was tied to my forgiveness of him” (016:2).

Conditional forgiveness for these participants was relatively simple and consistent with what has been reported in previous research—“I’ll forgive you, if you change your behavior.”

Conditional Reconciliation

Other participants described experiences that connoted conditional reconciliation more than conditional forgiveness. For example, when asked what they said when they expressed conditional forgiveness, the following people responded: 1) “I told him I would only get back together with him if he promised to never cheat on me again” (082:2), 2) “I got back together with the understanding that she would not lie to me again” (095:2), and 3) “I told him that it could never happen again or we couldn’t continue dating” (088:2).

In all three examples, it was the reconciliation (*get back together, got back together, couldn’t continue dating*) that was conditional, and yet the participant described this as their use of conditional forgiveness. These participants’ thoughts and communication indicate that, for them, conditional forgiveness was largely about conditional reconciliation. This evidence also reinforced the lingering ambiguity about the definitional boundary and relationship between forgiveness and reconciliation.

Combining Conditional Forgiveness and Reconciliation

Similarly, some conditional forgivers shared language that described both conditional forgiveness and conditional reconciliation. For example, “I said I forgave him if he promised to never let anything like that happen again” (009:2). This part of her narrative sounded like conditional forgiveness. She indicated that reconciliation was conditional when she also shared, “I told him, ‘This is your second chance and if you ever cheat on me again that is the end of everything’” (009:2). Another participant reported, “I told him I would forgive him but only if it was never to happen again” (049:2). She also recalled her conversation:

When he called and apologized I told him, “I can’t be in a relationship with someone who continues to intentionally hurt me. I’ve told you before I don’t appreciate this. If you can’t understand or respect that then maybe we shouldn’t be together anymore.” (049:2)

Another respondent shared, “I said I would forgive him if he promised to never do it again” (177:2). When asked why she used conditional forgiveness, she later said, “Because I needed to show him how serious I was. I did not want him drinking and driving” (177:3). She also said, “I said I couldn’t date him if he continued to drink and drive” (177:3).

A few things were clear from this data. First, in some instances the use of conditional forgiveness was isolated to only stipulations on the forgiveness. For others, there were expectations of reconciliation. Still, others expressed both

conditional forgiveness and reconciliation. Consequently, it was apparent that people tended to conflate conditional forgiveness reconciliation.

Distinguishing Between Conditional Forgiveness and Conditional Reconciliation

There was a relatively small group of participants that demonstrated an awareness of finer distinctions. One young mother reported that after giving birth to their son, her husband began a chronic pattern of alcohol addiction and neglecting family responsibilities. Her initial response was, “I confronted him that if he continued with his conduct I would need to make adjustments for the betterment of the family” (156:2). As her hope for change diminished, she made adjustments. “After several months of being apart I decided to start the healing process and forgive him but end the relationship too” (156:2). Later she explained that she said to him, “For the sake of yourself and my peace please take consideration with what I am saying and make changes. I do forgive you, but I can no longer be with you” (156:3).

Conditional Forgiveness as a Transitional Period

Other participants shared that they believed their use of conditional forgiveness was the best they could do in the beginning. A participant stated that although she had been taught by her church that genuine forgiveness is not conditional, the initial stipulations of her forgiveness and reconciliation with her husband, who had an affair while she was pregnant, were the best she could do at first. “It was the start of saving my marriage. It was what was best for me and

my children at the time. (203:3). Another shared, “I guess I felt that if I didn’t want to give up on ‘us’ that using conditional forgiveness would be the best option” (201:3). Later, she acknowledged that she would “Take this one day at a time and see how it goes” (201:3). When asked why he used conditional forgiveness, the following man replied, “Because it was the only way for me to even begin to forgive” (091:3). This evidence suggested that for some, conditional forgiveness signaled a transitional moment where forgivers take time to weigh the past and contemplate a future that includes the transgression and its relational implications; a point from where forgiveness and perhaps reconciliation could begin.

In section one of the analysis it was first important to establish the variation of how participants conceptualized conditional forgiveness. Some operated with relatively simple understanding. Others conflated conditional forgiveness with conditional reconciliation, while some demonstrated a sophisticated understanding of this distinction, even to the extent that they saw conditional forgiveness as a step toward full reconciliation with their serious romantic partner. These discoveries partially answer our first research question (What does conditional forgiveness mean to those using it in a serious romantic relationship?). Second, noting these variations was critical to preface because as this analysis progresses, it became obvious that sometimes participants operated with an understanding of the finer distinction, whereas other times they do not.

The subsequent dialectical analysis also helped answer research questions two and three.

Analysis Section II

The first research question was aimed at understanding what conditional forgiveness means to those using it in a serious romantic relationship. Section one began to answer that question. Section two continued to inform that inquiry, but it also directly answered the second and third research questions by (a) identifying the existence of an overarching dialectical tension, (b) identifying the subsequent six dialectical tensions that emerged, and (c) by illustrating in finer detail throughout the analysis how serious romantic partners give voice to these dialectical tensions during dialogue about conditional forgiveness.

Seven dialectical tensions emerged from this data. *Reconcilable-irreconcilable* was the overarching tension and the remaining six were: *individual identity-couple identity*, *safety-risk*, *certainty-uncertainty*, *mercy-justice*, *heart-mind*, and *expression-suppression*. The structure of each dialectical tension was dictated by carefully considering the nuances that emerged within each of them.

Reconcilable – Irreconcilable

Conditional forgivers often expressed ambivalence between the desire to reconcile and the desire to end the relationship. They wanted to forgive their partner, but they also needed some reassurance that errant behavior would not become a chronic pattern. As evidenced in more detail below, some conditional

forgivers opted to communicate commitment and security in the future of the relationship, but with stipulations on future behavior. On the other hand, others communicated a greater threat to the reconciliation in their conditional forgiveness messages. Avoidance and separation were also used to communicate the vulnerability of the relationship status.

Emphasized relationship preservation. For some conditional forgivers, the threat of ending the relationship was relatively low; it was more a matter of restoring the relationship to an acceptable level, and for them, this included conditions. One participant explained how she communicated conditions: “I told him that I loved him and wanted a life with him but not one that involved drugs” (003:2). She reported that he assured her it wouldn’t happen again. “He told me that he did not want to do anything that would jeopardize our relationship” (003:2). Another shared the following after discovering that her boyfriend had driven drunk, “For me, this episode was not enough for me to end the relationship or not forgive him, so I forgave him under the condition that he would not engage in this behavior again” (151:2).

Another participant shared that despite her sense of betrayal and the moral infraction on their marriage, “Sometimes it’s about preserving the relationship” (203:2). The depth of the tension is particularly evident by her remark, “That is the quote I told myself every day” (203:2). But she added the caveat, “It had conditions” (203:2). This participant also shared that her reconciliation was largely inspired by the fact that she had small children and was pregnant at the

time she discovered her husband's infidelity. "I know I would not have stayed if I was not pregnant" (203:2).

Forecasted a future without the relationship. For others, the relationship was more vulnerable and they communicated this to their partner clearly, but with relatively low-aggression. These participants forecasted to their partner a future that could include a break up if conditions were violated. For example, "I told her specifically that if this occurred ever again that there would no longer be a relationship" (207:2). Someone else shared this about growing increasingly intolerant of her partner's drug use: "I also told him that he needs to stop using drugs if he wants our relationship to last. He was crying telling me that 'I won't, I promise, I can't lose you'" (005:2). Another participant reported:

I told him that I cannot handle being yelled at because it reminds me of my father. I said that I would not stay in a relationship in which I had to endure yelling. Hence, I said that it couldn't happen again or else the relationship will be over. (073:2)

These examples illustrated that for these conditional forgivers, the fractures were pushing their limits. In these instances they used conditional forgiveness to send a strong clear message: Change the behavior or the relationship is in jeopardy.

Threatening. Other conditional forgivers framed their conditional forgiveness with a substantially more aggressive tone. For instance, one participant said, "I told her she is on a final straw" (195:2). Someone else said, "I

informed him that this was the first and only time I'd accept this happening" (191:2). Another reported, "I told him if he ever cheats on me again that I will dump him faster than his head could spin" (090:2). Someone else shared that he told his partner, "If she never did it again, I would forgive her. But if she did, we were done" (167:2). He added later, "She asked why I had to threaten to leave her. I told her because I want you to know how serious I am about you lying to me" (167:3).

This analysis illustrated a gradual progression from a relatively low risk of threat to the reconciliation to a higher risk. The dialectical term *spiraling inversion* (functional praxis) can help understand this communication. Spiraling inversion is what happens when a party shifts toward emphasizing one end of the tension. In the case of these conditional forgivers (in varying degrees)—the recent transgression made it temporarily necessary to discuss the topic of not being together. The following illustrated an elevated sense of this.

Separations/break ups. In addition to imagining or threatening to end the relationship, some participants described incidents of temporary separations or break-ups. For some, the message was intentionally strong. For example, "I kept my distance to show that everything wasn't ok" (024:2). Interestingly, not all partners were tolerant of reconciliation ambiguity. One participant shared that when she broached the subject of taking a break, her partner said, "Either we are together or not...no break ups" (213:3). She added later, "He forced me to get back together with him" (213:3). His intolerance of a break-up would be

indicative of a *dysfunctional praxis* known as *disorientation*. This is when a person feels intolerant of any ambiguity or opposition.

For others, distance allowed time for emotions to cool. For instance, a participant reported that after his wife of 18 years had an affair with a co-worker, “Many hostile arguments took place” (220:2). He and his wife separated temporarily and sought counseling, but reconciliation kept him motivated. He shared, “I wanted my marriage to work” (220:2). Time apart also allowed participants time to process their desire to reconcile. The following respondent exemplified this:

I waited for a long time to tell him what the conditions of the forgiveness were because I wasn't sure I even wanted to try to be with him. When I was sure I wanted to try to work things out, about 3 months later, I told him that I had to be more important than her and that I deserved that much. (053:2)

Another shared how a break up later led to a sincere apology, remorse, and reconciliation. But she also added that the reconciliation was conditional.

After avoiding me for four months, he wrote me an apology and said he had made the biggest mistake of his life by letting me get away. He was very regretful and apologetic. I never answered his e-mail. On Christmas Eve, as I was about to go to sleep after months of hurting over this and missing him, he called, and I answered. He had been a huge part of my

life and I missed him so I decided to give him another chance to prove himself, and the only way I could move on was to forgive him. (150:2)

She continued later and clarified her conditions of reconciliation.

I told him that I wanted to move on and put this behind us, that I don't want to be angry over it anymore. I told him how badly he hurt me, and told him I couldn't handle something like this again. I said if he ever hurts me again, he'll be out of my life forever. (150:2)

This longer narrative presented additional opportunities to highlight the tensions between reconcilable and irreconcilable with the use of dialectical tenets. *Change* (motion or process) was evident throughout the narrative (i.e. the initial transgression, the subsequent avoidance by the offender, reconnecting on the phone call, progressing to discuss reconciliation).

Praxis (we both act and are acted upon) was also exemplified in multiple ways. First, the transgression and his initial avoidance damaged his partner and jeopardized the relationship. Second, when he first sent a written apology, she judged it as "very regretful and apologetic." Although she did not initially respond, this affected a forthcoming change. She later accepted his call and expressed her hurt, which was an act of vulnerability that also signaled openness. Third, the time apart gave them both an opportunity to realize the value of the relationship. (He said he made "the biggest mistake of his life", and she said, "After months of hurting over and missing him, he called, and I answered.") She expressed that their reconciliation was conditional. She reported that this

transgression happened five months before the survey completion, and later in her survey, she shared, “Our relationship is much stronger now. We’re working on building trust, and he is more attentive and caring” (150:4).

This participant’s experience by no means tells the entire story of conditional forgiveness. The trajectory of the relationship remains unknown. However, it did offer insight about how conditional forgiveness (or reconciliation) is used, and what it means to a couple facing a vulnerable turning point in a relationship. For the long-term, it is unrealistic to expect to never be hurt again, but in this case, as well as with many of the participants, conditional forgiveness communicated the relationship’s vulnerability. In this section, the expressed tension between irreconcilable and reconcilable was the focus. The next dialectic continued to explain more about conditional forgiveness.

Individual Identity-Couple Identity

The second dialectic that emerged from this data was the tension between how the transgression impacted the individual and couple identity. At first glance, this dialectic closely resembled reconciliation, but what made it unique was the language participants used about identity and how this impacted the way they viewed themselves, their partners, and their relationship. Autonomy – connection is another prevalent tension noted by RDT scholars that was closely related to this tension. However, once again, language used by the participants was what ultimately led the current researcher to interpret this as a tension.

Framing it this way adequately captured the threat imposed by the current transgression.

