Predicting Forgiveness in Women Experiencing Intimate Partner Violence

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Abstract

Several theories have attempted to explain the stay/leave decisions of women experiencing intimate partner violence (IPV). One recent study suggests that women's intent to return to their abusive partners was related to forgiveness of the abuse; consequently, this study aims to identify factors that may make women more likely to forgive IPV. It was hypothesized that commitment, specifically both personal dedication and constraint commitment (Stanley & Markman, 1992), would predict forgiveness and that denial of injury would mediate the relation between commitment and forgiveness, as women may be more likely to deny the severity of the abuse in order to reduce the experienced dissonance that arises from being committed to an unhealthy relationship. Finally, it was hypothesized that silencing the self (Jack, 1991) would moderate the relation between personal dedication and denial of injury. Results generally supported the hypothesis that denial of injury would mediate the relation between commitment and forgiveness. Silencing the self was not found to be a moderator. These findings, limitations, and future directions are discussed.

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Introduction

Intimate partner violence (IPV), defined as any actual or threatened physical, sexual, psychological, or economic abuse of an individual by his/her current or past intimate partner, is a common yet serious health concern for many women (Family Violence Prevention Fund, 2004). IPV can result in many negative consequences, such as physical injury, chronic pain, depression, and post-traumatic stress disorder (Campbell, 2002; Coker et al., 2000). Additionally, women experiencing IPV often face a decision about whether to stay or leave their relationships and there can be many costs to both choices, thus making this decision confusing, difficult, and potentially dangerous (Choice & Lamke, 1997). Whereas some women are able to extricate themselves from abusive relationships, others are never able to leave, or they find themselves returning to their partners after multiple attempts to end their relationships (e.g., Herbert, Silver, & Ellard, 1991). As a result, it is important to fully understand the factors that affect the stay/leave decisions of women in IPV relationships, so that professionals who work with these women can better help them with these choices.

In a recent study of women residing in domestic violence shelters, Gordon, Burton, and Porter (2004) found that forgiveness of abuse predicted these women's intentions to return to their abusive partners. Further, along with the severity of the IPV, forgiveness uniquely predicted intent to return even when other traditional constructs that predict commitment to a relationship were in the predictive model, such as investments, quality of alternatives, and social pressure to stay in their relationships. These findings suggest that continuing to study forgiveness in this population may help researchers and clinicians better understand the stay/leave decisions of women faced with IPV. Therefore, the goal of this study is to examine what factors might lead a woman to be more or less forgiving of her partner's abusive behavior, as this variable appears to

be implicated in whether she will be more or less likely to finally leave a potentially dangerous relationship.

Commitment as a Predictor of Forgiveness

Past research suggest that there are multiple theories to help explain the stay/leave decisions of women faced with IPV (e.g., Brockner & Rubin, 1985; Fishbein & Ajzen, 1975; Walker, 1978, 1983). Perhaps the most promising and well-researched theory to explain the stay/leave decisions of women faced with IPV is Rusbult's (1980) investment model (e.g., Choice & Lamke, 1997; Johnson & Ferraro, 2000; Rhatigan & Street, 2005).

Rusbult's investment model suggests that a woman's reported investment in her relationship best explains her decisions to stay or leave that relationship. This theory proposes that factors such as attractiveness of alternatives (housing, partners, etc.), and any irretrievable investments (time of the relationship, shared equity in a house, etc.) that would be lost if she left are crucial factors to be weighed against satisfaction with a relationship and ultimately affect women's stay/leave decisions (Rusbult, 1980). Multiple studies have tested the investment model in several different samples; samples of all kinds show that the investment model offers a comprehensive model that helps explain an individual's commitment level in an abusive relationship (e.g. Rhatigan & Axsom, 2006; Rhatigan, Moore, & Stuart, 2005). More specifically, according to a recent shelter-based study, Rhatigan and Axsom (2006) found that each individual factor of the investment model significantly contributed to a woman's commitment to her abusive relationship. Furthermore, the investment model has been tested on some non-victimized samples, with results showing that investment in a relationship predicts the stay/leave decisions in both victimized and non-victimized women, thus demonstrating the theory's universality in predicting continued relationships (Rhatigan & Street, 2005). In sum, the

investment model appears to be a very promising model to explain one's commitment level to a romantic relationship.

