

# **Forgiveness of Sexual Cheating in Romantic Relationships: Effects of Discovery Method, Frequency of Offense, and Presence of Apology**

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In this study, participants ( $n = 196$ ) read a vignette about an imaginary romantic partner cheating on them by having sex with another person and responded to a series of questions assessing variables associated with forgiveness. Method of discovering how the infidelity occurred and the frequency of cheating occurrence were manipulated between participants, while the presence or absence of an apology was manipulated within participants. Results indicated that, regardless of how the transgression was discovered, forgiveness was most likely when cheating was an isolated incident and when an apology was offered by the partner. These findings are important in light of the lack of research exploring the role of apologies and frequency in forgiveness of infidelity.

Romantic relationships are one of many sources of joy in people's lives, but rarely are they impervious to acts of betrayal. People are bound to violate their partners' expectations, which may disrupt the relationship and be deeply hurtful. When such transgressions occur, victims may be motivated to seek revenge, wish harm upon their offenders, or simply avoid further contact (McCullough, Worthington, & Rachal, 1997). Alternatively, victims might excuse and exonerate their offenders, an act known as forgiveness.

Forgiveness is conceptualized as a process during which victims of transgressions experience changes in the way they think about, feel about, and behave towards their offenders (Finkel, Rusbult, Kumashiro, & Hannon, 2002; Kachadourian, Fincham, & Davila, 2004; McCullough et al., 1998; Sells & Hargrave, 1998). Cognitively, victims may try to take their offenders' perspective and understand why the transgression occurred, making them less inclined to perceive it as malicious or deliberate. Unlike the process of cognitive dissonance (see Petty, 1995),

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which involves changing new cognitions so that they support pre-existing attitudes and beliefs (“I *must* forgive because, if I don’t, my investment in this relationship will amount to nothing”), forgiveness is a deliberate and active change in attitude motivated by a desire to heal (“I *want to* forgive because this relationship is important to me”). Emotionally, victims’ feelings of hurt and betrayal begin to subside. They may allow themselves to release harbored feelings of hate and resentment and experience more positive feelings such as compassion and understanding. Behaviorally, victims may become more civil towards their offenders. They no longer seek revenge or avoid and may even engage in conversation. These cognitive, emotional, and behavioral components all are part of a larger process that is necessary for forgiveness to occur (see Gordon & Baucom, 1998; Kelley, 1998; Worthington & Wade, 1999).

One goal of forgiveness is to restore harmony to relationships in which transgressions occurred. People are more likely to forgive their partners when they are committed to and satisfied with their relationships (Finkel, Rusbult, Kumashiro, & Hannon, 2002; Paleari, Regalia, & Fincham, 2005). Therefore, it seems logical that “forgivers” experience stronger relationships with their partners than “non-forgivers.” McCullough and colleagues (1997) attributed this association to the fact that forgivers in committed and satisfactory relationships seem less inclined to “take inventory” of their partners’ misdeeds and more inclined to focus on their partners’ constructive behaviors. Finkel and colleagues (2002) suggested that victims in high quality relationships are more likely to empathize and identify extenuating circumstances for their partners’ transgressions, making the transgression less personal, less hurtful, and easier to forgive. In short, the process of forgiveness in romantic relationships enables victims to view themselves as accommodating, their partners as redeemable, and their relationships as resilient.

People are less satisfied and committed in relationships when they believe their partners are deceiving them (Cole, 2001). Moreover, people less committed to their partners are more likely to use deception as an attempt to withdraw from the relationship. One of the most common forms of deception in romantic relationships is *infidelity*, sexual behavior outside of a committed relationship. According to Wiederman and Hurd (1999), 68% of women and 75% of men admitted to participating in some form of sexual cheating. Because it is expected that romantic partners are faithful, sexual cheating may cause extreme damage to a romantic relationship.

Forgiveness may be particularly relevant in the context of sexual cheating. When people learn of their partners’ infidelity, the goal of forgiveness is to help victims gain a balanced view of the offender and

the relationship, decrease negative affect and increase empathy towards the offender, and help victims give up the right to punish their offenders (Gordon & Baucom, 1999). However, forgiving infidelity is not an easy task, especially when victims do not view these transgressions as unplanned, isolated incidents. The more likely victims are to see their partners' infidelity as blameworthy the less likely they are to forgive, making it less likely that the relationship will be reconciled (Hall & Fincham, 2006).

