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What determines forgiveness in close relationships? The role of post-transgression trust

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Relationship closeness is one of the best predictors of forgiveness. But what is the *process* by which closeness encourages forgiveness? Across three studies, we employed a mix of experimental and correlational designs with prospective ($N = 108$), scenario ($N = 71$), and recall ($N = 184$) paradigms to test a multiple mediation model. We found consistent evidence that the positive association between relationship closeness and forgiveness may be explained by levels of post-transgression trust in the offender. Moreover, trust always played the main mediating role in the forgiveness process, even when taking into account several transgression-specific variables associated with both trust and forgiveness (e.g., apology). We discuss the theoretical and practical implications of trust as a key indicator of forgiveness in close relationships.

Close relationships provide partners with many material, physical, and psychological benefits. In particular, they satisfy fundamental human needs for belonging and security (Baumeister & Leary, 1995) and self-esteem (Leary, Terdal, Tambor, & Downs, 1995). As such, close relationships are inherently motivating: partners want them to continue. When bad partner behaviour threatens the existence and quality of close relationships, one highly effective means by which offended partners protect and restore relationships is by forgiving. In fact, studies based on evolutionary (McCullough, 2008), interdependence (Finkel, Rusbult, Kumashiro, & Hannon, 2002), and functional (Strelan, McKee, Calic, Cook, & Shaw, 2013) theories suggest that victims are primarily motivated to forgive in order to continue the relationship (Karremans & Van Lange, 2004).

Not surprisingly, then, relationship closeness is one of the strongest predictors of transgression-specific forgiveness (for a meta-analysis, see Fehr, Gelfand, & Nag, 2010). The positive effect of closeness on forgiveness has been observed in romantic and various other types of adult relationships (Finkel *et al.*, 2002), in children's peer relationships (Peets, Hodges, & Salmivalli, 2013), and has been shown to hold across a variety of nations and cultures (Karremans *et al.*, 2011). Yet, although scholars generally agree about *why* closeness promotes forgiveness (i.e., it preserves close relationships), less is known about *how* closeness encourages forgiveness. In this article, we argue that the answer lies (at least in part) in the extent to which close relationships provide information about the *trustworthiness* of an offending partner. To be sure, closeness and trust are strongly entwined, such that the relation may be bi-directional. However, in the present studies,

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we hypothesize and test whether feelings of closeness form a *basis* upon which to restore trust in the wake of a transgression, thereby facilitating forgiveness.

How close relationships encourage hurt partners to restore trust

A widely accepted definition of a close relationship refers to the extent to which the 'selves' of two individuals overlap, such that one person's sense of self encompasses characteristics, resources, and perspectives of the other (Aron, Aron, & Smollen, 1992). Several notable features emerge from this definition. First, two people come to know each other very well, such that they become fairly good at predicting the other's behaviour (see Murray & Holmes, 2009). Second, they tend to possess mutually agreed plans and goals, such that they are committed to each other (Rusbult, Martz, & Agnew, 1998). Third, they tend to like each other, and in particular value what each brings to the relationship (McCullough, Luna, Berry, Tabak, & Bono, 2010). Fourth, they develop a psychological attachment (Finkel, Rusbult, Kumashiro, and Hannon, 2002). As such, 'closeness' is an umbrella term that captures the general sense of relationship quality indicated by other distinct, yet highly similar constructs such as commitment, relationship value, and attachment. Finally, the idea of closeness as 'high interdependence' (see also Kelley, 1983) enables reference to a wide variety of interpersonal relationships, including intimate partners, family members, friends, and work colleagues.

Although there are many variations on the definition of trust, researchers generally conceptualize trust as the willingness to 'accept vulnerability based upon positive expectations of the intentions or behaviour of another' (Rousseau, Sitkin, Burt, & Camerer, 1998, p. 395; see also Mayer, Davis, & Schoorman, 1995; Rempel, Holmes, & Zanna, 1985; Simpson, 2007). Given that humans are social creatures, trust is fundamental to the human experience and a strongly influential variable operating on and within interpersonal and group processes (for a review, see Thielmann & Hilbig, 2015). Trust is relevant whenever social interaction occurs, so that it transverses the gamut of social experiences, from interactions with complete strangers (Lount, Zhong, Sivanathan, & Murnighan, 2008), to those with authorities (Tyler, 2016), work colleagues (Kramer, 1999), and intimate partners (Murray & Holmes, 2009).

Trust can be something of a double-edged sword. On one hand, trusting another person by definition makes one vulnerable. On the other hand, if one cannot trust, one cannot function socially, and if one's trust is rewarded – and continues to be reinforced – then trust is mightily efficacious. For example, trust is associated with well-being (DeNeve & Cooper, 1998). In the context of interpersonal relationships, interdependence theory (Kelley & Thibaut, 1978) suggests that trust develops and is concretized when partners (whether they are intimate, friends, family members, work colleagues) continue to act in a mutually responsive manner (Murray & Holmes, 2009, 2015).

Clearly, trust is essential to healthy, functioning relationships (Holmes & Rempel, 1989). Indeed, prototype analyses suggest trust may be the defining feature of close relationships (Fehr, 1988). That said, we note that particular individual differences, such as those pertaining to self-esteem (Murray, Holmes, Griffin, Bellavia, & Rose, 2001) and attachment (Farrell, Simpson, Overall, & Shallcross, 2016), can play moderating roles, so that some close relationships are characterized by low trust. In the present studies, however, we focus on partner-specific trust, and what happens when it is violated.

Partner-specific trust develops over time (Holmes & Rempel, 1989). It is inferred from the extent to which partners pass 'strain-tests' (Holmes, 1981), that is, stressful situations in which a partner has to make a choice to act benevolently by making a personal sacrifice,

or act selfishly. Strain-tests provide useful diagnostic information about a partner's integrity, predictability, and dependability (Mayer *et al.*, 1995), and the extent to which one may have faith that a partner is intrinsically motivated to be responsive and caring (Rempel *et al.*, 1985). Accumulated positive partner behaviours in situations that test the partner's trustworthiness encourage one to ascribe positive dispositional qualities to the partner, to the point where victims can treat a subsequent trust breach as the exception that proves the rule (Miller & Rempel, 2004).