It is clear that the investment model theory offers necessary information about the influence that commitment has on a woman's decision to continue or terminate her relationship. However, in addition to predicting stay/leave decisions, research suggests that women's relationship investment predicts forgiveness in this population (e.g. Rusbult, Martz, & Agnew, 1998). Additionally, research shows a significant positive relationship between the overall level of individuals' commitment to their relationships and their reported forgiveness of their partners (e.g. Exline, Baumeister, Bushman, Campbell & Finkel, 2004; Karremans & Van Lange, 2004). Furthermore, Gordon and colleagues (2004) found that commitment had a significant positive relationship with forgiveness, such that the more committed a woman was to her partner, the more likely she was to forgive the abuse. In this study, they used Stanley and Markman's (1992) constraint commitment subscale, which is a measure of structural investments in marriage, social pressures, morality of divorce, unattractiveness of alternatives, and availability of other partners, to assess the woman's reported relational investments, as they believed that this scale closely reflects Rusbult's investment model's potential costs of leaving the relationship.

In general, previous research has focused either on investment theory to understand stay-leave decisions, or on overall levels of commitment; however, there are at least two types of commitment that also are likely to be implicated in the forgiveness of IPV (e.g., Adams & Jones, 1997; Johnson, 1973, 1991; Stanley & Markman, 1992). Using Stanley and Markman's terminology, these types of commitment are constraint commitment and personal dedication. Therefore, the first goal of this study was to examine the relative roles of both constraint commitment and personal dedication in predicting forgiveness in an IPV shelter population.

Constraint commitment. As described above, constraint commitment represents a form of commitment based on factors similar to the key components of Rusbult's (1980) investment model and is made up of one's quality of alternatives, social pressures, structural (monetary) investments, the difficulties that would come with terminating the relationship, and one's moral qualms with divorce (Stanley & Markman, 1992). Because previous findings indicated that investment variables predict forgiveness (Gordon et al., 2004; Rusbult et al., 1998) this study's first hypothesis was that the higher a woman's constraint commitment, the greater her forgiveness for the experienced IPV.

Personal dedication. According to many professionals in this field, many women that stay in IPV relationships report positive aspects of the relationship outside of constraints, including love, respect, and moments of true happiness (Choice & Lamke, 1997). In fact, many researchers who study romantic relationships suggest that there are important commitment factors outside of constraints that incorporate many of these aforementioned positive aspects in relationships (e.g. Adams & Jones, 1999; Johnson, 1973, 1991; Stanley & Markman, 1992). These feelings and experiences can be explained by a form of commitment that Stanley and Markman (1992) call personal dedication, or an individual's desire to "improve the relationship, sacrifice for it, to invest in it, to link personal goals to it, and to seek the partner's welfare, not simply one's own" (p. 595). According to Rhoades, Stanley and Markman (2010), these desires are typically related to more relationship dedication, and thus, it is hypothesized that a woman's personal dedication will be positively related to her level of forgiveness of her partner's abuse.

Denial of Injury and Forgiveness

In addition to assessing the degree to which commitment factors affect an individual's likelihood of forgiveness, the second goal of this study was to identify and examine the possible

cognitive mechanisms employed by this population that may further explain the relationship between commitment and forgiveness. Along these lines, Festinger's (1957) well-known theory of cognitive dissonance offers some potential explanations for this process. In instances when individuals have two conflicting attitudes, beliefs, or feelings about one situation simultaneously (and thus feel discomfort about the dissonance), they have a motivational drive to reduce the internal dissonance by changing their attitudes, beliefs, or feelings, in order to lessen the experienced discomfort (Festinger, 1957). In this sample of women experiencing IPV, the theory of cognitive dissonance would suggest that committed women would feel uncomfortable forgiving and/or staying with their partner while simultaneously maintaining the belief that their partner's abuse is serious and harmful. Therefore, this dissonance in turn suggests that women might be likely to minimize or even deny the severity of the violence in order to better cope with the experienced daily stressors of the situation. In fact, Herbert, Silver and Ellard (1991) suggest that women who remain with abusive partners "appear to employ cognitive strategies that help them perceive their relationship in a positive light" (p. 311). Therefore, these strategies might help women maintain positive thoughts of the current relationship to which they are committed, despite the experienced IPV.

Specifically, the mechanism of denial of injury has been theorized to be an important and potentially influential strategy to assess in this population. According to Choice and Lamke (1997), denial of injury is a coping mechanism that many women in IPV relationships might use on a regular basis to help handle the extreme stress. Denial of injury refers to the internal and external acts of minimizing the severity of the abuse and can be broken down into two major categories: denial of injury to others and denial of injury to the self. Whereas denial of injury to others speaks to the degree to which individuals minimize the abuse to their friends, family, the

law, etc., denial of injury to the self is an internal process that involves convincing the self that the abuse is not as severe as it truly is. Consequently, based on the theories of cognitive dissonance, it is theorized that forgiveness might be too difficult for abused women to achieve without the use of a cognitive mechanism such as denial of injury to the self.