Collision with identity. One of the central ideas that surfaced about identity was, “Can I be with someone who makes me feel this way?” For example, one participant reported, “I couldn’t see myself staying in a relationship in which yelling became a normal occurrence” (073:2). Someone else shared, “I used it (conditional forgiveness) because I wanted him to know that what happened was not okay and that I will not tolerate someone who would do something like that” (090:3). Another respondent explained how discovering her boyfriend’s pornography use impacted the way she viewed him, herself, and their relationship:

This was a shock to me because I thought he didn’t do this sort of thing. I remember asking him when we first started dating if he ever watched porn, and he shook his head and told me ‘No,’ he didn’t. So I assumed that he never did. When I found out I was pissed to say the least and I felt wronged and dirty. It was (also) wrong...because he had lied to me. I think if he would’ve just been upfront about it I wouldn’t have been so upset, and it wouldn’t have become such a big deal. (029:2)

Her shock signaled that how she viewed her partner’s identity before and after the incident was oppositional. For her, the lie exacerbated this identity violation. Her own identity was also threatened (I felt wronged and dirty.). She elaborated both about his identity and her own. “His character was distorted and

my trust was more than slightly dismantled. I started questioning everything...I felt very insecure with myself, and especially my body” (029:3). Later she shared, “I felt extremely violated because I had one opinion about him that had now changed on behalf of what I found out. I was hurt and I felt icky” (029:3). She added these powerful words about this clash with her identity:

I didn't want to feel dirty. And because of the nature of the issue I felt extremely disrespected and fooled. I felt like he didn't want me because apparently I wasn't enough for him sexually. I couldn't stand feeling the constant need to compare myself to those images of sex. Like I wasn't sexy enough. (029:3)

A portion of what this participant attempted to manage was how this incident threatened her self-image. Similar to the first exemplar, the nature of transgression and its implications to her identity put too great a strain on the relationship. She said this about her conditions:

When he admitted to it all, I told him that this was something I couldn't deal with and that he had to stop. He told me that he would stop. But the distance between us had already set in. I was pulling away from him emotionally. (029:2)

They tried to continue the relationship, but she said, “Then finally I called it quits” (029:2).

Public humiliation. Many participants shared instances when the transgression happened in the midst of a larger audience. This posed additional

identity threats. A respondent shared that she yelled to her boyfriend, “You have to understand how this makes me feel and look. I was the only one not knowing this was going on. People were laughing at me for a year because I was the idiot who had no idea my boyfriend had cheated on me” (213:2). Thus, she felt conditions were warranted. “And I promise, if I ever even hear about something else happening, I’m DONE!” (213:3). Another shared, “He did disrespect me a few times before this incident, but this time he did it front of others” (218:2). For these participants the added audience made the identity threat particularly reprehensible.

Incorporating transgression with couple narrative? Incorporating the incident into a couple’s identity is a source of tension that impacts forgiveness and/or reconciliation. Waldron and Kelley (2008) noted that when long-term couples were able to successfully do this, it was indicative of the dialectical term *recalibration*. The following respondent exemplified this engaged tension, and in her case, she resolved that recalibration was not possible:

His short temper started showing more and more over time. We never lived together before marriage so we were learning new things about each other every day. He did disrespect me a few times before this incident, but this time he did it front of others. My parents always said to respect others and treat people the way I wanted to be treated. I tried to tell him but he could not learn or understand why it’s important to keep the respect level

high between us. He came from a divorced family and his mother used these types of words toward him and his sister” (218:2).

She contrasted the values her parents taught her with those modeled to her husband. Two passages in particular contrast this identity: 1) “My parents always said to respect others...” and, 2) “He came from a divorced family and his mother used these types of words...” She described that he was overcome with anger and he ended up calling her brother “stupid” (218:2). Her extended narrative showed the dialogue and interplay this couple experienced as they were attempting to find an acceptable place between these tensions, and how conditional forgiveness played a part in this communication:

He came to my brother asking him for forgiveness and telling him that he is just like his own little brother. He turned to me and asked me for forgiveness too. Since he was crying and asking for forgiveness, I didn’t want to be mean to him. I told him this: “I’m glad you are sorry and you can see your mistake but if this happen(s) again I’ll leave you and never look back.” He said, “I don’t know why I said what I said. Deep inside I was telling myself to stop talking but I couldn’t shut myself up and I messed up. I’m sorry and it will never happen again. I promise.” (218:2-3)

She later admitted, “I was falling out of love with him and I felt bad so I thought if I forgave him things would get better and would love him again” (218:3). This dialogue demonstrated how the episode strained their connection

and how it changed her view of him and their relationship. She also added, “I knew our marriage was failing but I didn’t want it to happen that soon and I wanted to feel like I did my best to save it” (218:3). This exemplified the tension between identifying herself as a forgiving person, while also identifying herself as someone who values mutually respectful communication. In the end she shared, “He repeated his mistakes, so I divorced him” (218:4).

The purpose of this research was to glean insight about what conditional forgiveness means to those using it in a romantic relationship. Focusing more specifically on the tenets of relational dialectics theory helped make sense of this episode. Baxter and Montgomery (1996) identified *communication praxis*, what Baxter (2011) reframed as the *centripetal-centrifugal struggle*. This “process of constructing meaning from the interplay of competing discourses” (Baxter, 2011, p. 121) was analytically complex, to say the least. Fortunately, the complexity of this topic matches this theory nicely and provided an opportunity to see its enactment.

For example, the previous participant’s narrative illustrated the progression of this competing dialogue. The husband displayed aggressive behavior. The participant noted that he was becoming increasingly aggressive. In turn, she requested that he stop. He agreed, but relapsed during a disagreement with her brother. She told him that was unacceptable (and was joined in coalition with her brother). He pleaded for forgiveness from both his wife and brother-in-law. She communicated conditional forgiveness. In this case, conditional

forgiveness marked a dialectic moment. Based on her husband's behavior, this participant felt her voice or perspective was at risk for being silenced over the long-term. In RDT terms, she avoided becoming part of her husband's *monologue* where she was disrespected and verbally abused because he lacked the skill to communicate his needs differently.

It was evident from her narrative that she did not instantly walk away, but tried affecting change by expressing her concern (moving monologue to dialogue). If she had not communicated her need for change, this would have been what Baxter and Montgomery (1996) previously identified as a *dysfunctional praxis* known as *denial*—she likely would have harbored resentment that her relationship was not meeting her needs, but not expressed it. In this case, the relationship ended, but it is not difficult to imagine, and this analysis also evidenced, instances where the parties were able to productively adapt to a different dialogue.

Thus far, two dialectical tensions of conditional forgiveness have been discussed (reconciliation and identity) and the most recent exemplar illustrated the co-presence of these dialectics. *Totality* is the dialectical term that characterizes the co-presence; this term was illustrated more fully later in the analysis.

Safety-Risk

A third dialectical tension emerged that captured how conditional forgivers assess and discuss their sense of safety in the relationship—both emotionally and physically. Some participants communicated a relatively low

sense of risk. However, others expressed jeopardy and even fear. Some participants felt unusually vulnerable due to the emotional drain of being diminished by an inconsiderate or persistently hurtful partner; for others, the psychological toll of a drug abusive partner had started to chip away at their sense of security; alarmingly, physical safety was threatened in participants from this study as well.

Emotional. For some, the risk was emotional. One husband shared how his wife's continued criticism took a toll on his sense of emotional safety:

I told her it was hard for me to forgive her because she so frequently embodied the same hurtful perspective even when I told her it hurt me. I said that, in forgiving her, there was an assumption on my part that she would try to not talk to me the same way. (019:3)

Someone else explained that her boyfriend would frequently demean her and she reached her boiling point. "He was frustrated because I was indecisive, and began talking down to me like a child. Finally, I blew up and said, "Think about how you're talking to me right now" (189:2). Conditional forgiveness was how she communicated the boundary.

I gave examples of when he had done it before, and he was the one that said, "I promise to never do that again, but let me know when it happens so that I can know when I'm doing it and fix it. Do you forgive me?" I said "Yes, but I'm truly sick of being spoken to like I'm two years old. I

forgive you as long as you realize when you do it and try not to do it again.” (189:2)

Some conditional forgivers reported incidents of a partner stealing and explained that the betrayal made them feel vulnerable and thus warranted conditions. For example, a participant explained that his girlfriend repeatedly stole things from him. “I told her specifically that if this occurred again that there would no longer be a relationship. She understood because we had this issue before and she knew that I was extremely serious this time” (207:2). Another participant shared that she was surprised when her boyfriend broke into her parents’ home and stole their wedding ring and a gun. She said, “I knew of his somewhat illegal activities such as theft, but it never crossed my mind that I would be violated” (050:2).

The following participant explained how she feared for her safety and even felt trapped. “We had a very volatile relationship and fought frequently” (051:2). Later she admitted:

I told him as long as it never happens again and he truly shows me he is sorry then I will forgive him and move on. I remember being very scared about my decision. I was always on guard with his behavior. (051:3)

She reported, “I also felt trapped in the relationship and felt I had no other choice” (051:3). These participants shared important insight that for some conditional forgivers, a turbulent relational history, or the gravity of the betrayal threatened

their sense of safety. In the latter instance, it was also obvious that she perceived herself in a low-power position, with few resources to change the situation.

Physical threat. Tragically, there was a distinct group of participants in this data that reported fear of physical abuse. For many of these participants, substance abuse complicated the threat. A participant recalled a harrowing incident with her husband. “My husband called me bad things and said he was going to slash my face with a knife” (039:2). She went on to say he was “So drunk I forgave him because he said it was the alcohol talking, not him” (039:2). She admitted it was not the first time something like this had happened, “but it was the worst” (039:2). She also shared, “Our kids were already in bed” (039:2). Later she said, “The next morning when he was not drunk we talk(ed) and he actually said he would never do it again because I told him I was moving out of the house” (039:3). When asked why she conditionally forgave, she replied, “Because I still love him” (039:3). She reported she said to him, “If you do it again, it is over for good” (039:3).

Someone else shared that during a road trip, her boyfriend had driven recklessly. She expressed to him, “I then told him that I didn’t want this to ruin our time, but please just never do that again, and not to take such risks when I am in the car” (018:2). The following woman shared that her husband’s rage and addiction had elevated to the point of making her feel at very high risk:

My husband drank heavily every weekend. At these times, he was prone to becoming enraged and often became violent. He never hit me or

threatened to hit me, but frequently broke items by throwing them, tearing them apart, and frequently threw tantrums. (008:2)

She explained how his raging escalated. “One night during his drinking, he became angry when the garage door malfunctioned. He threatened to get a gun and shoot it. I got scared and left for the night” (008:2). She said this about her use of conditional forgiveness. “I didn’t use the words ‘forgiveness’ or ‘conditional’. I told him this could never happen again and I feel that the forgiveness was implied and expected” (008:2). Later she shared, “His behavior that night is not tolerable to me. I won’t live in a situation where his violence could potentially spill over to me” (008:3).

Another grave example came from the following participant. She initially shared, “We were having problems, it felt like the relationship had hit a wall, we weren’t moving forward and I was questioning my desire to stay” (069:2). They had attended an event separately and he had seen her flirting with other men. After a two week separation, a serious discussion ensued about the future of their relationship:

We were talking about what had happened and what we had to do and in all of his hurt and frustration—he culminated into a moment of intimacy as he first kissed me and then started to choke me. He tightened his grip, the kiss ended and I reached to remove (his) hands. I couldn’t pull his hands away and called out his name which brought him out of it and he released me. He began to cry and (I) began to console and reassure him,

with this ultimately leading to intercourse. The next day we talked and I reminded him of the domestic violence abuse I witnessed as a child and would not have that in my own life and I let him know that regardless of how much I wanted us to work out, if that happened again I could not forgive him. (069:2)

This participant later recounted their subsequent conversation: “He was like, ‘you know I’m not that type of guy, but I was so frustrated and hurt, but it won’t happen again’” (069:3). She later said, “I know it is never right for a man to assault a woman no matter what, I really wanted the relationship to work” (069:3).

So much was happening in this disturbing example. At its core, this example illustrated a pathological swing between safety and risk. In this case, she vacillated between feeling safe (initially intimate), and then being fearful of dying. The couple had come together to discuss the topic of reconciling after a two week break-up. Based on what she shared, the discussion topics were 1) the impasse in their relationship, and 2) the hurt caused by her flirting with other men.

Having a productive conversation about these topics would have been indicative of a *dialogically expansive discourse* (multiple competing discourses at play) (Baxter, 2011). However, his mismanagement of his frustration and hurt resulted in abhorrent attempts to squelch the discussion. Consider the sequence of events: 1) when they were initially talking, he started kissing her, 2) he began choking her, 3) he cried and she began to console and reassure him, and 4) her

consoling him led to intercourse. In this case, it appeared as though physical dominance and strength, crying, and sex were all used to silence her. This was an extreme example of *dialogically contractive text*, which Baxter (2011) explained as “Discursive practices by which some discourses are marginalized and dismissed” (Baxter, 2011, p. 153).