In the context of interpersonal relationships in particular, it may be argued that, insofar as partners trust each other to follow implicit and explicit relationship-specific rules and norms (Finkel, Rusbult, Kumashiro, and Hannon, 2002), any transgression effectively represents some form of trust betrayal. As such, transgressions are occasions where an offending partner has failed a strain-test. How might a close victim respond? On one hand, the closer the relationship the more keenly felt the transgression (Karremans & Van Lange, 2004). On the other hand, close relationships provide information that helps to mitigate the harmfulness of the transgression, so that victims perceive that, despite the trust betrayal, the offender is still trustworthy.

For a start, partners build up reputational credit by passing earlier strain-tests, thereby reducing perceptions of intentionality when they do transgress (Lount *et al.*, 2008). Additionally, close victims are, by definition, better able to take a transgressing partner's perspective (McCullough *et al.*, 1998). Viewed from the other angle, close transgressors are more likely to engage in post-transgression reparative action such as apologizing, expressing remorse, and making amends (McCullough, Rachal, Sandage, Worthington, Wade Brown, and Hight, 1998), and take responsibility for their actions (Hodgins & Liebeskind, 2003). Such responses are constructive and restorative, communicating that the offender seeks to restore power to the victim (Okimoto, Wenzel, & Hedrick, 2013), has respect and goodwill for the victim (Schmitt, Gollwitzer, Forster, & Montada, 2004), and wishes to re-validate shared values (Wenzel & Okimoto, 2010) and re-engage in the relationship (Hannon, Rusbult, Finkel, & Kumashiro, 2010). As a result, the act is less likely to be attributed to negative offender dispositions (Weiner, Graham, Peter, & Zmuidinas, 1991), and perceptions of offender culpability are diminished (Boon & Sulsky, 1997).

Further, and as we have noted, close relationships are inherently motivating. Close victims may reduce negative interpretations of a partner's integrity to be consistent with the investment they have made in the relationship and their expectation that the relationship is worth persisting with (Rempel, Ross, & Holmes, 2001). Accordingly, victims within such relationships are motivated to re-interpret bad partner behaviour by downplaying or cognitively re-framing it (Arriaga & Rusbult, 1998), and attribute qualities to transgressing partners that they may not necessarily possess (Murray, Holmes, & Griffin, 2003).

In summary, a transgression constitutes a betrayal of trust. But trust is more easily restored in close relationships not simply because closeness and trust are arguably synonymous. More specifically, close relationships are able to buffer the effects of transgressions. Victims in close relationships are able to refer to a shared history that allows them to discount their partner's bad behaviour. Close offenders themselves are more likely to act in ways that dampen the hurtfulness of their actions. Finally, close victims are motivated to discount the behaviour in order to maintain the relationship and their positive view of their partner. Taken together, several different sources of mitigating information allow close victims to maintain the view that their offending partner is still trustworthy, more so than those victims who are not close to their offenders.

How trust encourages forgiveness

Forgiveness refers to the process by which victims' affective, cognitive, and behavioural stances towards an offender change from negative to positive (McCullough, Rachal, Sandage, Worthington, Wade Brown, and Hight, 1998). Although forgiveness can be strictly intrapersonal (Worthington, 2001), often it is manifested interpersonally so that offenders become cognizant of a positive change in victims' attitudes towards them (McCullough, Rachal, Sandage, Worthington, Wade Brown, and Hight, 1998). A core feature of interpersonal forgiveness is that it is approach-oriented, indicating a willingness to re-engage with offenders. For example, McCullough (2008) argues that reconciliation is, to all practical intents and purposes, a behavioural proxy for interpersonal forgiveness.

Yet, the act (or mere thought) of forgiving may increase a victim's sense of vulnerability. Transgressions already make victims feel vulnerable because they communicate disrespect (Miller, 2001), subsequently threatening victims' basic need states of social connectedness (Baumeister & Leary, 1995) and self-worth (Leary *et al.*, 1995). By responding in an apparently conciliatory manner, victims open themselves up to the possibility that the person who hurt them will take advantage of them again. In fact, in certain circumstances, forgiving has negative psychological and physical consequences (for a brief review, see Strelan, McKee, & Feather, 2016). As a general rule, however, victims nonetheless see the opportunities offered by forgiveness as significant enough to risk offenders taking advantage of their benevolence.

As such, forgiving requires a leap of faith. The length of the leap depends on many factors, not the least of which is the extent to which victims *trust* their offending partners. The leap would be great – and therefore riskier – when a victim cannot trust that his/her offender would not repeat the hurtful behaviour, or use forgiveness to leverage greater power within the relationship. Conversely, the leap would be small – and therefore easier to take – when a victim *can* trust that his/her partner would not take advantage of forgiveness, or that the partner will strive to act according to implicit and explicit relationship rules. Accordingly, trust has been found to predict forgiveness within interpersonal relationships (Burnette, McCullough, Van Tongeren, & Davis, 2012; Finkel, Burnette, & Scissors, 2007; Luchies *et al.*, 2013; Molden & Finkel, 2010).

Alternative mediators

Our main hypothesis is that pre-transgression levels of relationship closeness will encourage forgiveness indirectly through post-transgression levels of trust. We also included for analysis several transgression-specific variables that are well established as predictors of forgiveness, specifically, *hurtfulness* (Fincham, Jackson, & Beach, 2005), perceptions of offender *intent* (Struthers, Eaton, Santelli, Uchiyama, & Shirvani, 2008), offender *apology* (McCullough, Rachal, Sandage, Worthington, Wade Brown, and Hight, 1998), *empathy* for an offender (McCullough, Rachal, Sandage, Worthington, Wade Brown, and Hight, 1998), and *rumination* (Worthington & Wade, 1999; for a meta-analysis, see Fehr *et al.*, 2010). These variables possess additional relevance because, as discussed earlier, they are often implicated in the extent to which closeness encourages restored trust.