Therefore, this study's second hypothesis is that denial of injury will mediate the relationship between both kinds of commitment (constraint and personal dedication) and forgiveness in this sample. This is the first study to empirically examine the role of denial of injury in women's attitudes toward their abusive relationships.

Silencing the Self as a Moderator

Silencing the self might be another coping strategy used by many women faced with IPV. According to Yovetich and Rusbult (1994), women in IPV relationships often "accommodate" or "inhibit their impulses" through a process called "transformation of motivation." According to this theory, transformation of motivation can occur when a partner experiences a potentially destructive act, and in response, inhibits her negative impulses and transforms them into more constructive responses that consider the "long term consequences" of one's actions on a relationship. Similarly, silencing the self is a construct that suggests that many women may devalue their experiences, repress their anger, and otherwise censor themselves in order to promote and maintain their intimate relationships (Jack, 1991). Whereas denial of injury is an active and conscious decision that women may make in the face of abuse, the mechanism of silencing the self is more of a stable trait, describing more global thoughts about one's role in romantic relationships (e.g. "In a close relationship my responsibility is to make the other person happy," "When I am in a close relationship I lose my sense of who I am."). It is possible that individuals who are more likely to silence themselves also may be more likely to deny the

severity of the abuse, as they are already prone to censoring their experiences. Therefore, it is likely that the presence of silencing the self as a trait will strengthen the relationship between commitment and denial of injury, thus increasing the likelihood of forgiveness when silencing the self is present.

Summary of Hypotheses

In summary, this study assessed the relationship between two types of commitment and forgiveness, and explored potential mechanisms that might explain the relation between commitment and forgiveness in this population of women residing in domestic violence shelters. Existing research suggests that investment increases the likelihood of forgiveness, however, this study aimed to analyze the unique effects of both constraint commitment and personal dedication, in order to determine whether this addition would improve our understanding of commitment and forgiveness of IPV. Additionally, this study attempted to determine the degree to which the mechanisms of denial of injury and self-silencing explained the relationship between both constraint commitment and personal dedication and their effects on forgiveness of physical abuse in this population. Finally, this study controlled for severity and frequency of violence, so that denial of injury could be assessed independent of actual level of reported injury.

Methods

Participants

Participants in this study were 121 women residing in 9 urban and rural domestic violence shelters in eastern Tennessee; 6 of the shelters were in urban settings and 3 were in rural settings. The average age of the women participating was 34 (SD= 10.5). The study sample was 82% Caucasian, 9% African American, 4% Hispanic, 2% Native American, and 3% other. Nine percent of the sample reported less than a high school education, 67% reported some high school education, and 23% reported post-secondary education. Further, 56% of the sample was married, living with a committed partner, or separated yet continuing to see each other. The remaining 44% of the sample were in other living situations with their partners separated or divorced or in non-residential dating relationships with their partners.

Procedure

After receiving approval from the University of Tennessee's Institutional Review Board for the following procedure, an introduction and general information letter was sent to all shelters within a 2-hour distance from the university. Out of the 27 shelters that were approached, 9 were willing to participate. Any interested shelters responded to the letter and became an active recruitment site for the study. The shelters that were not willing to participate attributed their decline to security reasons or shelter policies about research. Both fliers and sign up sheets were posted in participating shelters and the study investigators made weekly phone calls to the shelters to schedule times to administer the questionnaires to willing participants. All participants signed informed releases and each received a $20 gift certificate as compensation upon completion of the study. After finishing the questionnaires, each participant spoke with the research assistant who informed them about more details of the study, answered their questions,

and assessed for any distress that may have been caused by participation in the study.

Measures

Participants completed measures assessing both the abuse and their investment in their relationship with their partner, as well as the level of denial of injury and forgiveness of the abuse. These measures included the Conflict Tactics Scale (CTS; Straus, 1979), a measure of Denial of Injury created for this study, a measure of self-silencing (Jack, 1991), the Acts of Forgiveness scale (Drinnon, Jones, & Lawler, 2000), and the Commitment Inventory (C.I.; Stanley and Markman, 1992).