The data analysis in this study continues to reveal more about what conditional forgiveness means to those using it a romantic relationship. The participants in this section were weighing (and expressing) the struggle between safety and risk—both emotional and physical. These participants tell important stories about what conditional forgiveness looks like in serious romantic relationships. By seeing their own words and understanding the peril some of them face, it becomes increasingly evident that conditional forgiveness is a significant communicative site. Of course, the implications of these findings will be explored in detail during the discussion.

Certainty-Uncertainty –

Not surprisingly, the overall tone of the fourth tension was intolerance for uncertainty. With just a cursory examination, this category was closely related to the safety-risk dialectic discussed in the previous section. Evaluating exposure to future harm was a similarity among them. However, a few things made it distinct. In the preceding safety-risk dialectic, participants seemed to be weighing their emotional or physical vulnerability in a qualitatively different way; the damages were distinctly menacing. Alternately, the certainty-uncertainty dialectic was

characterized by 1) addressing the level of trust or security the partner perceived, 2) making judgments about the likelihood for future offenses, 3) assessing their partner's level of commitment to the relationship, and 4) clarifying mutual agreement of relationship standards and expectations.

Assessing trust. Many participants shared experiences and conversations that addressed appraising and reestablishing trust. For some, the appraisal of trust was judged by things such as remorse and atonement. For example:

I wanted to forgive her because I love her so much but I knew I had to give the situation time to pan out and for me to really evaluate the situation, as well as her make up for it. I went to breakfast with her (two) days later and she immediately continually apologized and begged for me back. I told her I would consider taking things slow, but that she would have to earn my trust back. (166:2-3)

He emphasized to his partner that he would “take things slow” and felt this would allow time for her to “make up for it.” He also judged her continuous apology and begging as sincere remorse. For most, reestablishing trust would likely occur over time and many explicitly communicated this to their partner. For them, conditional forgiveness was warranted while trust was reestablished. For example, “I used conditional forgiveness because my trust had been damaged and I was not sure if I wanted to completely put myself back into the relationship always knowing that there was that possibility for more lies” (095: 3).

Understanding how conditional forgiveness facilitated the reestablishment of trust was difficult to completely discern; however, the following participant elaborated and provided additional insight about this communicative dynamic. “I told him forgiveness was a process. That I could (forgive) but my trust would have to be built back” (203:3). She attempted to influence the certainty with careful monitoring of her husband’s e-mail and cell phone. “It had conditions. As long as he didn’t see her and that he did not change passwords and I had total access to email and phone” (203:2). It can be inferred that immediately following the betrayal, She added, “That worked for awhile” (203:2). By her own admission, in this couple’s case, this level of certainty (or control) was not conducive for the long-term.

From a dialectical perspective this was indicative of *change* (communication in flux) and *praxis* (mutual impact). Initially, her certainty was dependent on a heightened sense of control. He may have temporarily acquiesced because he understood and genuinely wanted to make her feel secure. Dialectically, *balance* is characteristic of compromise (Baxter & Montgomery, 1996). Compromise usually implies that both partners are giving up something, which generally only works temporarily (Wilmot & Hocker, 2007, p. 158). As such, in order to reestablish normalcy in the longer term, this couple would probably need to relax this degree of scrutiny. This couple made several adjustments that continued to provide evidence about the evolution of the

forgiveness process that began with conditional forgiveness. This process will be examined further throughout the analysis.

Some communicated this need with a particularly forceful tone. Many used the maxim, “Actions speak louder than words.” For example, when her boyfriend showed up late for dinner with her parents, lied that he had worked late, but later admitted he was late because he had celebrated “a record day” with co-workers, one participant responded, “Sorry doesn’t fix it, actions do. You have to prove to me you won’t do it again” (105:2-3). Later, she elaborated. “I always have believed the saying ‘actions speak louder than words’ so saying sorry isn’t enough and I have to see that change will/has occurred” (105:3).

Requests/entitlement of proof. For others, the onus of earning trust was laid squarely on the partner’s shoulders. They needed proof. For example, “I told him that he would need to earn my trust because it was going to be hard for me to just willingly hand my heart over to him once again” (061:2). Another shared, “I told her I would try my best to forgive her but it would take would take effort on her part to make me feel like trusting her again” (148:2).

Assessing likelihood of repeat offense. Many participants who used conditional forgiveness expressed varying degrees of certainty that the behavior was an isolated incident. A good example of the opposition between the poles of this tension was evident from the participant who was carefully monitoring her husband to reduce her uncertainty. Yet, she shared, “I stayed because I felt (the affair) would be over and it was the best thing for my family” (203:2). Another

participant shared about his ex-wife, “I tried my best to forgive her but she kept contacting this guy” (208:2). After discovering that his partner had “brought home another guy from the bar,” one participant contemplated getting back together with his girlfriend. He recalled their ensuing conversation, “I specifically remember telling her that if this happened this once, why would it not happen again?” (166:2).

Another woman shared that her boyfriend’s confession and assurances helped her assess the likelihood of a repeat incident and made reconciliation possible.

He confessed that he was wrong and that he had cheated. I was willing to forgive him on one occasion and that he would never do it again. He told me the entire story, what happened, where and what made him think it was ok. Then he told me how it would be different for him the next time.

(169:2)

A level of comfort and certainty that the errant behavior would cease was important to these respondents. For many, this happened through dialogue and the use of conditional forgiveness provided a way for them to express the seriousness to their partner.

Clarify relationship commitment. Apparent as well, was that other participants took this time to assess their partner’s commitment to their relationship. One participant shared that he needed some certainty that his girlfriend was indeed committed because she had previously abandoned him when

he needed her most. He shared, “My girlfriend dumped me the same weekend I lost all my money in the stock market” (077:1). He went on to explain that while he wanted to get back together (at her request), he also felt he needed some reassurance that she would be more committed during trying times. He shared this:

I explained to her when we got back together that while it would be impossible for her to break up with me after losing all my money again (I’m broke now), that doing so when I am already going through a situation would not be appreciated. (077:2)

Clarifying relational rules/expectations. Also evident was that conditional forgivers, for varying reasons, felt they needed to communicate their relational expectation with absolute clarity. Many displayed a pragmatic tone. For example, “I told him that I would never date a smoker or a chewer because I find great disgust in both things” (101:2). She reported the following brief exchange:

Me-“I will only forgive you if you quit, and if I find another can of chew then we’re done”

Him – “I don’t want to lose you, and I don’t want this to be a reason I would lose you, I’m going to quit.” (101:2)

She went on to add that she had previously made these expectations very clear and this time, she felt the need to express the specific stipulations of her forgiveness in order to reduce uncertainty:

I used conditional forgiveness because I had expressed my thoughts on smoking and chewing many years ago when we were first dating. I would not want this to be a reason our relationship would end, but it is certainly something I find very damaging to our relationship. The only way I was going to forgive his actions (was) if he quit. (101:3)

Someone else recalled a similar conversation with her partner about setting boundaries:

I told my boyfriend that if he never spoke to her again or did anything like this again then I would try and forgive him. He said that he never wanted to hurt me like that again and never would. (170:2)

She also shared about his response, “He promised me he would never talk to her again or do anything like that again. He said it was stupid of him and he didn’t know why he did it” (170:2). Despite her boundaries and his subsequent promises, she still battled uncertainty, as evidenced by her statement, “Most of our relationship is long distance. I have trouble fully trusting him still to this day” (170:2). This participant, and so many in this section, illustrated this unifying theme among conditional forgivers: Finding a tolerable tension between uncertainty and certainty in order to engage in a thriving relationship.

Mercy – Justice

There was abundant evidence among forgiveness literature that mercy and justice are tightly entwined with forgiveness, so it naturally followed that it would emerge as the fifth dialectical tension. Waldron and Kelley (2008) argued that the

complicated tension between mercy and justice would be well-understood using a relational dialectics framework. Consequently, their conceptualizations of these measurements influenced the current analysis. Various communicative behaviors signaled how partners voiced the tension between these extremes. Expressions of unfettered empathy denote mercy, whereas revenge seeking is indicative of justice. Justice is also perceived by sincere expressions of apology, remorse, penance, and atonement. These communicative acts signal to the forgiver that their partner understands the pain they inflicted. As many previous studies have revealed, forgivers are frequently highly dependent on the need to see that their partner “gets it” (Waldron & Kelley, 2008; Mongeau & Gracylnic, 2010).

Data from the current study corroborates the speculation of existing literature, but more importantly, it shed light on how the tension between mercy and justice was voiced by conditional forgivers. This is important to distinguish because it emphasizes that the forgiving partner was conflicted. On one hand, conditional forgivers want to extend mercy. On the other hand, they sometimes harbor a lingering sense that justice has not been adequately realized.

To illustrate the enactment of this tension, first this section highlighted participant examples that leaned toward mercy, then it progressed toward those that enacted justice. As a reminder, the moderate suppression of one tension is explained as *spiraling inversion (functional praxis)*, whereas extreme suppression would be characterized as *denial (dysfunctional praxis)*.

Empathy. As established by Waldron and Kelley (2008), the expression of empathy is indicative of the enactment of mercy. Various participants explained their empathy. For example: 1) “I ended up realizing she was young and made a mistake” (199:2). 2) “I had strong feelings for him and we are all human” (023:3). 3) “I realized he was in a difficult position and I might have acted the same way” (202:2). 4) “I understand people make mistakes, and will always see both sides. I have done my share of things I wish I had not” (050:3). Analytically, it was important to note that these sentiments echo previous data collections about the motivation to forgive (not necessarily with conditions). This provided evidence that one of the similarities between the use of conditional forgiveness and other expressions of forgiveness (explicit, discussion) is the desire to be merciful toward a partner. What is notable to researchers about the conditional forgiveness experience is the observation that conditional forgivers, like their unconditional counterparts, are sometimes motivated to extend mercy. Furthermore, the language they use connotes an openness to forgiveness that previous research has overlooked.

Remorse and atonement. Not surprisingly, for some, mercy was contingent on the perception of remorse or atonement. For example, “I believed he would never do that to me again, he would make it up to me, and that he had learned his lesson” (213:2) and “I told him, as long as it never happens again and he truly shows me he is sorry then I will forgive him and move on”. The general sense was that some degree of justice had been served when the offender was

made to face and admit not just the transgression, but the hurt inflicted on loved ones.

When a partner was demonstrative, this signaled to many conditional forgivers that their partner “got it” which has been noted by other scholars (Waldron & Kelley, 2008). Behaviors such as crying, pleading, and begging were generally perceived as sincere expressions of remorse, regret, understanding, or atonement. Consider the following examples:

- 1) As we were walking she started crying and crying hysterically and started apologizing about how she had cheated on me over a year before that. I was extremely angry but she wouldn't let me go. She clung to me apologizing over and again, begging for my forgiveness and finally I did with the stipulation that if she ever cheated (even kissing) again, we would be over. (134:2)
- 2) He was crying, and I was crying. I told him “I forgive you, but if you ever do this again, I am breaking up with you for good.” I also told him that he needs to stop doing drugs if he wants our relationship to last. He was crying telling me “I won't, I promise. I can't lose you.” (005:2)

The following participant explained how the emotion helped her believe her partner's sincerity:

He also poured his heart out to me, and I know him so well that I know he was telling the truth to me. Thus, I forgave him slowly and decided to stay with him because of the future I hope to have with him. (118:3)

Another described her partner's pleading, "I will show you baby I love you so much. This will never happen again. I'm so sorry. We can get through this. Please give me another chance" (132:2).

The above examples are indicative that, for many forgivers, seeing a partner display feelings of discomfort associated with inflicting harm satisfied a seemingly natural need for justice. This often signaled to the forgiver that moving toward mercy was then warranted. RDT terms also explain this dynamic: 1) *spiraling inversion* (shift toward justice) was incited by the transgression, and 2) *integration* was signaled by the peaceful existence between justice and mercy.

Circumstances influenced a couple's motivation to act more "merciful" temporarily. One gentleman shared after catching his partner snooping on his phone in their hotel bathroom, "I think the fact that we were on a 'vacation' at the time put some motivational pressure on us to reconcile" (033:2). He elaborated later, "She did violate one of my personal laws...and perhaps she had no idea (previously) how strongly I took her actions, so I decided not to push the issue of us splitting up" (033:2-3). This would be indicative of the dialectical term, *segmentation* which explains the phenomenon that different environments sometimes influence the expression or suppression of either pole (mercy or

justice). In other words, while on vacation this couple essentially “tabled” seeking full resolution and forgiveness until a more convenient time.