We included these variables as alternative mediators, to serve two inter-related purposes. First, we would be making important theoretical and practical contributions if we could show that, in the context of close relationships (where forgiveness is most relevant), trust predicts forgiveness over and above many strong transgression-specific

predictors of forgiveness. Second, we have suggested that closeness encourages trust often because pre-transgression closeness affects the way victims process post-transgression information such as hurtfulness and perceived offender intent; the likelihood that offenders will apologize and make amends; and how victims evaluate their offenders (e.g., the extent to which they will feel empathy). As such, much of the variance in the relation between closeness and trust may be attributed to these additional variables. By including them in our modelling, we will, in effect, partial out the variance that they share with trust, thereby providing a highly stringent test of trust.

The current research and hypotheses

We report three studies employing three different methodological approaches to test a multiple mediation model. We tested the model using an experimental, prospective design (Study 1), an experimental design embedded within a hypothetical scenario (Study 2), and a correlational recall design (Study 3).

STUDY 1

Study 1 employed a two-phase prospective experimental design. At Phase 1, participants brought to mind someone with whom they were in regular contact and they were close or not close. Approximately 2 months later (Phase 2), participants recalled a hurtful action by this person in the period since. There are several advantageous features of this design. It enabled us to (1) experimentally vary closeness within the context of actual personally experienced transgressions, insofar as we had some control over who was recalled and therefore (2) obtain an indication of closeness *prior* to a transgression so that (3) we could be more confident in drawing causal conclusions about the effect of closeness on post-transgression trust levels and forgiveness.

Method

Participants

At Phase 1, there were originally 266 undergraduates from a large Australian university who received partial course credit for participating. However, because we inadvertently requested a different student identification number at Phase 2, we could only confidently match the identification numbers of 108 participants across the two data collection points (84 women; 24 men; M_{age} = 23, SD = 8.48). All of these participants recalled transgressions between Phase 1 and Phase 2.

Materials and procedures Phase 1

We conducted the study online. We randomly allocated participants to bring to mind someone with whom they were in regular contact and they were either 'really close' or 'not close'. To personalize the survey, participants wrote the person's first name in a textbox which appeared automatically thereafter where applicable. Participants indicated the nature of their relationship (relationship partner; family member; friend/ acquaintance; work colleague; or 'other'), followed by the manipulation check ('X and I are close') on a scale where 1 = *strongly disagree*; 5 = *strongly agree*.

Materials and procedures Phase 2

Approximately 2 months later participants completed the second phase of the study. Participant confirmed they were recalling an event by the same person they indicated in Phase 1, by writing this person's first name in a textbox, which appeared automatically thereafter wherever relevant. Next participants described in a textbox something that this person did to upset them, no matter how big or small, in the past 2 months, including how it made them feel. The remainder of the survey consisted of items relating to the key measures, plus a measure of time elapsed since the transgression (days). All items are 1 = *strongly disagree*; 7 = *strongly agree* unless otherwise indicated. All multi-item measures were randomly presented within blocks and averaged with higher scores indicating greater agreement.

Trust was measured with 15 items from Rempel, Holmes, and Zanna (1985) Trust Scale, which measures trust of a specific person (e.g., 'I can rely on X to keep the promises he/she makes to me'; $\alpha = .94$). To ensure the scale was relevant to all participants regardless of relationship type, we removed two items that refer explicitly to an intimate partner.

Apology was measured with three items ('X was remorseful; made amends; apologized for what he/she did'; $\alpha = .88$).

Hurtfulness was measured with three items ('The event is still painful for me'; 'What X did was hurtful'; and 'Compared to other hurtful events in my life, this was the most hurtful'; $\alpha = .72$).

Intent was measured with three items ('X's behaviour was intentional'; 'X's behaviour was deliberate'; 'X meant to hurt me'; $\alpha = .82$).

State-specific *empathy* was measured with four items developed by Wenzel and Okimoto (2010) (e.g., 'I think I can understand what went on in X's head'; $\alpha = .80$).

State-specific *rumination* was measured with five items developed by McCullough, Bono, and Root (2007) (e.g., 'I brood about how X hurt me'; $\alpha = 92.$).

Forgiveness was measured with the Transgression-Related Interpersonal Motivations (TRIM) scale (McCullough, Fincham, & Tsang, 2003; McCullough, Rachal, Sandage, Worthington, Wade Brown, and Hight, 1998). The TRIM consists of three subscales (avoidance, revenge, benevolence) plus a single-item measure of forgiveness. Following McCullough *et al.* (2010), we combined all items to form an overall indication of forgiveness of a specific other's transgression (avoidance and revenge items were reverse-scored; 17 items; $\alpha = .92$). The avoidance subscale usually includes the item 'I don't trust him/her', but we did not include this item in the final scale to avoid conflating forgiveness with the measure of trust.

Finally, we implemented a *closeness manipulation check* to confirm that participants were still close/not close at T2 ('We are close').

Results

Background variables

Participants nominated relationship partners (20.4%), family members (13%), friends/acquaintances (60.2%), and work colleagues (5.6%). One participant did not provide an answer. When the sample was broken down according to experimental condition, note that there were no work colleagues in the close condition, and no relationship partners in the non-close condition.

Time elapsed since the transgression ranged from one to 70 days ($M = 29$, $SD = 19.14$). On average, the transgression was considered to be at the lower end of

the harm scale in terms of how painful it still was ($M = 2.69$, $SD = 1.88$), and was benign compared to other hurtful events in participants' lives ($M = 1.79$, $SD = 1.41$).

Differences between close and non-close conditions

We conducted *t*-tests to examine differences between close and non-close participants on the manipulation check, mediator variables, forgiveness, and time elapsed. Table 1 reports the results. Table 1 shows that the manipulation was successful, with participants assigned to thinking of a close other significantly more likely to rate them as close than those assigned to the non-close condition. In addition, these differences remained significant at T2. Following the transgression, close participants were significantly more likely to forgive their offender, and trust them, and the offending partner was more likely to have apologized. There were no significant differences on hurtfulness, intent, empathy, and rumination. Finally, there was a significant difference on time elapsed since the transgression, that is, close participants recalled more recent transgressions.