There are differences between men and women in how they react to sexual cheating. Shackelford, Buss, and Bennett (2002) discovered that men reportedly find sexual infidelity more difficult to forgive than women and are more likely to believe that they would end a relationship with a partner who committed this transgression. It has also been found that women are more likely to experience jealousy in response to the emotional aspects of infidelity (e.g., a partner becoming emotionally attached), while men are more likely to experience jealousy in response to the actual sexual act (for a review, see Harris, 2003).

The likelihood of forgiving partners' infidelity also may be impacted by the way in which the cheating is discovered by the victim. There are obviously many ways that people may find out about their partner being unfaithful. Afifi, Falato, and Weiner (2001) made a significant contribution to the literature by studying the association between discovery method and forgiveness. Four different discovery methods for sexual cheating were identified: (1) *unsolicited partner discovery*, where the perpetrator openly admits to the transgression without prior interrogation by the victim; (2) *solicited partner discovery*, where the perpetrator only admits to the transgression after he or she has been suspected and questioned by the victim; (3) "*red-handed*" *discovery*, where the victim catches the perpetrator in the act of infidelity, and (4) *unsolicited third party discovery*, where the victim is told about the transgression by means of another person.

Afifi et al. (2001) found a linear relationship between these four discovery methods and likelihood of forgiveness, such that unsolicited third party discovery was the least likely to be forgiven and unsolicited partner discovery was the most likely to be forgiven. People who discovered the cheating by means of unsolicited partner discovery, compared to other means, were most likely to stay in a relationship following discovery. Presumably, a partners' openness in admitting to infidelity poses the least severe relational threat. Victims may view this act of honesty as an attempt to save the relationship, making them more willing to hear their partners' explanations and more inclined to take their perspectives. On the other hand, when victims learn of their partners'

infidelity from an uninvolved person or by walking in during the sexual cheating act, it might foster more vengeful thoughts and emotions.

Another factor that may impact on the likelihood of sexual infidelity forgiveness is the presence of an apology. The words "I'm sorry" or "I was wrong" imply that one recognizes and is remorseful for an offense - an attempt to mend a relationship that has been potentially jeopardized (Darby & Schlenker, 1982). Apologies may help victims develop less vengeful attitudes towards offenders, guide them toward a less volatile emotional state, and reduce the likelihood of an aggressive response (Ohbuchi, Kameda, & Agarie, 1989). In short, apologies mitigate the negative impact of a transgression both for victims and offenders. Apologies also facilitate forgiveness, as they provide an opportunity to empathize with offenders (McCullough et al., 1998). The more strongly victims believe that their offenders experienced a sense of guilt and were concerned about the loss of a valued relationship, the easier it may be to take the offenders' perspective and maintain positive views of the offender. In turn, empathic victims may be less avoidant, less vengeful, and more benevolent towards the offender (McCullough et al., 1998; Paleari et al., 2005). Apologies compensate victims for the level of hurt experienced, making it easier to forgive an offender and providing an incentive to reconcile the relationship (Hargrave, 1994; Metts, 1992, 1994).

While it may seem obvious that apologies play a significant role in the forgiveness of sexual cheating, researchers have not assessed the association between apologies and forgiveness in the context of romantic relationships. The role of apologies in promoting forgiveness may differ depending on the relationship between victims and transgressors. For example, depending on the level of romantic commitment, an apology may be more meaningful and valuable to a victim when he or she is hurt by a romantic partner than when he or she is hurt by a friend or family member.

Another important variable is how often the cheating occurred. The decision to forgive may depend on the frequency of the partner's cheating. When a partner has only cheated once, the victim may believe that the relationship is worth mending, thereby making forgiveness more important to consider than if cheating has occurred frequently. Believing that cheating will never occur again, the victim may choose to forgive and be less likely to end the relationship. Unfortunately, no study assessed the role of frequent cheating on forgiveness.

The present study explored how likely people forgave sexual cheating in romantic relationships. Although several studies assessed forgiveness in the context of romantic relationships, few focused on the particular transgression of infidelity. Afifi et al. (2001) demonstrated that the extent

to which sexual infidelity is forgiven may depend on how it is discovered by the victim. However, that study did not assess the extent to which participants believed their offenders apologized, which may play a significant role in the decision to forgive. Numerous studies showed that offenders' apologies were related to victims' forgiveness and desire to reconcile the relationship (Metts, 1992, 1994; Ohbuchi et al., 1989). Unfortunately, very little is known about the role of apologies in the context of romantic relationships, particularly with respect to infidelity. The present study examined possible interaction effects of these three variables in the forgiveness of sexual cheating, exploring between all three variables.