Moving toward justice. The above examples illustrated behaviors that lean toward being merciful. By contrast, some conditional forgivers offered responses that favored the justice end of the tension. For some, withdrawal communicated a form of punishment. For example “I kept my distance to show that everything wasn’t ok” (024:2). This participant’s withdrawal was her message to him that there were consequences (reduced intimacy/threat to the relationship) for his errant behavior. Another shared, “I gave her the silent treatment and ignored her because I was so angry” (058:2).

The following respondent exemplified how retaliation sometimes takes over, despite the competing desire to extend mercy and reconcile: After sending a plane ticket to her long-distance lover, the following participant discovered through Twitter, that during his visit, while she was at work, her boyfriend met an ex-girlfriend for lunch. When asked about it, he lied. She retaliated: “I cancelled his flight home. I hate liars” (182:2-3). When asked why she used conditional forgiveness, she replied, “Life is too short to hold grudges, so there was no other choice” (182:3).

Tension exemplar. Many other participants provided evidence of this competing struggle between the desire to extend mercy and the need to see justice. One participant described an episode of prolonged deceit that resulted in a confrontation. He and his girlfriend moved in together before she had a job, and

he admitted he had pressured her to find employment. “About three months into moving in together, she told me she had found a job.” He continued, “She would wake up every morning, get ready for work and leave. She even had me meet her one time at the place where ‘she worked’ to pick her up for lunch” (092:2). Upon discovering her deceit, he solicited her parents’ coalition. “I actually had a discussion with her and her family, who took my side” (092:2). He explained the outcome of the discussion:

I could tell she was upset and sorry. She apologized to all of us and we felt it was a true apology. I actually remember feeling a little pity for her, we went back to normal, but she knew, even though I never verbally told her, that she would not be able to do that again.” (092:2)

Integration is the dialectical term that denotes a moment when compromise or denial of one pole is not necessary. The above example illustrates how this couple arrived at an acceptable tension between mercy and justice.

A few discursive points are worth noting: First, this participant reported he could tell his partner was upset and sorry, which is consistent with the aforementioned observations of *reassurances*. (She “got it.”) This is an important distinction for forgivers. Second, his partner’s discomfort may have been heightened by the added coalition of her parents. Third, it is significant that the participant used the word “pity” to describe his feelings toward his partner. This creates the impression that she expressed a deep sense of shame or mortification for her deceit. This may or may not have been heightened by the

larger audience. Fourth, this participant reported that things went back to normal which, in light of the current dialectic, indicates that justice was served so mercy was granted. Fifth, in this participant's case, he chose not to express conditions. He believed conditional forgiveness was an implicit understanding. This might also be interpreted as a face-saving strategy. Suppression of conditions is a topic that will be discussed in greater detail during the final dialectical tension.

The discourse highlighted in this section focused its attention on the tension between extending mercy and satisfying the natural urge to see justice. Consistent with the preceding and forthcoming dialectical tensions, mercy and justice are negotiated alongside myriad relational dynamics. The next section will concentrate on the tension between heart and mind.

Heart-Mind

Not surprisingly, the conditional forgivers in the current study were often torn between emotion and logic—the sixth dialectical tension. The initial inspiration for this dialectical tension came from Waldron and Kelley (2008). Reflecting on their data, they noted that intense emotion sometimes accompanies the communication of forgiveness, but is often juxtaposed with cognitive and intellectual processes. They cited as examples forgivers acting willfully, saying the words “I forgive you” while waiting for their feelings to follow (p. 63-64). The current data both corroborates and adds to the Waldron and Kelley (2008) discussion. This section is structured to illustrate the notable distinction in the

data between the heart-mind tension of relationships during formative years versus what was noticed in more mature romantic relationships.

Formative. This analysis revealed various examples that illustrated the heart-mind tension in formative relationships. In some instances, the relationships were ongoing, whereas other participants shared retrospectively about past relationships when they used conditional forgiveness. First, the following were examples of on-going relationships. “I love my boyfriend with all my heart, and this was just a bump in the road for us. I knew he only loved me, I just think I wanted to hear it” (117:3). She also said she could forgive him with conditions. “But, he needed to include me in his friends’ lives, especially if (they are) girls” (117:2). She said she knew in her heart that he loved her, and she loved him. She intellectualized the transgression as a “bump in the road.” She also processed that she needed to hear his verbal reassurances—both that he loved her and that he would change his future behavior to help her feel more secure.

Another young man professed, “All was well – I was in love and thought everything was good...I loved this girl! She was my first everything” (226:2). When asked why he used conditional forgiveness he exclaimed, “Because I loved her! Nothing else mattered. Opinions of friends or family didn’t matter. She was my world and a person I wanted to be with forever” (226:3). However, he also shared about his conditions, and the intellectual tension that opposed his passionate exclamations, “But always knowing I wouldn’t put up with it again” (226:3). Someone else shared, “Maybe it was because he was my first love, but I

was very attached to him. I told him ‘I want you in my life. You hurt me so bad, but I still love you so much’” (005:3).

Another participant explained, “She begged (and said) this was a once in a lifetime mistake and (said it) would never happen again. The love and commitment we (had) established made it hard to refuse the offer” (132:2). He shared that he used conditional forgiveness because, “Affairs are not acceptable in any situation” (132:3). He also admitted that his heart and mind struggled because of lingering mistrust, but said, “All we can do is take it day by day and hope the trust reincorporates as strong as it once was” (132:4). Each of the above examples illustrates the similarity between conditional forgivers and unconditional forgivers—the desire to preserve the relationship and to put the transgression behind them. However, in both of these instances, conditions of the forgiveness were communicated.

The general sense from these exemplars was that the forgiveness episode has created a turning point in the relationship. In turn, this incited a conversation about the state of their feelings and commitment to each other. Conditional forgiveness was then incorporated as a way to preserve the relationship (in these cases, it seems indicative of what the heart wants), but also assert some control about the future—perhaps an assertion of logic. Certainly, there is a tension between the two.

Other conditional forgivers provided additional insight about the use of conditional forgiveness in terminated relationships. In retrospect, some

participants reported that youth and an over-zealous heart had clouded their judgment. For example, “I was young and emotionally attached” (005:2). Someone else admitted, “I was young and stupid” (145:3). When asked why he used conditional forgiveness the following participant shared, “I’m still not sure to this day. I wanted to work things out with (name) and this was the path I chose to go. I still wanted her in my life even though she hurt me so much” (047:3). The following participant also realized that her emotional attachment was greater than her partner’s and explained how she used conditional forgiveness to balance the power:

I was always a lot more serious about the relationship than he was. It was great when we were great, but once something happened that required a bit of work, he ran for the hills. But I loved him, and wanted things to work out between us.” (145:2)

She explained that she used conditional forgiveness when he stood her up shortly after her father had died. Initially, she discontinued contact with him, but then explained that they were trying to reconcile and “We were making promises to each other about how it’d be different this time” (145:2). She continued, “I brought up this incident which was still a source of strife for me.” He told her he “just forgot.” (145:2). She also shared:

I started to cry and demanded to know how he could be so stupid. He just sat there and took it, admitting to his wrong and said he’d never do it

again. I shouldn't have believed him, but I was an absolute sucker for this boy. (145:2)

From this participant's words, it appeared that she was more invested in the relationship than her partner. It also exemplified that sometimes communicative attempts to influence the relationship trajectory are not successful.

The examples thus far provide insight about the heart-mind tension in relatively formative serious romantic relationships. Conditional forgiveness in these relationships was largely about establishing a future together. During this time couples often do not have children or entwined systems of social and familial support. It is also less likely that they share assets and long histories.

Mature. On the contrary, the data revealed unique dynamics of the heart-mind tension of conditional forgiveness in more mature relationships. Unlike in formative relationships, interdependence complicated the use of conditional forgiveness and the heart-mind tension. As indicated, interdependencies included financial, social, and familial obligations; the well-being of children influenced decisions. Consequently, even in the face of extreme emotional pain, couples resisted making hasty or overly emotional decisions. These factors of obligation and interdependence substantively impacted the heart-mind tension for some conditional forgivers. A participant shared the following about her feelings, the struggle between her heart and mind, and a prolonged dialogue with her husband:

It was the worst thing that I had ever experienced. I was pregnant with young children and I felt blindsided and completely violated. I did not see it coming. I felt like I was attacked when I (was) wounded. (203:2)

She also explained why she pursued forgiveness and reconciliation, but with conditions:

It is not always about right and wrong but more about preservation of the relationship. That is the quote I told myself over and over. Also, I did not want to fail again at marriage. I know I would not have stayed if I was not pregnant. I put the hurt far away deep inside and prayed for peace everyday because I did not want it to affect my pregnancy or my other children. It had conditions. (203:2)

Myriad complexities occurred in this narrative. Despite feeling devastated, she suppressed her feelings. She even engaged “self-talk” to keep herself focused on reconciliation and working toward forgiveness. This also illustrated *segmentation*. In other words, under some circumstances she suppressed one pole (heart) so she could concentrate on her goal of reconciliation in a less emotionally charged way. This is a similar tendency noted among long-term married couples (Waldron and Kelley, 2008).

Importantly though, it appeared from her narrative that the participant was not willing to *deny* her feelings. Instead, she practiced *segmentation* and essentially waited for strategic times to dialogue. She was engaged in an emotional and intellectual struggle between what she felt was right for her and

what was healthy for her children. This implies that initially it was her logic that kept her from ending the relationship. She also stated that she had an emotional and intellectual struggle about “failing” at marriage a second time. The inference was that she needed to concentrate her effort toward “saving” this one. However, she had boundaries. Consequently, she plainly stated, “It had conditions.”

Baxter (2011) encouraged researchers to consider locating power in dialogue as opposed to locating power in people. The detail this participant reported about this enduring incident provided insight about power adjustments located in people. The participant initially felt a reduced sense of power (pregnancy, family preservation, and desire not to fail again). The participant shared that she empathized with her husband’s reduced sense of power: “He felt betrayed also. He did not want to start over again with kids” (203:2). Her first attempt to regain some control came from increased monitoring. Previously cited in another section, it was reported that she said, “That worked for awhile” (203:2). This may indicate that this power adjustment was not acceptable to him—maybe too much scrutiny for the long-term. So, he made another adjustment and moved out of their home: “He was gone for about six weeks” (203:2). When he came back home, she asserted power differently and said, “As long as he stayed we lived together as a married couple” (203:2). She invoked a discourse about what “norms” exist for married couples. Returning to counseling was part of her condition and she shared, “This time we went for a little over a year” (203:2).

She was essentially communicating, “I want/need this relationship. If you want/need this relationship, this is what it’s going to take.”

In their case, it appears as though both partners were able to adapt to several shifts of power. A partner unable to do so might have fled. This couple’s story also helped raise sensitivity about how power can undergird the heart-mind tension—about preserving a family, mutual responsibility, cultivating mutual respect, and rebuilding. She added the following about their continued journey. “It has been a long road. We have gone through so many levels of emotions and changes” (203:4). Recall her earlier response (from a previous section) to the survey question, “Why did you use conditional forgiveness?” She replied, “It was the start of saving my marriage. It was what was best for me and my children at the time” (203:3).

This closing exemplar illustrated the tension between emotion and logic, and how sometimes in committed relationships there are extended periods of instability caused by major transgressions. Sustaining relationships endure transgressions. For some, forgiveness and reconciliation occur easily. For many others, mitigating circumstances complicate these processes. It can be messy. The totality of dialectical contradictions has continued to help analyze that messiness. We live in culture that encourages forgiveness and reconciliation; fortunately, we also live in a culture that increasingly teaches mutual self-respect and value in romantic relationships. Balancing the delicate tension between these is apparent in this struggle between heart and mind.

At this point in the analysis, six dialectical tensions have been described to illustrate the complexity of how conditional forgiveness is voiced and what that means to those who use it in serious romantic relationships. One remaining tension helped inform this analysis.

Expression-Suppression

Most conditional forgivers in the study expressed their conditions, and the analysis has provided abundant participant examples. This section will briefly highlight a few expression exemplars and provide some analysis about the explicit conversation that was indicative of this prevalent theme among conditional forgivers. By contrast, and of special intrigue, was a group of conditional forgivers that suppressed communicating the conditions of their forgiveness. As mentioned in the literature review, *implicit* conditional forgiveness was initially detected in Kloeber (2008). In that analysis, the strategy was used in response to an abusive transgression in all four cases. As such, this section will delve more deeply into this tendency among some conditional forgivers.