Relations between closeness, discounting, trust, and forgiveness

First, we examined correlations between each of the mediator variables and forgiveness. All relations with forgiveness were significant (i.e., *p*s < .001) and in the expected directions, with *r*s ranging from $-.33$ for hurtfulness to .68 for trust.

It may also be noted that trust was significantly associated with each of the alternative mediators in the expected directions (all *p*s < .02), with *r*s ranging from $-.24$ for hurtfulness to .53 for empathy.

Next, we tested a multiple mediation model using Preacher and Hayes' (2008) Multiple Mediation macro (5,000 iterations; bias corrected). Closeness was the predictor variable; trust, hurtfulness, apology, intent, empathy, and rumination were entered as competing mediators; and forgiveness was the outcome variable. Figure 1 presents the model. It shows that, first, as indicated by the *t*-tests, closeness was positively associated with trust, apology, and forgiveness. Second, consistent with the correlations, trust and apology

Table 1. Summary of *t*-tests for differences between closeness conditions on forgiveness, trust, alternative mediators, and time elapsed (Study 1)

	Not close (n = 48) M (SD)	Close (n = 60) M (SD)	t^a	d
Manipulation check T1	2.89 (1.02)	4.60 (0.53)	11.25***	2.10
Manipulation check T2	4.46 (1.75)	5.86 (1.62)	4.30***	0.83
Forgiveness	3.99 (0.72)	4.45 (0.58)	3.63***	0.70
Trust	4.38 (1.20)	5.45 (1.09)	4.80***	0.93
Hurtfulness	2.78 (1.36)	3.03 (1.42)	0.95	0.18
Apology	3.58 (1.73)	4.48 (1.90)	2.56**	0.49
Intent	3.14 (1.47)	2.82 (1.62)	1.05	0.21
Empathy	4.50 (1.36)	4.90 (1.41)	1.49	0.29
Rumination	2.50 (1.48)	2.55 (1.56)	0.17	0.03
Time elapsed	33 (19.63)	25 (18.08)	2.25*	0.42

Note. $^a df = 106$.
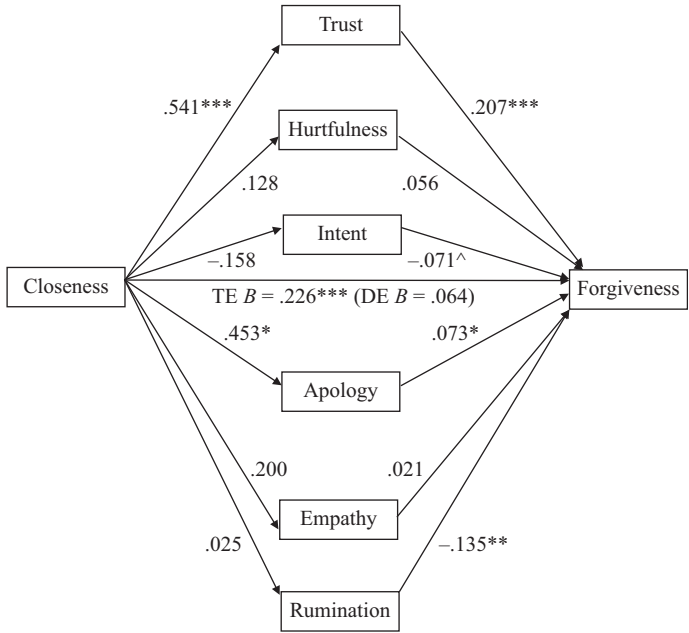*p < .05; **p < .01; ***p < .001.

Figure 1. The indirect effect of closeness on forgiveness via trust (Study 1).
Note. ***p < .001; **p < .01; *p < .05; ^p = .060.

were each positively associated with forgiveness; rumination was negatively associated; and there was a marginally significant negative relation between intent and forgiveness. Third, the total effect (TE) of closeness on forgiveness (B = .226, p = .001) was reduced to non-significance (direct effect [DE] B = .064, p = .201), indicating mediation via trust and apology. Fourth, closeness indeed had an in DE on forgiveness through trust (B = .110, $CI_{95\%}$ = [.043, .210]) and apology (B = .033, $CI_{95\%}$ = [.005, .089]). Contrast tests revealed the indirect effect through trust was significantly stronger than that through apology (B = .077, $CI_{95\%}$ = [.003, .174]; We tested whether there was an interaction between closeness and trust on forgiveness, but no such effect emerged in any of the studies [ps > .121]).

In summary, as expected, trust played the primary mediating role in the relation between closeness and forgiveness. Of the other five alternative mediators, only apology retained an indirect effect, although its effect was subordinate to that of trust.

Finally, we conducted an exploratory analysis in which forgiveness was a mediator and trust was the outcome measure. Interestingly, forgiveness mediated between closeness and trust, and none of the other mediators played a role. We will return to this finding in the General Discussion.

STUDY 2

A strength of Study 1 is that we were able to measure victim responses to transgressions from their own lives, thus enhancing ecological validity. Moreover, we retained some experimental control over the level of victim–offender closeness, thus enhancing internal validity. However, a limitation of this procedure is that the nature of the transgression may have varied across conditions. To address this limitation, Study 2 employed an

experimental design, again manipulating closeness, but this time embedding the manipulation in a hypothetical scenario. Although vignettes have been criticized on the basis that people do not necessarily behave the way they say they will behave (Nisbett & Wilson, 1977; but see Robinson & Clore, 2001, for rebuttal evidence), a hypothetical scenario was well suited to our present purposes. As noted in the Background, it is difficult to disentangle pre-existing levels of relationship closeness from pre-existing levels of trust. A hypothetical scenario enabled us to get around this issue by providing participants with an imagined partner, of whom there is no knowledge (including past history) apart from the fact that they are close (or not).

A second feature of Study 2 is that we developed alternative measures of trust and forgiveness that took into account the hypothetical nature of the transgression. The use of different measures also helped to reduce the possibility that results across the studies reflected mono-measure bias.

Method

Participants
There were 71 North American participants recruited through Crowdflower, a labour-sourcing site similar to M-Turk (47 women; 24 men; M_{age} = 37, SD = 1.66), paid \$1.