Six main hypotheses were tested: (1) We expected a significant main effect in frequency of occurrence, such that cheating as an isolated incident would be related to greater forgiveness ratings than cheating as a frequent occurrence; (2) We expected that there would be a significant main effect in discovery method, such that *unsolicited partner discovery* would be related to greater forgiveness ratings than *unsolicited third party discovery*; (3) We expected that there would be a significant main effect in apology, such that the presence of apology would be related to greater forgiveness ratings than absence of apology; (4) It was expected that there would be an interaction effect of discovery method and frequency of cheating, such that an isolated incident of cheating that was voluntarily disclosed by the partner was expected to be related to greater forgiveness ratings than frequent cheating disclosed by a third party source; (5) It was expected that there would be a significant three-way interaction between discovery method, frequency of occurrence, and apology. That is, we expected that an isolated sexual cheating incident voluntarily disclosed by the partner would be related to greater forgiveness ratings when an apology was offered than when an apology was not offered; and, (6) We expected that there would be a significant main effect for gender, such that women would elicit greater forgiveness ratings than men.

## METHOD

### Participants

A total of 196 undergraduate students (127 women; 69 men;  $M$  age = 19.80 years old,  $SD = 3.50$ ) from a large Midwestern university participated in the study. Among these individuals, 50.5% were Caucasian, 13.3% Latino/a, 10.7% African American, 10.2% Asian American, 2% Indian, 8.7% identified as "other," and 4.6% non-classifiable. Participants were enrolled in psychology courses and received required course credit for their involvement.

### Materials and Procedure

Participants were informed prior to returning a signed consent form that the study pertained to cheating within romantic relationships and subsequently received a folder containing a single vignette (see Figure 1) and dependent measures. The first part of the vignette was identical for all participants describing a hypothetical long-term romantic relationship between the participant and a significant other. The relationship existed for over four months, affirming that both partners “spend a great deal of time together” and “are content with the relationship.” The vignette stated that the imaginary significant other partner cheated on the participant by having sex with another person.

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#### *All Vignettes:*

Imagine that you are currently romantically involved with someone. The two of you have an established relationship, and you comfortably refer to your partner as your “boyfriend” or “girlfriend.” You and your partner spend a great deal of time together, and both of you are content with the relationship. One day, you find out that your partner has cheated on you by having sex with another person. You were previously unaware of this behavior.

#### *Discovery Method: You learn about the cheating ...*

... from a *common friend* of you and your partner. This person has told you because he or she believes that it is in your best interests to know.

... because you have caught your partner “*red-handed*.” Specifically, you walked in on your partner and this other person while they were having sex with each other.

... because your partner has *admitted to cheating on you* in this way. Your partner has disclosed this fact only because you have *questioned him or her* about the act.

... because your partner has *admitted to cheating on you* in this way. Your partner has disclosed this fact openly and *without any suspicion or interrogation* or on your behalf.

#### *Frequency of Occurrence:*

It is disclosed that this is the *first time* that your partner has ever cheated on you. It was an *isolated incident*, and there has been no history of such behavior in your relationship.

It is disclosed that this is *not the first time* that your partner has cheated on you. In the course of your relationship, cheating behavior has *occurred frequently* without you knowing about it.

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FIGURE 1 The Conditions Used for Vignette

The second part of the vignette differed across participants in how the person learned of the cheating (i.e., the *discovery method*) and how often the partner cheated (the *frequency of occurrence* – frequently or once). Four methods of discovery based on Afifi et al. (2001) were utilized, namely: (a) *unsolicited partner discovery*, partner admits openly and without interrogation; (b) *solicited partner discovery*, partner admits after confronted and questioned; (c) “*red-handed*” *discovery*, partner is caught in a sex act; or, (d) *unsolicited third party discovery*, victim was told by a mutual friend. In terms of the frequency of occurrence, participants either read that the cheating behavior occurred frequently over the past several months or was an isolated incident with no history of this behavior. In addition, all participants were asked to rate a set of statements twice, once while imagining that the partner apologized and again when imagining that the partner did not apologize for the transgression. The order of *apology status* and items was counterbalanced across participants. Therefore, this study used a four (discovery method) by two (frequency of occurrence) by two (apology) mixed design, with repeated measures on the last factor.