Expression. Some conditional forgivers were very frank about their needs. When asked why he expressed conditions to his partner, one man shared: “Because she lives in her own world and if I am not explicit in my needs she may well not notice them, and unintentionally do more damage than otherwise intended” (077:3). Another shared after discovering his girlfriend lied about staying the night in a hotel room with another man. “I told her plainly that if she ever betrayed me I would leave her even if I still loved her. I couldn’t respect

myself as a human being if I didn't" (078:2). He also added, "I felt I should be honest about my feelings in order to allow her to make a decision (about being) in a committed relationship" (078:3). Another participant shared how he chose to express conditions after his partner hit him:

I was messing around with a basketball and I believe I did a "think-fast" throw at her. She didn't react fast enough and the ball hit her in the face. After I hit her with the basketball she came up and pounded me in the chest two or three times with her fists. (121:2)

He walked inside the house and she joined him after awhile:

She came in to talk to me. I reminded her that my previous relationship had been both physically and emotionally abusive and told her I would not live with that again, ever. I basically told her that if she could not promise that, I would leave. I told her that if she ever laid another finger on me I would leave instantly with no discussion. She was upset and promised not to do it again (121:2).

These examples show the determination of some conditional forgivers to eliminate ambiguity. For a variety of reasons (partner perceptions, relational history, personal history), each of these participants felt strongly about communicating clear relational expectations, in the form of conditional forgiveness, and these examples illustrate a pragmatic, serious tone.

Suppression. Interestingly, a group of conditional forgivers chose to suppress the conditions of their forgiveness. They reported that their forgiveness

was conditional, but also reported that for a variety of reasons, they did not express the conditions to their partner. Participants claimed they believed their partner would change and reported that there was a mutual implicit understanding. For example, one previously mentioned participant shared, “I felt I didn’t have to (express conditions). She promised she wouldn’t lie like that again and I didn’t feel the need to threaten her by saying ‘if you do it again...’ (092:3). (The ellipses were the participant’s.) In this case, he shared that the conversation they had (with her parents) and the remorse she expressed was strong enough evidence that an implicit agreement was certain. Different from Kloeber (2008), examples such as this did not involve substance or physical abuse.

However, consistent with the findings of Kloeber (2008) there was evidence of suppressed conditional forgiveness in response to transgressions such as substance or physical abuse. Consider the following narrative:

It was late at night and my husband was quite drunk. He just became more and more verbally aggressive toward me when I tried to get him to come to bed. He did not like me telling him what to do. We started arguing about how much he had to drink and I threw a beer bottle and broke it and he grabbed me. We had more words while I was in his grasp and I called him (an) f-er and he wrestled me down and punched me. As soon as he did it, he knew he had crossed a line. He released me and I locked myself in the bedroom until morning. When I finally saw him the

next morning, he was very sorry and apologized. He wanted to know if I wanted him to move out. I told him no. (180:2).

When asked why she used conditional forgiveness she said, “I came from a violent family and as a child, I felt I had to take it, but not as an adult” (180:3). She also said she didn’t express the conditions because, “He knew. I did not have to say anything” (180:3). She shared later, “I was just so shocked and mad that my non-communication said more than if I had verbalized it” (180:3).

This participant’s narrative and decision to suppress conditions was compelling for myriad reasons. First and foremost, it involved an instance of physical abuse. Second, she came from a violent family which provided evidence that she is among the group of domestic violence victims that has been unable thus far to break the cycle of abuse. She also made this connection: She acknowledged her awareness that this was a voluntary as opposed to an involuntary relationship. Third, although she was aghast and afraid (she locked herself in her bedroom until morning), she did not feel she needed to express conditions because, “He knew.” She assumed that her “non-communication” was more powerful than if she had verbalized conditional forgiveness. Fourth, her husband asked her if she wanted him to move out. She said, “No.” He opened the door, but she believed she should not only forgive him, but should stay reconciled. She believed her avoidant communication style had a chance at minimizing her future risk.

The following participant also articulated that physical abuse had become chronic and he feared his partner's retaliation, so he chose to suppress his conditions. "She had hit me many times and would apologize and I learned to just let it go." He said he conditionally forgave her, but when asked why he chose not to express conditions, he responded, "Fear" (072:2). Similar to some other instances describing physical abuse, substance use was also a mitigating factor. "We were using illegal narcotics, there were other active addicts around and the situation happened due to a disagreement about drugs" (072:2). Unfortunately, his narrative was also very brief. Otherwise we might be able to induct more. It would be useful to know information about his family of origin, (as other participants volunteered) and previous relationship history, as also ascertained from others' narratives.

Similarities and distinctions exist among these first two exemplars. They both involved drug or alcohol use and both resulted in a physical altercation. In both instances implicit conditional forgiveness was used. In one instance the behavior had also been endured in childhood. In the latter, a pattern of physical abuse in the current relationship had been established, but the participant's history is unclear.

There are also distinct similarities between the current data and the Kloeber (2008) implicit forgivers. Participants expressed in their surveys that they forgave because they believed their partner would change; they acknowledged that they felt their forgiveness was conditional; they did not

express the conditions to their partner; and each was related to a transgression involving substance or physical abuse, or in some instances, a combination of both. From a dialectical perspective, suppression can be characteristic of denial, a dysfunctional praxis (Baxter & Montgomery, 1996). This was additional evidence indicative of the centripetal-centrifugal struggle. Baxter (2011) argued that this discursive struggle was largely influenced by power. Although this dialectical concept has been discussed several times throughout this analysis, it deserved additional focus because of its proximity to physical and psychological harm. This data revealed how an abuser instilled fear in a relational partner and how that fear silenced discussion about forgiveness, reconciliation, and healthy relationships. Discussion aimed toward improving or ending the relationship was silenced. Discussion aimed at cultivating genuine forgiveness was also silenced. Fear was a tool that silenced communication.

Other participants elaborated about why fear kept them from expressing conditions. When asked why she did not express her conditions verbally, the following participant responded, “Because he is typically very defensive and it’s difficult to accuse him of doing anything wrong.” (068:3). She also added later:

I forgave him because that is what I do. I don’t think it’s healthy to hang on to negative grudges. He respects that I was angry about the incident and that I forgave him. I don’t expect he’ll be doing that again. I didn’t actually say ‘I forgive you, but you can’t do that ever again’ but he knows. (068:3).

Baxter (2011) has encouraged researchers to hear cultural discourse at work in participant's dialogue. This participant's statement that she forgives "because that is what I do" implied that she identifies herself as a forgiver. She followed with the statement that she does not think it is healthy to hold grudges. These are cultural discourses about forgiveness. When taken together, these also infer that, for her, forgiveness is not something that is communicated or negotiated, but just expected and done. Her partner is not expected to apologize and she acquiesces (or excuses him) because he is defensive. She does not require him to acknowledge anything. Instead, she requires herself to perpetually forgive. He does not atone, and we gather the impression that he endures virtually no discomfort; there is no sense of justice—no accountability. These behaviors are indicative of what many forgiveness scholars would call "cheap forgiveness". It costs nothing. These may also represent the cultural discourse to forgive.

This participant's sentiments are very similar to the others who chose not express conditions: "He/she knows." In a description of the event about her husband's transgression while with friends she replied, "They had been drinking all day, didn't have a designated driver, and made the bad decision to go to a bar and stay out after the game" (068:2). When replying to the question, "Was this the first time something like this occurred?" "No, but I could count the number of times it's happened on one hand (in the 17 years of marriage)" (068:2).

Interestingly, this participant initially explained that she was fearful of her partner's defensiveness. (He is typically very defensive and it's difficult to

accuse him of doing anything wrong.) Her choice of the word accuse (rather than confront) is noteworthy too. We might infer that a discussion is perceived (either by her or him) as something hostile rather than something more benign and fruitful. Additionally, when she added the caveat that it had happened so few times, there is a connotation that she is minimizing his dangerous behavior.

As such, a prevalent theme among those who opted for implicit conditional forgiveness was that they avoided conflict. For example, during a heated discussion, the following participant said his girlfriend threw his cell phone in the pool. He said he didn't express conditions because, "I really didn't want to talk to her at that point." He also shared that he was, "Very upset." Another young man shared after confronting his girlfriend who had used his debit card without his knowledge, "I was upset and didn't want it to happen again, but I still liked her" (217:3). This implies that she had a certain degree of power over him simply because he liked her and he did not want to threaten a future together. He also disclosed, "I had trouble expressing my feelings. Also, I was afraid that it would start another argument" (217:3).

Another participant offered a few additionally illuminating remarks. She admitted she tends to avoid conflict for fear of upsetting "anyone". "I did not express conditions verbally because I also did not want to make anyone more upset" (026:3). The word "anyone" has an avoidant connotation to it. Although she was talking about a specific incident involving her boyfriend, she opted to be more elusive and referred to him as "anyone". She elaborated later:

I used conditional forgiveness because I did not want to worsen the situation and often fear conflict. I have found that I have trouble with actual forgiveness and often use conditional forgiveness. I especially try to ignore bad behaviors or things that bother me and attempt to write them off as ‘boys will be boys.’ (026:3)

She understands that she uses conditional forgiveness as a consolation to what she considers “actual forgiveness.” Equally intriguing is that she assumes or accepts “bad behavior” as a gender assumption when she uses the maxim, “Boys will be boys.” Once again, this is the invocation of cultural discourse and will be analyzed in depth below.

The avoidant communication among these implicit conditional forgivers is worthy of closer examination, and the most recent iteration of RDT provided useful analytical tools. Baxter (2011) used the term *proximal already spoken*—the dialogue history that exists between two partners and *proximal not yet spoken* to describe the anticipation of conversations that have not yet happened between the relational partners. It follows that the proximal already spoken informs the anticipation of future conversations. Each of the avoidant participants above was previously silenced—either by fear of physical harm or dread of confrontation. The man whose girlfriend repeatedly abused him physically was afraid of his partner’s repercussions; based on the proximal already spoken, he has learned that she will hit him. He has been silenced.

Likewise, the participant whose husband becomes defensive has learned to avoid because his defensiveness hijacks productive two-way communication. She anticipates a hostile conversation, which is indicative of the proximal not yet spoken. Consequently, her concerns go unheard. Because she invokes a gender maxim, “Boys will be boys” and opts to not upset “anyone”, it appears that she has been silenced not just by her partner, but by gender assumptions or cultural discourse: Men’s abhorrent behavior should be excused as one would excuse a child for immature behavior, implying reduced culpability. Women should be peacemakers and avoid upsetting “anyone”. Baxter (2011) explained that this type of cultural discourse is the *distal-already-spoken* and the *distal-not-yet-spoken*. In other words, history has already produced an entire dialogue about cultural norms. Today’s dialogue is influenced by existing cultural norms; it is a both a reaction to and a factor of tomorrow’s dialogue. It is obvious from this data that some conditional forgivers fear either the physical or social consequences of communicating conditional forgiveness to a relational partner. Expressing or suppressing conditions is a site where people either reify or alter existing assumptions or monologues.

Where does avoidance lead? One of our participants described a vacation she took with her husband about 5 years into their marriage. A serious skin infection forced her to stay off the beaches and out of the water. She said, “My partner looked bored and wasn’t talking to me” (107:2). He left her alone at the pool. She added, “I felt he didn’t care about me or that I was injured. I was

hurt, emotionally” (107:2). Later, she continued, “He never apologized for leaving me that day” (170:3). She also said she did not express conditional forgiveness because:

We had been married for 5 years. We had a home together. At the time, I was made to believe that my thoughts were unreasonable. In the big scheme of things, he hadn’t hit me, he hadn’t had an affair on me, he had just ignored me. What is the big deal? (107:3)

Similar to a previous example, this participant began to minimize her own feelings and avoided confronting her partner and advocating for herself. Her retrospect was illuminating. She shared:

After 20 years of marriage and X children, I finally divorced my partner. There were several more incidents like the one described in this survey where my partner failed to acknowledge my physical needs and left me to fend on my own when hurt. (107:4)

The last comment she made, “Good riddance.” (107:5).

It would be irresponsible to suggest that steadfast rules could apply to all relationships. However, valuable insight can be gleaned about this participant’s avoidant style. As RDT would suggest, absolute denial of one pole can work in dysfunctional ways. Communication is a powerful tool; dialogue creates the space for partners to negotiate mutual satisfaction and value. Of course, there are times during a relationship when suppressing one’s feelings is necessary and

prudent. However, when a chronic pattern ensues and persistently privileges one voice over another, relationships will likely suffer.