Procedures and materials
We conducted the study online, randomly allocating participants to one of two conditions. Participants read a scenario adapted from Strelan *et al.* (2016): 'First, we would like you to imagine that you have a very good friend (*an acquaintance*) whom we shall call Sam. You and Sam are very close (*are not close but you do have contact with him/her from time to time*). Next, imagine that one night you and Sam are out with a group of friends. Sam happens to tell everyone a story about you that he/she and the others think is funny, but which makes you feel embarrassed and humiliated. Later you take Sam aside and tell him/her how you feel. . .' ('Sam' was chosen as the transgressor's name because it is gender-neutral, allowing participants to imagine either a male or female friend/acquaintance).

The *manipulation check* was: 'Are you and Sam close or not close?' (*close/not close*).

Measures of key and background variables followed, with items randomly presented within blocks. All multi-item measures were summed with higher scores indicating greater agreement. All items are 1 = *strongly disagree*; 7 = *strongly agree*.

Trust was measured with ten items: 'I would trust Sam in the future; I believe Sam would look out for my best interests in the future; I can rely on Sam; Sam is a trustworthy person; I would put stock in whatever assurances Sam makes; I can depend on Sam to be supportive; I would feel comfortable telling Sam personal details; Despite what he/she did, I would still share personal things with Sam; I think I could rely on Sam in the future; I think I could rely on Sam to do the right thing by me in the future' (α = .98).

Hurtfulness was measured with two items ('I think Sam's actions would be hurtful/upsetting'; r = .71, p < .001).

Apology was measured with the same three items as in Study 1, modified for the hypothetical context (α = .70).

Intent was measured with four items ('Sam tried to humiliate me'; '. . .meant to upset me'; '. . .deliberately hurt me'; 'Sam's actions were intentional'; α = .95).

Empathy was measured with the same four items as Study 1, modified for the hypothetical context (α = .62). Removing one item improved internal reliability to .70, however, note that results of the main analyses are the same regardless of whether a three or four item measure is employed.

We did not include a measure of rumination in this study because we were not convinced that it would resonate in a hypothetical study (we were influenced by the fact that rumination played no role in the first study where participants recalled an actual but benign transgression). We replaced it with a set of items that we labelled as *downplaying,* relevant because victims in close relationships are more likely to downplay a partner's bad behaviour. These items were 'I don't think Sam realized just what he/she was doing' and 'I don't think Sam realized the impact his/her actions would have on me' (r = .70, p < .001).

Forgiveness was measured with ten items: 'Despite what happened I have goodwill towards Sam; I wish for good things to happen to Sam; I have compassion for Sam; I forgive Sam; I find it difficult to act warmly towards Sam (reverse-coded); I want Sam to get what he/she deserves (reverse-coded)'; I'm willing to let this go; I hold a grudge towards Sam (reverse-coded); I have a positive attitude towards Sam; I wish the best for Sam' (α = .91).

Background variables. We measured participants' *mood* with the item, 'Overall, my mood is...' (1 = *very unpleasant;* 7 = *very pleasant*). Finally, we checked the ecological validity of the scenario with several separate items: 'The scenario was realistic'; 'If this had really happened to me, I would feel upset'; and 'I can imagine this happening to me'.

Results

Background variables

Participants agreed that the scenario was realistic (M = 5.68, SD = 1.24); they could imagine it happening to them (M = 5.51, SD = 1.33); if it had actually happened to them they would be upset (M = 5.11, SD = 1.51); and that what Sam did was hurtful (M = 5.07, SD = 1.27). Close and non-close participants did not differ on any of these measures, nor did they differ on mood (all ps > .34).

Manipulation check

All participants correctly identified the condition to which they had been assigned, that is, 100% of participants in the close condition agreed that they were close to Sam, and 100% of participants in the non-close condition agreed they were not close.

Differences between close and non-close conditions

We conducted a series of *t*-tests to test for differences between experimental conditions on the mediators and forgiveness. Table 2 summarizes the results. Table 2 indicates that participants in the close condition were significantly more likely to forgive Sam, trust Sam, and downplay what Sam did. They were also significantly more likely to perceive that Sam apologized, even though no apology information was provided, and were significantly less likely to perceive that Sam intended to cause harm. There were no significant differences between conditions on hurtfulness and empathy.

Table 2. Summary of *t*-tests for differences between closeness conditions on forgiveness, trust, and alternative mediators (Study 2)

	Not close (*n* = 33) M (SD)	Close (*n* = 38) M (SD)	*t*[a]	*d*
Forgiveness	4.13 (1.06)	5.21 (1.12)	4.14***	0.99
Trust	3.22 (1.31)	4.96 (1.21)	5.81***	1.38
Hurtfulness	5.21 (0.93)	5.06 (1.36)	0.52	0.13
Apology	4.55 (1.66)	5.33 (1.27)	2.67**	0.53
Intent	3.70 (1.44)	2.82 (1.58)	2.40*	0.58
Empathy	3.73 (0.97)	4.03 (1.07)	1.25	0.29
Downplay	4.48 (1.25)	5.47 (1.29)	3.26***	0.78

Note. [a]*df* = 69.
*p < .05; ***p* < .01; ****p* < .001.

Relations between closeness, discounting, trust, and forgiveness

First, we examined zero-order correlations between each of the mediating variables and forgiveness. Mirroring Study 1, all relations were significant and in the expected direction, with correlations ranging from −.25 (*p* = .036) for hurtfulness to .72 (*p* < .001) for trust.

Also consistent with Study 1, trust was associated with each of the alternative mediators, in the expected directions, with *r*s ranging from −.22 (*p* = .069) for hurtfulness to .68 (*p* < .001) for downplaying.