Conflict Tactics Scale (CTS). The CTS (Straus, 1973; 1974; 1979) is a 19-item self-report measure designed to measure strategies that couples may use to resolve conflict (e.g. how often in the past year or ever in your relationship has your partner "threatened to hit or throw something at you," or "yelled and/or insulted you"). Specifically, the CTS measures degree to which couples use reasoning, verbal aggression, and violence to resolve conflict. The coefficient alphas range from .70 to .88; further, the test has both concurrent and content validity, showing it is predictive of the incident rate of partner violence (Straus, 1976).

Measure of Denial of Injury. The measure of Denial of Injury is a 14-item self-report measure assessing the extent to which an individual denies/minimizes the degree of the experienced injury to others and themselves (e.g. "I find myself telling lies to prevent others from suspecting my partner and I fight," or "sometimes I think that our fights did not really happen"). Several items were generated based on Choice and Lamke's (1997) definition of these constructs. These items were shared with eight other members of the research team to assess face validity. Four of those items were reworded for clarity after that process. For a list of the items,

see the Appendix. The coefficient alpha was .80 in this study, suggesting that the scale has good inter-item reliability.

Silencing the Self Scale (STSS). The Silencing the Self Scale (STSS; Jack, 1991) is a 31-item self-report measure with a 5-point Likert scale. The scale measures the degree to which an individual silences certain feelings, thoughts and actions in an intimate relationship (e.g. "When I am in a close relationship I lose my sense of who I am."). Three separate samples show the internal consistency for the total scale ranged from .86-.94, and test-retest reliability was excellent (Jack, 1991). Further, the STSS had extremely high levels of construct validity when compared to a sample of battered women, $p < .0001$ (Jack, 1991). In summary, the STSS is a reliable, valid measure.

Acts of Forgiveness Scale (AF). The Acts of Forgiveness Scale (Drinnon, Jones, & Lawler, 2000) is an 45-item self-report measure scored on a 5-point Likert scale, designed to assess acts of forgiveness of a specific betrayal towards a partner (e.g. "I generally feel that I have managed to get passed the offense"). This scale shows good reliability with initial coefficient alphas of .96, a test-retest coefficient of .90 (Drinnon et al., 2000). Additionally, this measure was assessed with other existing measure of forgiveness (r ranging from .53 to .82), and was demonstrated to be more highly correlated with other state measures of forgiveness, rather than trait measures, which indicates discriminant validity (Drinnon et al., 2000).

Commitment Inventory (C.I.). The Commitment Inventory (Stanley & Markman, 1992) is a widely used 55-item self-report measure designed to assess two aspects of relationships commitment: constraint commitment and personal dedication. The C.I. uses a 7-point Likert scale to measure commitment. Stanley and Markman (1992) describe constraint commitment as made up of one's structural investments in marriage, social pressures, morality of divorce,

unattractiveness of alternatives, and availability of other partners (e.g. “I would lose valuable possessions if I left my partner” and “I am not very attractive to the opposite sex”). In contrast, the personal dedication scale is made up of subscales measuring primacy of relationship, relationship agenda, satisfaction with sacrifice, alternative monitoring, and meta-commitment (e.g. “I tend to think about how things affect ‘us’ as a couple more than how things affect ‘me’ as an individual,” and “I want this relationship to stay strong no matter what rough times we may encounter”). The C.I. showed good reliability with coefficient alphas ranging from .79 to .94. Additionally, the C.I. showed good concurrent validity with various commitment measures, including Rusbult’s measure of commitment (Stanley & Markman, 1992). Overall, this measure seems to be a widely used, reliable, and valid measure to assess commitment levels.

Data Analytic Strategy.

According to MacKinnon, mediational models hypothesize that the independent variable causes the mediator variable, which causes the dependent variable; thus, the mediator variable clarifies the nature of the relationship between the independent and dependent variables (2008). For this study, path analyses using Structural Equation Modeling (SEM) were used to test possible mediating effects of denial of injury on the relation between commitment and forgiveness. Additionally, SEM analyses were used to test possible moderating effects of silencing the self on the association between personal dedication and denial of injury in this same model, thus testing a moderated mediation model. AMOS version 17.0 was employed for mediation and moderation analyses.

SEM was the preferred method of testing this hypothesis, as it is the best method for allowing to evaluate moderated mediation. In order to account for missing data, compared to pairwise and listwise deletion, full information maximum likelihood estimation (FIMLE) has

been found to be more efficient and less biased for handling missing data (Arbuckle, 1996), thus this strategy was employed. When applicable, model fit was evaluated using the chi-square statistic (χ^2), the comparative fit index (CFI), and the root mean squared error of approximation (RMSEA). According to Hu and Bentler (1999), the chi-square fit index assesses the discrepancy between the sample and the fitted covariance matrices and is estimated by dividing the chi-square estimate by the degrees of freedom; values less than 2.0 are indicative of good model fit. The CFI compares the estimated model fit to the null model; values of .95 or higher indicate good model fit (Hu & Bentler, 1999). Lastly, the RMSEA indicates model error per degrees of freedom, with values less than .08 indicating good model fit (Hu & Bentler, 1999). According to Hu and Bentler (1999), when compared to other model fit indices, the CFI and RMSEA are most commonly used, as they have greater ability to identify misspecified models.