Tension between expression and suppression. The data showed examples of the vacillation between expression and suppression. The following participant described this combination. When describing their relational history, she revealed that she had avoided directly addressing her partner's alcohol addiction. "My fiancé at the time was drinking too much, which lead to a lot of inappropriate behavior and broken promises" (056:1). His alcohol use progressed. When she raised the issue, her partner first used humor to avoid or minimize the seriousness of her concern:

I mentioned to him a few times my concern for his (excessive) drinking habits but he never would address it as an issue. He used humor and numerous excuses for why he had to drink or why he got so sick." (56:2)

She finally hit her breaking point when he ruined her birthday by standing her up for dinner and choosing to drink at her apartment with friends. She said, "My place was trashed and the damage was horrendous. I spent my (XX) birthday taking care of my inconsiderate boyfriend and his loser friends" (056:2). Later, she shared:

My fiancé and I had been together for so long I wanted to try and find a way to fix our relationship. Obviously things were changing between us and tearing us apart. I told him 'I forgive you as long as this never happens again and you start going to AA meetings right away.' (056:2)

She added, “He had a serious drinking problem and he had to pick between the bottle and our relationship” (056:2). She also admitted:

At the time I did not know what conditional forgiveness was let alone that I was using it. I was so embarrassed by the whole thing and wanted to set new boundaries in our relationship so that it did not happen again. (056:3)

She elaborated later:

I feel actions speak louder than words and I wanted him to do things to work at repairing our relationships and fixing his drinking problem. I wanted a type of verbal contract so that he knew his behavior was not acceptable and I would not put up with it.” (056:3)

This participant’s narrative was indicative of a progression from subtle to much more direct confrontation. Because her initial communication was having little impact, she escalated her seriousness about her boundaries.

This section revealed variations in the tendencies to express or suppress conditions of forgiveness. The large majority of the respondents expressed their conditions. For some, they used this opportunity to pragmatically clarify relational expectations. By contrast, a smaller group preferred to suppress their conditions. The current data revealed varying reasons for this. In some instances it was because the communication about the transgression already provided them a sense of agreement with their partner. However, others disclosed in their surveys that they suppressed conditions because they felt afraid of the

consequences. In some cases, this was a general hesitation to stir up conflict, but as was evidenced, others feared further physical or psychological repercussions.

All seven relational dialectics have been detailed. As a reminder they were: *reconcilable-irreconcilable*, *individual identity-couple identity*, *safety-risk*, *certainty-uncertainty*, *mercy-justice*, *heart-mind*, and *expression-suppression*. The analysis of each provided a nuanced understanding of how conditional forgivers give voice to conditional forgiveness, which also contributed to answering the larger question: What does conditional forgiveness mean to those using it in a serious romantic relationship? The subsequent discussion will begin to weave the current data with what was already known.

DISCUSSION

Before delving into specifics, it is useful to reflect broadly about the contributions of the current data. The current analysis is the first data collection aimed solely at the examination of conditional forgiveness in serious romantic relationships. As such, this qualitative analysis provides fresh insight about conditional forgiveness that to date that has been missed by other methods. This inductive approach concentrated on hearing the experience of what conditional forgiveness means to those who have used it in a serious romantic relationship. The relatively large sample of open-ended data (n=201) provided a unique opportunity to gather a thorough sense of the variety of its meaning. Furthermore, the dialectical framework embraced the inherent paradoxical nature of the tension between the desire to forgive, and the simultaneous need to protect from future

harm. It also provides a theoretically grounded way to analyze and frame that complexity.

The first part of this section outlines the theoretical contributions of the current results and then concentrates on connecting those results with previous literature. Practical implications are then presented before thinking more broadly about how the current findings might inspire future scholars and perspectives. Finally, this section addresses the limitations of the current study, and then offers some concluding thoughts about conditional forgiveness.

Theoretical Implications

There are several theoretical implications of the current examination. Rather than provide an exhaustive list, this section outlines three. The first addresses the intersections of forgiveness, reconciliation, and conditional forgiveness. The second provides a way to think about the knot of conditional forgiveness tensions, and the third connects the existing results to negotiating morality theory (Waldron & Kelley, 2008). Recall the concern of the first research question was to understand the meaning of conditional forgiveness in serious romantic relationships; the second asked which dialectical tensions would emerge and the third was aimed at understanding how conditional forgivers give voice to the emergent tensions. Synthesizing these results with theory helps address each of these questions.

The intersections of forgiveness, reconciliation, and conditional forgiveness. There is a lingering conflation between forgiveness and

reconciliation (Balkin et al., 2009; Frise & McMinn, 2010; Hawk, 2007, p. 302). Consequently, there is a conflation between conditional forgiveness and conditional reconciliation, and this was evidenced by the variety of meanings revealed in the analysis. The current study provides evidence that in many instances, the reconciliation was conditional—communicating conditions of forgiveness was merely the language people used. However, others differentiated between the two and used conditional forgiveness. Still, for others, they used conditional forgiveness as a way to move toward unconditional forgiveness. What became clear was that there is an overlap between these three concepts. Sometimes all three existed. Other times, one, or some combination of two existed.

Consequently, presenting a way to think about the relationship between conditional forgiveness, forgiveness, and reconciliation was necessary—a way of theorizing that both acknowledges the use of conditional forgiveness and satisfies the lingering critique about the paradoxical meaning of conditional forgiveness (Enright, 2001; Derrida, 2001).

One of the contributions made by this data was the substantial amount of language that described the meaning of conditional forgiveness. This concrete evidence provided a foundation to begin thinking about these intersections. The following diagram provided a useful way of conceptualizing those intersections.

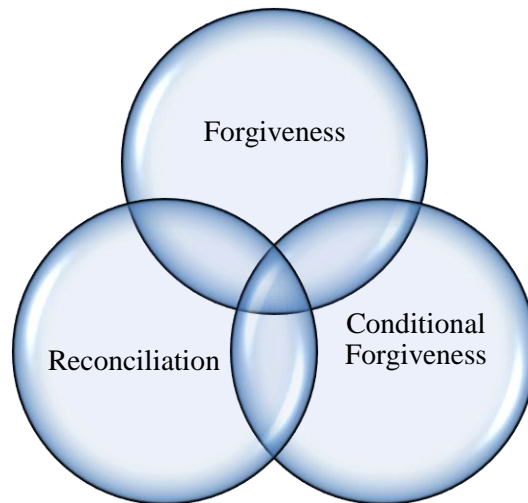


Figure 1. The Intersections of Forgiveness, Reconciliation, and Conditional Forgiveness

This diagram may be useful in delineating conditional forgiveness from conditional reconciliation. It may also help future scholars conceptualize conditional forgiveness as a transitional time. Theoretically, a forgiver could start in one place on the diagram and with the passage of time, the use of communication, and/or the intervention of a third party, could in turn migrate to a new location within the forgiveness experience. For those who continue to pursue unconditional forgiveness (with or without reconciliation) it could be worked toward. For example, a couple recovering from infidelity might merely exist together (outside forgiveness and conditional forgiveness), and appear reconciled to outsiders, especially during early stages when they are making sense of the transgression and addressing raw emotions. Recall the couple from this data who exemplified this: 1) “It had conditions”, 2) “It has been a long road” and 3) “We

have gone through so many levels of emotions and changes” (203:2-4). They also sought a therapist. The diagram helped visualize that possibility.

Knot of conditional forgiveness contradictions. Throughout this analysis there have been multiple references to a knot of tensions. In fact, previous dialectical scholars have used this term and have urged future researchers to analyze the knot more broadly (i.e. Baxter & Erbert, 1999). Visualizing the knot of contradictions may now provide a macro way to examine the conditional forgiveness experience for serious romantic partners.

The diagram below illustrates how the seven dialectical tensions of conditional forgiveness work in tandem with one another. This does not imply that all seven are constantly present. Of course, the context of the couple influences this. Rather, some combination of the seven dialectics is engaged, and in varying degrees, depending on the couple.

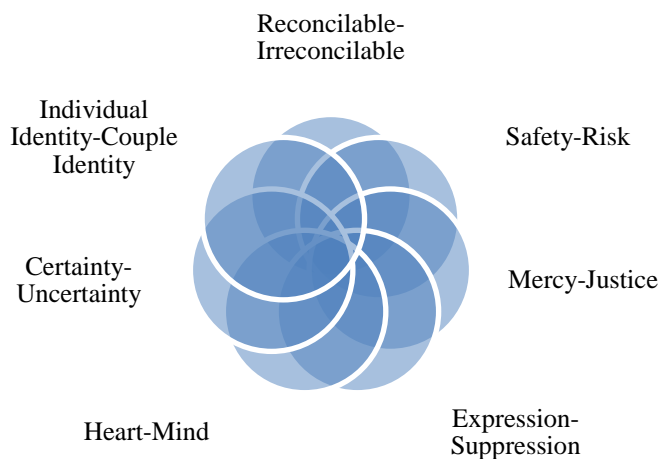


Figure 2. Knot of Conditional Forgiveness Contradictions

In addition to assisting forgiveness scholars, RDT scholars may find this a useful way to illustrate the tensions that emerge from their own communication topics, something for which relational dialectics scholars have called (Baxter & Erbert, 1999).

Negotiating morality theory (NMT). Results from the current analysis also closely intersect with negotiating morality theory (Waldron & Kelley, 2008). As mentioned in the literature review, Waldron and Kelley (2008) outlined ten moral functions of forgiving communication in their introduction of NMT: 1) defining moral standards, 2) establishing accountability, 3) engaging moral tensions, 4) restoring relational justice through atonement, 5) hope-reimagining a moral future, 6) honoring the self, 7) redirecting hostility, 8) increasing safety and concern, 9) finding closure, and 10) possible reconciliation.

The current data provided evidence that conditional forgivers are engaged in these NMT processes. In fact, some of the moral functions' descriptive language is closely related to the dialectics of conditional forgiveness revealed in the analysis (justice, safety, reconciliation). To elaborate, clarifying relational expectations surfaced in the certainty-uncertainty dialectic. Accountability and atonement were frequently addressed in the mercy-justice dialectic. Honoring the self was also evident in the identity dialectic and reconciliation. And of course, the safety-risk dialectic was closely related to the eighth function—increasing safety and concern. This is by no means an exhaustive list of the similarities. Future analysis of the current data or subsequent data collections of conditional

forgiveness would likely provide abundant evidence that conditional forgiveness and NMT are tightly entwined.

Future researchers might use NMT as a theoretical framework as they investigate the functions of conditional forgiveness. For example, a participant who had been raised to value respectful communication searched for how she could respect herself if she stayed with her verbally abusive husband: “I couldn’t see myself staying in a relationship in which yelling became a normal occurrence” (073:2). Examples such as this might incite thought about the future of this theory.

Connecting Current Results to Existing Research

First and foremost, the current examination provides evidence that reconciliation is a central concern for conditional forgivers; this is a significant contribution to forgiveness, reconciliation, and conditional forgiveness literature. This had not yet been detected about conditional forgiveness.

As reported, the current analysis revealed the presence of seven dialectical tensions of conditional forgiveness, which directly answered research question two. The analysis of the tensions produced understanding about how conditional forgivers give voice to those tensions, which answers the third research question. The amalgamation of results informs the larger research question: What does it mean to use conditional forgiveness in a serious romantic relationship? The purpose of the section below is to discuss how these results intersect with (a) the dialectics of forgiveness (not necessarily with conditions), and (b) some of the

current conditional forgiveness research. The current results substantiate some previous conjecture from quantitative findings about its use, and intersect with the few qualitative interpretations.

Two of the dialectical tensions found in the current study had been previously noticed among forgivers in Waldron and Kelley (2008): *mercy-justice* and *heart-mind*. The former implied, that to some degree, both unconditional and conditional forgivers sought to find an acceptable tension between extending mercy (empathy, understanding, exoneration) and achieving some justice (through apology, atonement, remorse, restitution, etc.). The current study also illustrated that sometimes a lingering sense of injustice made forgivers hesitant to extend unfettered mercy.

For some, mercy came slowly because of relational history or the nature of the transgression, which has been indicated by previous research (Merolla, 2008; Merolla & Zhang, in press; Guerrero & Bachmann, 2010; Waldron & Kelley, 2005). However, the current results provided detail about what that meant to some conditional forgivers. For example, extending mercy to an abusive partner was counterintuitive for some conditional forgivers. For many conditional forgivers this could be assuaged by better understanding the distinction between forgiveness and reconciliation. Likewise, transgressions that violated closely held moral values and relational covenants caused conditional forgivers to grapple with how to approach granting mercy and enacting forgiveness. For example, a participant from this study reported she was aghast to discover her partner's

pornography usage. It made her aware that they did not necessarily share the same moral standards: “His character was distorted and my trust was more than slightly dismantled” (029:3). For many it raised important questions about the future of the relationship.

The analysis of heart-mind revealed that like the Waldron and Kelley (2008) interviews of long-term married couples, sometimes long histories and intricate interdependencies caused forgivers to suppress extreme emotion in favor of relationship preservation. The implications of this are complicated. There is evidence from the current data that in some instances, this was used adaptively; however, there was also evidence that *too much* suppression was maladaptive. For example, recall the participant whose husband, in a drunken rage, held her down and punched her. She said, “I was just so shocked and mad that my non-communication said more than if I had verbalized it” (180:3). Recall also, that she came from an abusive family. Understanding generationally enduring patterns of suppression is a critical site for future research. Communication scholars may be well-positioned to address this serious social problem.