Next, we tested a multiple mediation model using the same procedure as Study 1. As shown in Figure 2, and reflecting the *t*-tests, closeness significantly predicted trust, apology, intentionality, and downplaying. Once again, there was a significant relation between trust and forgiveness, but this time only intent (of the alternative mediators) retained a significant relation with forgiveness. Once again there was evidence of mediation, with the TE of closeness on forgiveness (TE = 0.702, *p* < .001) reducing to non-significance with the inclusion of the mediators (DE = 0.121, *p* = .339). There was an indirect effect through trust (*B* = .480, $CI_{95\%}$ = [.274, .782]) and intent (*B* = .107, $CI_{95\%}$ = [.014, .320]). A contrast test of the indirect effects indicated that, once again, the effect through trust was significantly stronger than that through intent (*B* = .262, $CI_{95\%}$ = [.047, .462]).

In summary, the results of Study 2 replicated those of Study 1. Trust played the dominant mediating role in the relation between closeness and forgiveness. This time, intent rather than apology played an additional role, but was still subordinate to trust.

Finally, we repeated the exploratory mediation model tested in Study 1 and found, again, that forgiveness played the sole mediating role between closeness and trust.

STUDY 3

Although the consistent results were encouraging, Studies 1 and 2 were limited to the extent that the transgressions were benign (Study 1) or hypothetical (Study 2). Thus, a primary aim of Study 3 was to test our model with personally experienced transgressions that were highly hurtful – in other words, examine victim responses to transgressions where the offending partner failed a significant 'strain-test'. Ethical and logistical
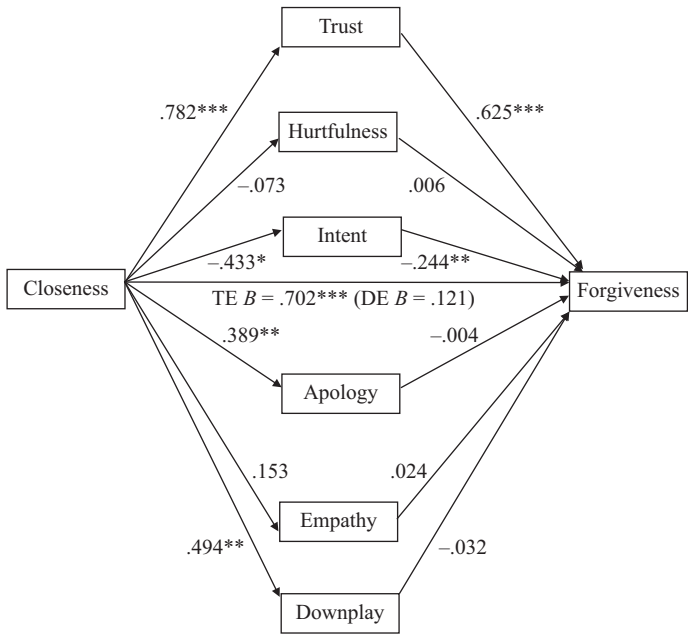
Figure 2. The indirect effect of closeness on forgiveness via trust (Study 2). ***$p < .001$; **$p < .01$; *$p < .05$.

considerations necessitated employing a recall paradigm. Although such a design is limited by its correlational nature, our concerns over not being able to draw causal conclusions were somewhat placated by the fact that we had already replicated the model across two different experimental paradigms.

Study 3 also introduced new measures. The trust indices in the first two studies captured a generalized sense of trust in another following a transgression. In Study 3, we employed a more specific measure of trust that taps into victim perceptions that, following a transgression, an offender constitutes an exploitation risk and is therefore untrustworthy. In addition, this time we measured closeness with a widely used scale that taps into qualities indicative of relationship closeness. Last, we expanded our suite of competing mediators to include an additional factor, sympathy. Whereas a closely related construct, empathy, reflects an individual's ability to appreciate another's situation and take their perspective, sympathy reflects positive feelings and concern for another. Sympathy is associated with increased closeness and trust (Gonzaga, Keltner, Londalh, & Smith, 2001) and is also a good predictor of forgiveness (for a meta-analysis, see Fehr, Gelfand, and Nag, 2010). We also re-included rumination, expecting that rumination would be salient in this particular study because participants would be recalling transgressions that were more serious.

Method

Participants

Participants were 184 North Americans recruited online through Crowdflower and paid $1 (131 women, 53 men; $M_{\text{age}} = 37$, $SD = 11.15$).

Procedures and materials

We asked participants to recall an instance when someone had recently hurt them quite significantly. We emphasized that it must be someone with whom they were still in an ongoing relationship. To personalize the survey, participants wrote the person's name in a textbox, which would automatically appear thereafter where necessary. They then completed measures of key variables. We presented items in blocks. Multi-item measures were averaged with higher scores reflecting greater agreement. All items are 1 = *strongly disagree*; 7 = *strongly agree* unless otherwise indicated.

To reduce the possibility of motivated memory affecting responding, we measured participants' current levels of relationship closeness *before* they described the hurtful event. *Relationship closeness* was measured with the five-item commitment subscale of the Investment Model Scale (Rusbult *et al.*, 1998; α = .87). In addition, participants were asked to indicate the nature of their relationship with the offender (i.e., friend, relative, romantic partner, spouse, work colleague, other).

Next participants described the transgression and indicated how long ago the event occurred (subsequently coded into *months*). They then completed measures of the mediating variables and forgiveness.

Trust of the other person was measured with Burnette *et al.*'s (2012) five-item Exploitation Risk scale (e.g., 'I feel like X might do something bad to me again'; α = .86). For ease of interpretation, we recoded the items in the scale so that higher scores indicate greater levels of trust.

Hurtfulness (α = .63), *apology* (α = .89), and *empathy* (α = .79) were each measured with the same items as Study 1.

Intent was measured with three items: 'X hurt me on purpose rather than unintentionally'; 'X deserves to be blamed for hurting me'; and 'X's behaviour was motivated by selfish rather than unselfish concerns' (α = .73).

Rumination was measured with the seven-item intrusiveness subscale from the Impact of Event Scale (Horowitz, Wilner, & Alvarez, 1979; α = .90).

Sympathy was measured with four items: 'I feel sorry/sympathy/concern/compassion for X' (α = .80).

Finally, we measured *forgiveness* with the same items as Study 1 (α = .93).