After reading the vignette, all participants rated six statements pertaining to forgiveness along 7-point Likert scales (1 = *strongly disagree*; 7 = *strongly agree*) for each apology condition: (1) *I would forgive my partner after this incident*; (2) *Forgiveness would be important to consider after this incident*; (3) *I would find it easy to forgive my partner after this incident*; (4) *I would be able to trust my partner just as much as I did before the incident*; (5) *I would worry about my partner’s future behavior*; and, (6) *I would end the relationship because of my partner’s cheating*. Items 1, 4, and 6 were based on a forgiveness scale (e.g., TRIM-12, McCullough et al., 1998; IRRS, Hargrave & Sells, 1997), while items 2, 3, and 5 represented important factors that typically were not assessed. Participants also rated how long it would take them to forgive, along a 7-point Likert scale (1 = *right away*, 7 = *never*). To assess the believability of the vignette, two subsequent items required participants to rate how realistic they believed the story to be (7-point scale: 1 = *not at all realistic*; 7 = *very realistic*) and whether they had ever experienced the incident (*yes* or *no*). Finally, participants provided demographic information including age, sex, and current relationship status.

## RESULTS

The mean rating of the extent to which participants found the vignette realistic was 6.33 ( $SD = 0.33$ ). Most participants (66%) reported that they had no prior experience with the relational transgression of a romantic partner sexually cheating. Thus, despite the fact that most participants

had not personally experienced a partner's infidelity, they seemed to find the situation quite believable.

To test the first five hypotheses, a 4 (discovery method: unsolicited partner vs. solicited partner vs. red-handed vs. unsolicited third party) X 2 (frequency of occurrence: frequent vs. isolated) X 2 (apology status: present vs. absent) series of mixed-design *MANOVAs* was conducted; one on each individual forgiveness item, with the last factor as a within-subject variable. The first hypothesis, stating that there would be significant differences in forgiveness based on how the cheating was discovered, was not supported. No main effects for discovery method were obtained on any of the dependent variables.

In partial support of the second hypothesis, main effects for frequency of occurrence were obtained for several of the forgiveness dependent variables (see Table 1). Specifically, participants who read that their imaginary partners cheated on them only once compared to frequently reported that they were more likely to forgive,  $F(1, 188) = 10.01, p = .002, es = .05$ ; considered forgiveness more important,  $F(1, 188) = 5.98, p = .015, es = .02$ ; were less likely to worry about their partner's future behavior,  $F(1, 188) = 7.12, p = .008, es = .04$ ; and were less likely to end the relationship,  $F(1, 188) = 14.36, p < .001, es = .07$ . No significant main effects emerged for the variables of ease of forgiving, likelihood of trusting partner in the future, and time needed to forgive.

TABLE 1 Mean Rating on Forgiveness Responses based on Frequency of Sexual Cheating by Partner

FREQUENCY of OCCURENCE	<i>Often</i> ( <i>n</i> = 99)	<i>Isolated</i> ( <i>n</i> = 97)
Forgiveness dependent variables:		
<i>likelihood of forgiving</i>	2.04 (1.11)	2.60 (1.39)**
<i>importance of forgiveness</i>	3.10 (1.64)	3.70 (1.82)*
<i>ease of forgiving</i>	1.77 (1.01)	1.84 (1.06)
<i>trust partner in the future</i>	1.69 (1.17)	1.91 (1.29)
<i>worry about partner's future acts</i>	5.54 (1.83)	6.14 (1.29)**
<i>likelihood of ending relationship</i>	6.11 (1.00)	5.44 (1.26)**
<i>time needed to forgive</i>	6.02 (1.10)	5.70 (1.26)

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

Note. Value in parenthesis is standard deviation.



Main effects were also obtained for apology, partially supporting the third hypothesis (see Table 2). Participants who read that their imaginary partner apologized for the transgression compared to those who read that their partner did not, were more likely to forgive,  $F(1, 188) = 150.82, p < .001, es = .45$ ; considered forgiveness more important,  $F(1, 188) = 116.37, p < .001, es = .38$ ; found it easier to forgive,  $F(1, 188) = 35.26, p < .001, es = .16$ ; were more likely to trust their partner in the future,  $F(1, 188) = 20.43, p < .001, es = .10$ ; were less likely to end the relationship,  $F(1, 188) = 68.65, p < .001, es = .27$ ; and needed less time to forgive,  $F(1, 188) = 90.28, p < .001, es = .32$ . No significant main effects emerged regarding the extent to which participants would worry about their imaginary partners' future behavior.