By contrast, the current results also provided information about the heart-mind tension in more formative relationships. Some shared retrospectively that strong emotion clouded their judgment and caused them to tolerate substandard treatment from a partner. Some admitted they opted for communicating conditions rather than breaking up, which may be related to previous indications that high quality, high investment, but low alternatives are associated with

conditional forgiveness (Guerrero & Bachmann, 2010). In these cases, conditional forgiveness might be perceived as a “last ditch effort” to save the relationship. Others used conditional forgiveness to pragmatically communicate to their partner that although they were deeply in love, they would leave if conditions were not met. For them, it was a matter of self-respect. The heart-mind tension helped illuminate how these discernments were enacted.

Future conditional forgiveness research should concentrate on the contrast between its utility in mature versus formative relationships. Making informed decisions and adjustments that greatly influence the trajectory of one’s life should be carefully deliberated. As such, what may be productive for a mature couple may not be applicable to those less settled.

Waldron and Kelley (2008) identified *trust*-safety in their forgiveness work. However, the current analysis found *risk*-safety captured and described the conditional forgiveness experience more accurately. This may indicate an inherent difference between unconditional and conditional forgiveness. Some conditional forgivers (as opposed to unconditional forgivers) weigh their physical and emotional risk and safety differently. This important discovery begins to answer some of the phenomenon that evades current forgiveness research—understanding forgiveness in response to abusive transgressions and relationships (i.e. Casey, 1998; Crisp, 2007; Waldron & Kelley, 2008). The current results, the theoretical implications, and this noted distinction might inspire future researchers to

discover more about forgiveness in response to high-risk transgressions such as substance, physical, and psychological abuse.

Two other dialectics (*individual-couple identity, certainty-uncertainty*) had not been considered dialectically by Waldron and Kelley (2008), but nonetheless, these extant topics had been suggested as theoretical frameworks (identity theories and uncertainty management theories). The current data offered a new perspective to the conceptualization of identity as a tension between the individual and couple. Autonomy –connection was a closely related tension, but did not thoroughly capture the threat posed by the transgression. Thinking about identity dialectically illustrated the fluidity between how a partner saw him or herself both independently and in relationship with a partner. The transgression imposed a threat, and became a topic of conversation that essentially engaged the tension between those two poles. Many conditional forgivers were actively pursuing an acceptable level of this tension. Some were able to find it; others were not.

Uncertainty was also previously found to be a significant predictor of conditional forgiveness (Guerrero & Bachmann, 2010). The current results revealed evidence that the tension between certainty and uncertainty was a prevalent theme among conditional forgivers. The current analysis provided evidence about why. Recall that the most severe transgression in Guerrero and Bachmann (2010) was infidelity. The current study revealed a large range of serious offenses that included infidelity, physical abuse, substance abuse, and

drinking and driving to name a few. The nature of these transgressions could explain why reducing uncertainty becomes a preoccupation for forgivers—especially those who desire to also reconcile. Consequently, as was evidenced, communication is often directed at finding a more comfortable level of certainty about the mutual level of commitment and agreement of moral standards.

Expression-suppression intersected with the previous discovery of *implicit conditional forgiveness* from a small sample (Kloeber, 2008). This is significant because it substantiates the previous discovery and raises new awareness about this avoidant tendency among some conditional forgivers. Similar to the previous findings, the current analysis found evidence that suppression was sometimes chosen in instances of physical and substance abuse. The current data also revealed its use in response to partners who, when confronted, tended to be emotionally volatile, or defensive rather than contrite. Some simply admitted they avoid conflict. Others minimized the significance of the transgression, or made excuses for a partner's bad behavior or subsequent apathy. Suppression was also inspired by a lack of communicative skill. Fear was also plainly stated by one participant. These avoidant behaviors need more research attention. This would help inform forgiveness scholarship, substance abuse literature, communication conflict style literature, and the study of domestic violence, to name a few.

In contrast to the previous findings, the current data found evidence of suppressing conditions in instances that did not involve abuse or aggression.

Some people chose not to express conditions because they did not feel it was warranted. They felt their partner understood the seriousness of the situation. However, the current analysis illustrated that despite eschewing expressed conditions, they were clear that they were conditionally forgiving as opposed to unconditionally forgiving. Future research about this conditional forgiveness strategy could be informed with the research of Roloff, Soule, and Carey (2001), who found that, “Fear of losing (a) partner was positively related to conflict avoidance” (p. 370). This is an important commonality between conditional and unconditional forgivers.

There is also an interesting absence among the conditional forgivers in this data. Waldron and Kelley suggested the dialectic forget-remember (not necessarily specific to conditional forgiveness); however, because so few participants mentioned it in the current analysis, this category was eliminated. This omission might indicate a significant distinction between conditional forgivers and their unconditional counterparts. The current data suggested that for conditional forgivers, forgetting was not an option. In fact, there was a distinct characteristic among the few conditional forgivers that mentioned forgetting. They reported that forgetting was impossible. (i.e. “I told him I could forgive, but I couldn’t forget.”) It may be that other forgiveness strategies are more prone to an association with the lingering myth to forgive and forget.

It would also be intriguing to consider the comparison between forgive-remember and expression-suppression. In some instances, forget might mean,

“Let’s please stop talking about this.” This may imply final resolution to the forgiveness episode, but is perhaps reserved for transgressions that do not significantly change the relationship.

Previous scholars have also found an association between conditional forgiveness and transgression severity or blameworthiness (Merolla, 2008; Waldron & Kelley, 2005). The current study adds vivid details to those findings. Recall the following exemplars: (a) husband came home drunk and threatened to slash his wife’s face with a knife, while her children slept in the next room, (b) a man who was afraid to speak his mind because he feared another beating from his girlfriend (who was also doing drugs), and (c) a woman who was silenced first with kissing, next with choking, and finally with pleading, apologies, and subsequent sex. These people shared that they were afraid. As such, the current study heightens awareness about what transgression severity and blameworthiness really mean to some conditional forgivers. Researchers should also continue to value methods that hear these voices, and in turn, look for ways to unpack these persistent social problems.

The current data could also be used to expand the communication of hurtful events (Metts, 1994). For example, substance abuse, stealing, and pornography use did not appear in Metts (1994) results, but were reported from the current data. Likewise a comparison between the types associated with conditional forgiveness versus unconditional forgiveness might provide fruitful insight.

Furthermore, when a partner feels increasingly undervalued, chronically disrespected, rarely honored, or worse—physically or psychologically threatened or abused, it is highly plausible that relational deterioration is inevitable. These transgressions should threaten relationship reconciliation. If communicating conditional forgiveness is a symptom of something more sinister brewing, or of voices asserting themselves, then it should be given attention—even critiqued to reveal deeper meaning.

However, as a reminder, the use of conditional forgiveness was previously associated with relational deterioration above and beyond the affects of transgression severity (Waldron & Kelley, 2005). The current method broadens what is known about communicating conditions. Consider the following: The knot of contradictions illustrates how many communicative phenomena are colliding at the same time. Consequently, various contradictions are engaged (to varying degrees, depending on the relationship). For example, people begin contemplating the choice to reconcile; identities clash and sometimes need to be re-conceptualized; forgivers weigh their sense of safety; uncertainty may be heightened; the delicate balance between mercy and justice is sought; emotion needs to be adequately addressed and managed; couples also strive to find the right tension between expressing and suppressing their feelings, concerns, and relational standards. Of course, this barrage of tensions and discernments impacts relational satisfaction or creates an ongoing negative affect (Merolla, 2008).

Communicatively managing any one of these could destabilize a relationship. When several collide, it is easy to imagine relational deterioration or termination.

At first glance, it was counterintuitive that a sincere apology positively predicted conditional forgiveness (Merolla & Zhang, in press). However, the current data highlighted a substantive group of conditional forgivers who operated with the maxim, “Actions speak louder than words.” So, in other words, the apology still needed to be accompanied by improved behavior. The implicit message was “Because you violated my trust, I’m struggling to believe you.” An example from the academic community might help illuminate this: Imagine a student who perpetually apologizes for turning in late work. At some point, despite the fact that they seem sincere, most professors will eventually set a limit, hold the student accountable, and place the burden back on the student to make adjustments if they expect to be rewarded with good grades. By no means does the current researcher suggest that personal relationships could be cleansed of all hurt, or that rigid standards should unilaterally employed. However, partners should be able to express the tension that says, “I appreciate the apology and I can see you are sincere. I forgive you, but I want more for me and for us.”

Outlined above were ways that the current results intersect directly with the communication of forgiveness literature, and how future research could extend existing lines of research.

Future Research

It would be fruitful to examine the use of conditional forgiveness in parent and adult children contexts in response to severe transgressions such as sexual, physical, psychological, substance, or alcohol abuse. The synthesis of previous research indicated that conditional forgiveness is more prevalent in romantic settings (Bachmann & Guerrero, 2007; Guerrero & Bachmann, 2010; Merolla, 2008; Merolla & Zhang, in press; Waldron and Kelley, 2005). This may be a result of the distinctions between negotiating reconciliation in voluntary as opposed to involuntary relationships. Alternately, how do adult children set conditions with parents? When is it necessary? What dialectical tensions emerge during the communication of conditional forgiveness in the adult-child and parent context? How are these similar or different from the results in the current study? For example, how might reconciliation is handled differently? How are boundaries used to facilitate healthy reconciliation? What do adult children discuss with their parents? What subjects do they avoid? If they have children, how do they discuss the level of involvement with grandchildren? How do they plan holidays? As parents age or become ill, parents may require additional support. How do adult children negotiate the increased interdependency during these times? For scholars interested in similar lines of research, see Baker (2005) and Hargrave (1994a; 1994b).

Along similar lines, how does communication about conditional forgiveness change when a parent's prognosis is terminal? This research is

related to the work of communication scholar Keeley (2004) who has collected narratives from final conversations with the terminally ill. She reported that forgiveness was a prevalent final conversation topic. Researchers may seek to understand whether conditional forgiveness exists in this context. Some interesting topics might include: 1) as a parent grows frail, and becomes less of a threat, how does communicating forgiveness change? 2) How does communicating about reconciliations change? 3) Are adult children motivated to extend mercy to dying parents? 4) Are they still seeking transgression acknowledgement from parents?

Researchers might also consider how parents communicate conditional forgiveness to adult children for similar transgressions. How do parents of substance abusers communicate conditional forgiveness? Their concerns might include things such as: financial support, living independently, suggesting treatment, family intervention, and legal matters, to name a few. What dialectical tensions emerge when conditional forgiveness is communicated from parent to adult child and how are those related to the current study results?

Critical scholars may also undertake the topic of investigating conditional forgiveness. Previous research indicated that people who perceive themselves as having less power are more inclined to use conditional forgiveness (Guerrero & Bachman, 2010). The current study provides additional insight about what that means. Some of the conditional forgivers in the current study described feeling fearful about a partner's repercussions; others minimized their own feelings, or

resorted to suppressing self-advocacy—strong signals that conditional forgiveness should be studied by future critical scholars.

In their (2008) edited book, *Women's Reflections on the Complexities of Forgiveness*, Malcolm, DeCourville, and Belicki presented abundant clinically- and empirically-grounded forgiveness research that could easily inspire the critical scholar. They argued: “Many women’s lived experiences teaches them that compared with men, they can expect to have less financial, political, and professional or expertise-related power...”(p. 22). Consequently, women can have an innate tendency to develop subordinate relationships to men and, “Hence, forgiveness for the sake of repairing relationships may have great appeal to women, but it may also put them at risk of injury again if the hurtful other is inclined to misuse or abuse the power differential” (p. xx). Several examples from the current data support this claim. Recall the participant who minimized her feelings to keep peace and reconciliation with her husband:

We had been married for 5 years. We had a home together. At the time, I was made to believe that my thoughts were unreasonable. In the big scheme of things, he hadn't hit me, he hadn't had an affair on me, he had just ignored me. What is the big deal? (107:3)

This pattern endured for 20 years until she finally decided she deserved more. “There were several more incidents like the one described in this survey where my partner failed to acknowledge my physical needs and left me to fend on my own when hurt” (107:4). For other critical perspectives see Casey (1998) and

Crisp (2007) who tackle the topic of forgiving sexual abuse from a theological perspective.

Communication privacy management theory (Petronio & Caughlin, 2006) may be a useful way to think about conditional forgiveness. For example, how is the use of implicit (or unexpressed) conditional forgiveness related to communication privacy management? What are the differences between secret keeping, enabling, and implicit conditional forgiveness? How does the risk-safety dialectic of conditional forgiveness intersect with communication privacy management? Which family members are told about serious transgressions? Which are not? How is this managed productively or unproductively? How do these communicative strategies change over time?