Results

Background variables

Participants recalled transgressions by friends (36%), relatives (28%), romantic partners (15%), spouses (16%), and work colleagues (2%), with 2% indicating 'other'. Transgressions occurred on average 19 months earlier (*SD* = 38.57). On average, transgressions were still highly painful (*M* = 5.29, *SD* = 1.45). Participants were generally equivocal that, compared to other hurtful events in their lives, this one was the most hurtful (*M* = 3.83, *SD* = 1.90).

Correlations between mediators and forgiveness

Table 3 reports the zero-order correlations between closeness, the mediating variables, forgiveness, and time elapsed. Table 3 shows that closeness was positively associated with trust, apology, intent, empathy (albeit marginally), sympathy, and forgiveness. In addition, all of the mediators were significantly associated with forgiveness, in the expected directions.

Table 3. Zero-order correlations between closeness, mediating variables, forgiveness, and time elapsed (Study 3)

	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9
1. Closeness									
2. Trust	.37***								
3. Hurtfulness	−.05	−.41***							
4. Apology	.29***	.20**	−.05						
5. Intent	−.32***	−.60***	.48***	−.30***					
6. Empathy	.14^	.26***	−.29***	.38***	−.51***				
7. Rumination	.00	−.47***	.72***	−.07	.47***	−.33***			
8. Sympathy	.41***	.13	−.09	.31***	−.23**	.21**	−.05		
9. Forgiveness	.69***	.54***	−.18**	.30***	−.46***	.27***	−.28***	.35***	
10. Time elapsed	−.05	−.06	.18**	−.00	.06	−.03	.04	.12	.02

Note. $N = 184$; *$p < .05$; **$p < .01$; ***$p < .001$; ^$p = .059$.

Meanwhile, trust was again significantly associated with all of the alternative mediators in the expected directions, except for a null relation with sympathy. Finally, time elapsed since the transgression was not associated with any of the variables, except for a positive relation with hurtfulness.

Indirect effect of closeness on forgiveness through trust and alternative mediators
To test our main hypothesis, we employed the same approach as Studies 1 and 2, using Preacher and Hayes' (2008) Multiple Mediation macro (5,000 iterations, bias corrected). Figure 3 illustrates the results of the testing of this model. Closeness retained a significant, albeit reduced relation with forgiveness with the inclusion of the mediators (TE $B = .535$, $p < .001$; DE $B = .429$, $p < .001$). This time the only significant indirect effect was through trust ($B = .065$, $CI_{95\%} = [.027, .117]$; In Studies 1 and 3, participants indicated if their transgressor was an intimate partner, friend, family member, work colleague, or other. The number of work colleagues/other was so small as to preclude sensible inferential analyses with these particular participants. We reran analyses and found, in both Studies 1 and 3, that intimate partners tended to respond significantly differently to friends, but not family members, on many of the alternative mediators. However, the results of the main mediation analyses did not change when we ran four alternative analyses, specifically, (1) controlling for relationship type; (2) removing participants whose transgressors were work colleagues or 'other'; (3) separate analyses for relationship 'type' subgroups, where it was sensible to do so in terms of power; and (4) when employing an intimate partner versus friend contrast as the IV. The only change was that, typically, apology no longer played a mediating role in Study 1). Finally, and consistent with Studies 1 and 2, an exploratory model showed that forgiveness (and, this time, apology and intent) mediated between closeness and trust.

GENERAL DISCUSSION
Across three methodologically distinct studies, we found consistent support for the central role of trust in the relation between closeness and forgiveness. In the two experimental studies (Studies 1 and 2), there was evidence that trust was primarily
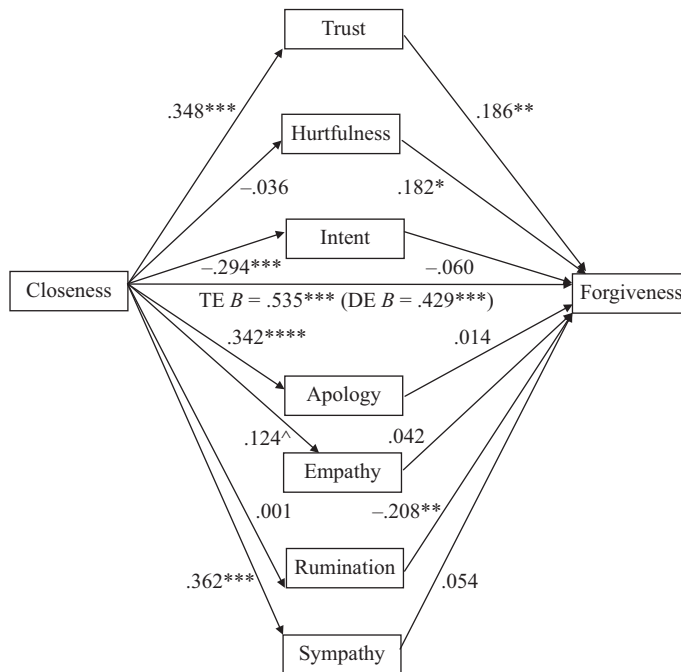
Figure 3. The indirect effect of closeness on forgiveness via trust (Study 3).
Note. ***$p < .001$; **$p < .01$; *$p < .05$; ^$p = .059$.

responsible for fully mediating the relation between closeness and forgiveness. In Study 3, which employed a correlational recall design, closeness retained a significant but reduced association with forgiveness, with the only indirect effect occurring through trust.

Notably, trust played the dominant mediating role over and above many robust transgression-specific predictors of forgiveness, specifically, hurtfulness, intent, apology, empathy, rumination (Studies 1 and 3), downplaying (Study 2), and sympathy (Study 3). This outcome is notable for two inter-related reasons. First, we were able to discount the latter variables as viable alternative mediators. Second, each of these variables is significantly associated with trust (apart from a marginal relation with hurtfulness in Study 2 and a null relation with sympathy in Study 3). In some cases, the correlations are relatively large (e.g., $r = .52$ between trust and empathy in Study 1; $r = .68$ between trust and downplaying in Study 2; $r = −.60$ between trust and intent in Study 3). As such, it was possible that any effect of trust could have been due to its association with several other variables. In other words, the flipside of discounting the transgression-specific predictors as alternative mediators is that, while victim interpretations of the offender, the transgression, and offender reparative effort could all affect victim perceptions of an offender's post-transgression trustworthiness, our three studies suggest that trust does not need these variables for it to be effective. Rather, trust governs in its own right.