TABLE 2 Mean Rating on Forgiveness Responses Based on Presence of Apology following Sexual Cheating

	<i>STATUS of APOLOGY</i>	
	<i>Present</i>	<i>Absent</i>
Forgiveness dependent variables:		
<i>likelihood of forgiving</i>	2.93 (1.71)	1.70 (1.16)***
<i>importance of forgiveness</i>	4.02 (1.95)	2.77 (1.91)***
<i>ease of forgiving</i>	2.07 (1.37)	1.54 (1.01)***
<i>trust partner in future</i>	1.99 (1.44)	1.61 (1.30)***
<i>worry about partner's future acts</i>	5.78 (1.63)	5.89 (1.82)
<i>likelihood of ending relationship</i>	5.40 (1.58)	6.16 (1.25)***
<i>time needed to forgive</i>	5.55 (1.39)	6.16 (1.14)***

$n = 196$  \*\*\*  $p < .001$  Note. Value in parenthesis is standard deviation.

In partial support of the fourth hypothesis, a significant interaction between frequency of occurrence and apology emerged with respect to how long participants would take to forgive their imaginary partners,  $F(1, 188) = 9.72, p = .002, es = .05$ . Participants who read that their imaginary partner cheated only once needed less time to forgive when an apology was offered ( $M = 5.28, SD = 1.47$ ) than when an apology was not offered ( $M = 6.10, SD = 1.20$ ). No interaction effects were found for any other dependent variables. However, the fifth hypothesis stating that there would be a significant three-way interaction between discovery method, frequency of occurrence, and apology, was not supported. No interactions were found between these three variables for any of the dependent variables.

To test the sixth hypothesis, a univariate *ANOVA* was conducted on all forgiveness ratings with gender as the independent variable. Women were significantly more likely than men to believe they would worry about their imaginary partner's future behavior when an apology was offered (women:  $M = 5.98$ ,  $SD = 1.46$ ; men:  $M = 5.46$ ,  $SD = 1.82$ ),  $F(1, 193) = 4.72$ ,  $p = .031$ ,  $es = .02$ ; and was not offered (women:  $M = 6.12$ ,  $SD = 1.68$ ; men:  $M = 5.54$ ,  $SD = 1.94$ ),  $F(1, 193) = 4.63$ ,  $p = .033$ ,  $es = .02$ . Men were more likely to believe that it would be easier to forgive their imaginary partners than women, but only when an apology was not offered (men:  $M = 1.71$ ,  $SD = .99$ ; women:  $M = 1.41$ ,  $SD = .89$ ),  $F(1, 193) = 4.56$ ,  $p = .034$ ,  $es = .02$ . No significant effects were found for any other forgiveness ratings. There were also no significant interactions between gender and discovery method and frequency of occurrence.

### DISCUSSION

Previous studies supported the claim that forgiveness is more likely in high quality relationships (see Finkel et al. 2002). Forgiveness of a romantic partner for a given transgression is an indication that the relationship is committed and satisfactory (McCullough et al., 1998; Paleari, Regalia, & Fincham, 2005). Sexual cheating, in contrast, may be the strongest indicator that the relationship is in jeopardy. The current study examined the influence of discovery method, frequency of occurrence, and apology on people's likelihood of forgiving infidelity.

Consistent with prior research (e.g., McCullough, 2000; Rusbult, Verette, Whitney, Slovik, & Lipkus, 1991), forgiveness was more likely in the presence than absence of an apology. Participants reported that it would be easier to forgive their imaginary partners for cheating, the process of forgiving these partners would take less time, and they were more hopeful about the future relationship and less likely to end the relationship when they read about receiving an apology than when they read about not receiving an apology. While existing theories link apologies to relationship reconciliation (Metts, 1992, 1994), the current study suggests that reconciliation may exist following sexual cheating transgressions. Victims of sexual cheating may feel that they have little reason to forgive and may feel entitled to revenge. However, when a remorseful apology including a confession of wrongdoing is offered by the transgressor with an attempt to mend a relationship, victims then seem to forgive, regain trust, and reconcile the relationship.