Because so many conditional forgivers helped us understand that for them, the use of conditional forgiveness signaled a transitional time, a life-span perspective would also likely provide a fruitful analysis. Life-span scholars argue that myriad life events and traumatic experiences often cause families to reevaluate relationships and adjust communication among family (Pecchioni, Wright & Nussbaum, 2005, p. 80). Results from the current study might help inform the conceptualization of such a study. For example, in the heart-mind dialectic there was a distinction between communication among formative relationships versus some of the more established relationships. It might also help to consider this in light of the Waldron and Kelley (2008) interviews of long-term married couples. A life-span perspective also assumes that some cognitive

abilities positively improve across the life span (Pecchioni, Wright & Nussbaum, 2005, p. 6). Perhaps forgiveness and reconciliation are among those positive cognitive abilities; perhaps understanding conditional forgiveness over time from a life-span perspective would help scholars better understand the theoretical intersections of conditional and unconditional forgiveness.

Similarly, studying conditional forgiveness longitudinally would be fruitful from other theoretical frameworks. Many of the access challenges contemplated during the conceptualization of the current study would still apply to abusive situations, and the need for anonymity would be a challenge to researchers. However, couples highly motivated to recover from infidelity (similar to a few in the current study) may be willing to participate in a diary method of their conditional forgiveness episode. Furthermore, as also suggested by previous research, collecting dyadic information about the communication of conditional forgiveness would provide insight that is limited in the current study. For example, what do people think about having conditions placed upon them? Do they understand? Do they resent them? Do they feel threatened? Does the couple have a shared understanding about the meaning of forgiveness, reconciliation, and conditional forgiveness?

Thinking more broadly, structuration theory (Giddens, 1984) might help inform the ways conditional forgiveness is enabled or constrained from larger systems (i.e. religion, social, medical) (H. Canary, personal communication, December 16, 2010). For example, what messages do we hear from clergy and

religious communities about forgiveness, reconciliation, and conditional forgiveness? Do they make clear distinctions between forgiveness and reconciliation? One of the participants in the current study shared explicitly that a church group had helped her realize that genuine forgiveness is not conditional; another participant shared that she is deeply spiritual and strongly connected to her faith community, and added that she felt guilty for her conditional forgiveness, despite the fact that her husband was frequently volatile and aggressive. Additionally useful from a structuration perspective would be to examine the teachings of organizations such as Alcoholics and Narcotics Anonymous, and ALANON. How do their tenets intersect with the construction of conditional forgiveness?

This is not an exhaustive list of the future research possibilities. Instead, this is meant as a starting point from which future research about conditional forgiveness can be inspired and conceptualized.

Practical Implications

A campaign could be developed to improve forgiveness and conditional forgiveness education among counselors, social workers, and therapists. This is largely in response to previous literature that stated there is ambiguity among therapists with regard to defining forgiveness (Anderson, 2007). Gordon, Baucom, and Snyder (2005) revealed that many clients leave therapists when a partner feels judged by the therapist. As such, connecting these populations with recent developments of forgiveness research will gradually assuage this—

especially research that is grounded in revealing the lived experience of forgiveness (Cosgrove & Konstam, 2008).

The theoretical diagrams presented in the prior section could be used as part of this education campaign. This would help counselors and therapists understand the relationship between forgiveness, reconciliation, and conditional forgiveness, as well as understand from a dialectical perspective the range of dialectics that are engaged during the use of conditional forgiveness. This might also assist third parties' efforts to assess those at risk of abusive relationships.

Understanding the existence of implicit or unexpressed conditional forgiveness may also help identify earlier stages in the forgiveness process or potentially abusive relationships. As revealed in the current study, some people do not express their conditions. This may thwart a shared understanding about relational expectations. It may also keep the forgiver harboring resentment, rather than working toward forgiveness.

It may also be helpful to conceptualize the reconciliation as conditional instead of the forgiveness (D. Kelley, personal communication, February, 2007). For some people, conditional forgiveness provokes an ideological debate that sidetracks the topic-at-hand. Recall from the analysis that many people wanted to identify themselves as forgiving people. The literature review also clearly established that cultural pressure to forgive is part of our unfolding forgiveness dialogue. Reframing the reconciliation as conditional may abate some of the contention.

As illustrated by other participants, understanding conditional forgiveness as a transitional time might be a productive way to think about this strategy. As heard from some participants, at first, conditional forgiveness was the best they could do. It was a step toward unconditional forgiveness.

Conceptualizing reconciliation as one with boundaries rather than as dichotomized might also help forgivers work toward forgiveness while managing boundaries and gaining back a sense of control (D. Kelley, personal communication, May, 2006; V. Waldron, personal communication, October, 2010). The current dialectical analysis may assist that meaning-making. For example, many participants needed behavior change as evidence that they should resume reconciliation. Understanding reconciliation in dialectical terms helps conceptualize it as something fluid – A reconciliation that has varying degrees of interdependency, depending on the current status of the relationship. The Waldron and Kelley (2005) results regarding the correlation between conditional forgiveness and relational deterioration might reflect this phenomenon. Perhaps relational deterioration is another way of saying reconciliation with boundaries. It is reduced intimacy—a change in the relationship.

Along very similar lines, rather than assume relational deterioration is a negative outcome, scholars might consider this a healthy response by those who aim to increase physical and/or emotional safety. As evidenced in the analysis, reconciliation may not always be the healthiest choice. Perhaps the abused could be liberated with the knowledge that there is a difference between forgiveness and

reconciliation, and conditional forgiveness should not be relegated as a paradox so quickly. Forgiveness can and should be pursued from a distance in some cases.

Likewise, the nature of the relationship can change. Relationships are not containers (Baxter, 2011). For couples with intricate interdependencies this may mean a period of reduced intimacy, less vulnerability, while forgiveness and reconciliation are pursued. There should be a way to communicate conditions of reconciliation. People are practicing the art of this imperfect journey.

Limitations

The current study has limitations. To start, this study used relational dialectics theory with an anonymous survey—something relational dialectics scholar Baxter (2011) has highly discouraged. Baxter (2011) has argued that qualitative methods such as interviewing, diaries, or dyadic data are the preferred methods for dialectical analysis. Among other things, this is meant to maximize the likelihood that the analysis is multivocal. Although measures were taken and questions were posed to encourage participants to disclose details of conversations, it is probable that a different method would elicit additional information. Nevertheless, as presented in the rationale, anonymity and the safety it provided participants were given precedence. Despite the limitations, this method provided a way to hear highly sensitive information. Voicing these marginalized perspectives was critical to the current discovery.

This analysis makes a substantive contribution to understanding what conditional forgiveness means to those who use it a serious romantic relationship.

However, other perspectives could also help answer this research question. Ultimately, this data was interpreted from the author's point of view; however, this is within the guidelines articulated by Lindlof and Taylor (2002). Previous literature, education, and experience are among the factors that qualitative researchers bring with them. Measures were taken to assure that the author's account was responsive to the experience of those studied (Lindlof & Taylor, 2002). For example, long periods of time were taken to maximize the absorbency of the participants' experiences. Notes and commentaries were written and revisited; connections were identified between them much later in the process. When things were persistently unclear or difficult to make sense of, the researcher opted for patience, reread participants' dialogue, revisited previous literature, and discussed with the primary research advisor.

Additionally, despite that the age range was fairly diverse (18-50+), and that roughly 21% of the respondents reported being married or divorced, the mean age was still just 25-years old—a natural by-product of a convenience sample. Consequently, the results should be interpreted as a solid first step toward understanding conditional forgiveness. The results reflect some range as evidenced by the exemplars. However, understanding more about how conditional forgiveness impacts an older age-group should remain a priority for future researchers.

Conclusion

Enright (2001) argued that forgiveness is not a panacea. This remains something to ponder. Pure, unconditional forgiveness, as explained by Derrida (2001) is something magical—to marvel—a possibility to pursue. The use of a previously used (but now slightly adapted) forgiveness metaphor might also help synthesize the experiences shared by conditional forgivers. Hawk (2007) presented a powerful metaphor to broaden the way forgiveness and its pitfalls are conceptualized. The rapids in the river near his home have names like “Fang,” “Tumbleweed,” and “Cliffside” (p. 309). Likewise, there are places on the river where boulders or other debris create eddies—a place for some to catch a breath. He warns that forgivers may “sometimes get stuck in an *eddy of long-term, low-grade, simmering resentment*” or caught in an “eddy of *resentment and revenge*” (p. 309). Others may get tangled in an eddy of “*depression and withdrawal*” or the “*eddy of victimhood*” (p. 309).

Hawk’s insight was meant not only to inspire the forgiver, but to warn the third-party interventionist as well: “When we see a friend or family member in an eddy, we may grow impatient and be tempted to *push* that person back out into the current” (p. 310). He continued:

Having observed this process carefully in many situations, we believe that it is best to be patient, to see the eddies as resting places, to have a keen sense of timing, and to watch for a person’s own motivation to return to the flow of life (p. 310).

Perhaps for some, conditional forgiveness resembles an eddy—a place to catch a breath—a way to ease back in. And, perhaps it reminds us that we forgive as imperfectly as we live.

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APPENDIX A

Where were you when this incident occurred?

How long ago did this incident occur? (years, months)

How old were you when this incident occurred?

How old was your partner when this incident occurred?

How clearly do you remember this incident?

What did your partner do that required forgiveness?

In as much detail as possible, please describe the circumstances surrounding this incident. For example, explain some of the background between you and the person you forgave when you used conditional forgiveness.

Was this the first time something like this occurred?

In as much detail as possible, please tell the story about this incident. For example, describe the setting, those present, and what events led to this forgiveness situation. What happened between you and your partner during the episode? What happened afterward?

Please rate your feelings about the severity of this incident.

Did you communicate the conditional forgiveness to your partner?

If yes, please describe in as much detail as possible, the conversation between you and the person you forgave when you used conditional forgiveness. For example, how did you tell your partner you would forgive him/her? It would be helpful if you could detail the things you said, and those that the

other part said. Please use quotation marks where you recall exact words or phrases.

If you didn't express conditions verbally, why not?

Indicate the extent to which you used the described behavior in this situation. "7"

indicates very extensive use, "4" indicates moderate use. "1" indicates very slight use. "0" indicates no use.

I told him/her I would forgive him/her, but only if things changed.

I told him/her I would forgive him/her, but only if the offense never happened again in the future.

Indicate the extent your partner used the described behavior in this situation by

writing a number next to the item. "7" indicates very extensive use, "4" indicates moderate use, "1" indicates very slight use. "0" indicates no use.

My partner told me it would never happen again.

Why did you use conditional forgiveness?

Did you communicate to your partner the reasons why you offered conditional forgiveness?

If yes, in as much detail as possible, please describe the conversation about your reasons for using conditional forgiveness. Once again, use quotation marks where you recall exact words or phrases.

If no, why did you choose not to communicate your reasons for using conditional forgiveness?

Please use the scale below to answer the following questions.

My partner acknowledged that he/she hurt me.

My partner offered sincere apologies

My partner expressed feelings of guilt and sadness.

The items below refer to this relationship before the offense which required your forgiveness, immediately after the offense, and now. Use the numbers below to indicate how much you agree with each statement. Use N/A if you think the questions is not applicable to your situation.

We had a high quality relationship before the offense.

We had a high quality relationship immediately after the offense.

We have a high quality relationship now.

We had an intimate relationship before the offense.

We had an intimate relationship immediately after the offense.

We have an intimate relationship now.

We had a stable relationship before the offense.

We had a stable relationship immediately after the offense.

We have a stable relationship now.

Please describe in detail any changes in the status of your relationship. For example, married to divorced, not living together any longer, etc. Include instances where multiple changes may have occurred (broke up, got back together).

What is the current status of this relationship?

Please consider how your relationship with the other person changed due to the situation you have been describing. A “0” means no change, “-1” means a small amount of negative change, “+1” indicates a small amount of positive change, and so on.

Trust

Sharing information about our day

Emotional closeness

Amount of time spent in shared activity

Sharing feelings and thoughts

Amount of touch in the relationship

Amount of time spent together

Feelings for one another

Amount of time spent talking

Your sex?

Sex of your partner?

Your age now?

Your partner's age now?

Describe your ethnic background.

Marital status?

Describe your religious affiliation.

Indicate your level of agreement by marking the appropriate description

Religious beliefs were an important part of my upbringing.

Spiritual beliefs were an important part of my upbringing.

My religious faith affects my relationship with others.

My spiritual beliefs affect my relationships with others.

In general, I consider myself a religious person.

In general, I consider myself a spiritual person.

Your level of education?