Thus, these results have important theoretical and practical implications. They suggest that in the context of close relationships – where forgiveness is most relevant (McCullough, 2008) – the best predictor of transgression-specific forgiveness is a variable that has received relatively little empirical attention, as exemplified by its absence in a recent gold-standard meta-analysis of predictors of forgiveness (Fehr, Gelfand, and Nag,

2010). Clearly, if we want to know what is most likely to encourage close victims to forgive, we should look more closely at the role of trust.

Limitations and directions for future research

Measures of closeness and forgiveness are usually highly correlated (McCullough, Rachal, Sandage, Worthington, Wade Brown, and Hight, 1998; see also the results sections of Studies 1 and 2, and Table 1). As such, it is not easy to disentangle the directionality of relations between closeness, trust, and forgiveness. For example, while interdependence theory (Kelley & Thibaut, 1978) suggests that closeness is more likely to precede trust than vice versa, individual differences in working models of attachment – good indicators of generalized trust – have been shown to predict relationship quality (Collins & Read, 1990). While many studies have demonstrated the effect of relationship quality on forgiveness (Finkel, Rusbult, Kumashiro, and Hannon, 2002; McCullough, 2008), others have demonstrated the effect of forgiveness on relationship quality (Karremans & Van Lange, 2004). Further, researchers treat trust as both a predictor (Molden & Finkel, 2010) and an outcome (Wieselquist, 2009) of forgiveness. Most notably, longitudinal studies have demonstrated that relationship quality, trust, and pro-relationship behaviour (similar to forgiveness) are mutually reinforcing (Wieselquist, Rusbult, Foster, & Agnew, 1999).

Given these complex bi-directional relations, it is perhaps not surprising that exploratory analyses revealed support for an alternative model: closeness → forgiveness → post-transgression trust. Thus, in addition to forgiveness promoting post-offence trust, these findings may support the possibility that forgiveness promotes post-offence trust. To be sure, these two possible models are not necessarily competing or incompatible, but may point to a cyclical model in which forgiveness, trust, and closeness encourage each other (Wieselquist *et al.*, 1999). In line with our main prediction, we found evidence that closeness is associated positively with post-offence trust, which in turn is associated with higher levels of forgiveness. Yet, closeness may affect forgiveness in a more direct manner as well, and higher levels of forgiveness in turn help maintain trust in a close partner in the aftermath of an offence. Our cross-sectional data do not allow us to disentangle these possibilities empirically. In future experimental or longitudinal studies, such potential reciprocal patterns between closeness, trust, and forgiveness should be examined further.

Relatedly, even though Studies 1 and 2 experimentally varied closeness, our conclusions from all three studies are still somewhat dependent upon correlational data. It was beyond the scope of the present paper to run a study testing for a causal effect of trust, although this limitation is mitigated by other studies which have already demonstrated that manipulated trust causes changes in levels of forgiveness (We have conducted two separate studies as part of an ongoing, related project in which we manipulated trust using experimental design. In both studies, participants imagined themselves going on a blind date, who rejects them. In the first study, a friend tells the participant about the date's trustworthy [or untrustworthy] qualities. In the second study, participants view photographs of their date, which we manipulated as trustworthy or not. In both studies, participants were more likely to forgive the trustworthy date) (e.g., Luchies, Rusbult, Eastwick, Wieselquist, Kumashiro, Coolsen, and Finkel, 2013; In Studies 1 and 3, participants indicated if their transgressor was an intimate partner, friend, family member, work colleague, or other. The number of work colleagues/other was so small as to preclude sensible inferential analyses with these particular participants. We reran analyses and found, in both Studies 1 and 3, that intimate partners tended to respond

significantly differently to friends, but not family members, on many of the alternative mediators. However, the results of the main mediation analyses did not change when we ran four alternative analyses, specifically, (1) controlling for relationship type; (2) removing participants whose transgressors were work colleagues or 'other'; (3) separate analyses for relationship 'type' subgroups, where it was sensible to do so in terms of power; and (4) when employing an intimate partner versus friend contrast as the IV. The only change was that, typically, apology no longer played a mediating role in Study 1). In any event, the bi-directionality of the trust–forgiveness relation suggests that it would be more fruitful to test the *conditions* under which one is more likely to predict the other. That is, when is trust more likely to predict forgiveness, and when is forgiveness more likely to predict trust? For example, perhaps the effect of trust on forgiveness is dampened in situations where the transgression is highly severe; but would a positive effect of forgiveness on trust be dependent on severity to the same extent?

Finally, future researchers should turn to testing the boundary conditions of our findings as they relate to closeness and trust. For example, transgressions resonate more in close relationships. The more hurtful or unexpected the transgression, the more likely it is that trust may be damaged. Thus, while we have shown that closeness encourages restored trust following a transgression, trust may be dampened or not even restored if a transgression is experienced as particularly noxious. Relationship 'type' may also be important. For example, trust may be most at risk when a long-term partner cheats, yet forgiving may be more likely to occur because the relationship is valued. Conversely, while a friend's betrayal may also result in reduced trust, forgiveness may be less likely because the material and psychological ties to the friend are not as strong.

Conclusion

One of the best-established predictors of forgiveness is relationship closeness. We have demonstrated across three methodologically different studies that pre-transgression levels of closeness predict forgiveness through an association with post-transgression levels of trust. In theoretical terms, trust clearly plays an important role in the forgiveness process, perhaps more so than previously credited. In practical terms, these initial data suggest that if we want to know when forgiving is an opportunity worth taking a risk for, we should focus on the extent to which victims perceive offenders to be trustworthy. We can glean such information from the closeness of a relationship. As such, the studies presented here provide insight into the process by which closeness encourages forgiveness. They indicate that close victims are more likely to forgive because they perceive they can trust their offender, despite the offender's actions.

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