The likelihood of forgiving sexual cheating may also depend on how often the behavior occurred. Participants who read about imaginary partners cheating only once reported that they would be more likely to forgive the transgression and less likely to end the relationship than those who read about frequent-cheating partners. Perhaps these participants

viewed themselves as committed partners in romantic relationships or believed their imaginary partners' isolated cheating to be a redeemable offense. These individuals also reported that they would be more likely to worry about their imaginary partners' future behavior. In light of discovering such a transgression, victims of a single sexual transgression may worry about whether or not their partners will cheat again and again in the future. In contrast, people who discover that a partner cheated multiple times may worry less because they are already less likely to forgive and more likely to end the relationship.

In this study, how one discovered the hypothetical sexual transgression was unrelated to the likelihood of forgiveness, contrary to the findings of Afifi et al. (2001). Afifi et al. (2001) included participants who previously experienced infidelity in a dating relationship, making this transgression more salient to these participants at the time of the study. In the present study, the majority of participants had no prior experience with sexual cheating. It may be that for people without such experience, cheating is deplorable; it does not matter how the infidelity is discovered. It is also possible, given the significant roles of frequency and apology in this study, that discovery method becomes inconsequential in the decision to forgive once victims learn that the cheating was an isolated incident or once they receive an apology from their partners. Finally, it is possible that the vignette used in this study was not vivid enough or did not provide enough detail about the discovery method, making it difficult for participants to even envision such a scenario.

Contrary to expectation, only one significant interaction emerged. Participants who read about an isolated incident of cheating, compared to participants who read about frequent cheating incidents, believed that it would take them less time to forgive the imaginary partner, but only when the partner apologized. Learning that a partner's infidelity only occurred once may not be a sufficient condition to influence the *length of time* one thinks he or she needs for forgiveness of the sexual transgression. In romantic relationships people may be more likely to forgive their partners when they believe the partner to be trustworthy and devoted to the relationship (Kachadourian, Fincham, & Davila, 2004). Infrequent cheating combined with an apology may provide some assurance to victims that the offender deserves to be forgiven and expedites the forgiveness process. Future research should explore these speculations.

The findings that women more than men believed that it would be more difficult to forgive an imaginary partner and more likely to worry about future behavior is surprising in light of recent research suggesting that men tend to be more jealous and less forgiving of sexual infidelity

(e.g., Edlund, Heider, Scherer, Farc, & Sagarin, 2006; Harris, 2002; Shackelford et al., 2002). However, these studies indicate that men are only more jealous about the act of their partner having sex with another person, whereas women are more jealous about emotional attachment that may occur. The findings in this study may be attributable to the fact that the vignette focused on how participants discovered the cheating and how often it occurred and provided no details about the sexual act itself. This lack of detail about the act of the partner having sex may have forced participants to think more about the emotional attachment issue and less about the extent to which the partner engaged in and enjoyed the act.

Researchers also questioned the validity of measures used in studies where a significant gender difference was found. Desteno, Bartlett, Braverman, and Salovey (2002) suggested that these findings are due in large part to the “forced-choice” format used in most studies (i.e., participant simply indicates whether they would be more distressed by the emotional attachment or the sexual act), as this was the only measure in their study to produce any effects. Harris (2002) discovered that significant effects found using a “forced-choice” measure disappear when participants are asked to think about real transgressions that occurred in their lives. Perhaps women find it more difficult to forgive than men. Because the present study utilized a hypothetical scenario, our gender effects may not be generalizable to real-life infidelity.

Clearly, further research is needed on forgiveness of sexual cheating. The present study failed to replicate other studies (e.g., Afifi et al., 2001). Our participants reportedly never experienced a romantic partner cheating; therefore, the present study might have had a biased sample. Furthermore, participants considered forgiving in a hypothetical transgression which might not represent how people would respond to “real world” transgressions. Although other studies found that imagined transgressions predicted forgiveness of real-life transgressions (Fincham, 2000; Kachadourian, Fincham, & Davila, 2004), those studies did not assess specifically the transgression of sexual cheating. Future studies should include participants who actually experienced a discovery method for sexual infidelity, because these individuals may have different perspectives about the importance of apology and transgression frequency.

In sum, the incident of frequent or infrequent cheating in the present study was discovered either unsolicited from the partner, solicited from the partner by way of catching the partner “red-handed,” or from a third party. Results suggested that regardless of the discovery method, forgiveness was more likely when the partners apologized or when the cheating was an isolated incident, and victims reported they would less

likely end these imaginary relationships. In addition, the process of forgiveness may be shorter for victims whose partners cheated only once and apologized for the incident.

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