The significance of indirect effects was tested using Meeker's formula, which has a better balance of Type I and Type II error when compared to Sobel's test of mediation (MacKinnon, Lockwood, & Williams, 2004). Thus, 95% confidence intervals will be used to test mediation in this sample.

When testing moderation, a multiple group model approach, which requires grouping individuals based on levels of a moderator, is a common technique for evaluating moderation within an SEM framework (Kline, 2005). However, dichotomizing continuous variables to create groups, as is the case with the current continuous variable of silencing the self, reduces power (Cohen, 1983; MacCallum, Zhang, Preacher & Rucker, 2002). For this reason, it is recommended to add interactions to the path model when evaluating continuous moderators (Kline, 2010). Thus, the addition of an interaction term was chosen in lieu of a multiple group approach for this study.

Moderation was tested following the recommendations of Aiken and West (1991), such that all independent variables (i.e., relationship commitment, silencing the self, and Frequency of psychological and physical aggression) were mean centered to aid in the interpretation of moderated effects and to reduce multicollinearity among variables. Note that frequency of psychological and physical aggression was controlled for all models due to research showing a strong negative association between frequency of psychological and physical aggression and forgiveness (e.g. Gordon et al., 2004). Silencing the self was then evaluated as a moderator of the effect of commitment on denial of injury, by creating an interaction term comprised of mean centered silencing the self and mean centered commitment.

Results

Descriptive Statistics

First, bivariate correlations among study variables were examined. Correlational findings are presented in Table 1. Consistent with our predictions, both types of commitment and the total commitment level were significantly positively correlated with levels of forgiveness. Additionally, as hypothesized, denial of injury was not only positively correlated with both types of commitment, but also with levels of forgiveness ($p < .01$). Further, denial of injury was not significantly correlated with frequency of psychological and physical aggression, which suggests that denial of injury is a unique variable that is separate from the amount of actual violence that is experienced.

Mediation

First, we tested the hypotheses that both constraint commitment and personal dedication would predict forgiveness, with denial of injury as a mediator of the relation between commitment factors and forgiveness. To provide a more conservative test of mediated effects, direct paths were included from both commitment variables to the dependent variable, forgiveness. This model is presented in Figure 1. Due to this model being fully saturated (i.e. no degrees of freedom), no model fit statistics are reported. Unfortunately, denial of injury did not significantly mediate either the relationship between personal dedication and forgiveness ($\beta = .20$, $p > .05$) or constraint commitment and forgiveness ($\beta = .08$, $p > .05$), however, both constraint commitment and personal dedication were significantly related to forgiveness, as suggested in our first hypothesis ($\beta = .19$, $p < .05$; $\beta = .20$, $p < .05$, respectively).

As a result of the high correlation between personal dedication and constraint commitment and the apparent similarity of the role of each in this model, mediation was likely

not found due to the shared variance between the two constructs. Thus, the two constructs were collapsed into one total commitment score. This model is presented in Figure 2. This model was also fully saturated, and thus provided a perfect fit to the data. Results indicated that commitment was positively related to denial of injury ($\beta = .26$, $p < .01$), and denial of injury was in turn significantly related to forgiveness ($\beta = .20$, $p < .05$). Furthermore, the relation between commitment and forgiveness was not statistically significant ($\beta = .08$, $p > .05$), suggesting that denial of injury might mediate the relation between commitment and forgiveness. Indeed, the M-test of indirect effects supported this proposed meditational pathway (95% CI = .001 - .002), suggesting that denial of injury is accounting for the relation between commitment and forgiveness. It should be noted that the control variable, frequency of psychological and physical aggression, also was a significant predictor of forgiveness, ($\beta = -.26$, $p < .01$). However, even when controlling for this factor, denial of injury still accounted for some of the unique variance in this model, indicating that denial of injury contributes significantly in predicting forgiveness in this population.

Moderation

Finally, we examined whether silencing the self moderated this mediated pathway from commitment to denial of injury. This model is presented in Figure 3. As evidenced by the model fit statistics, $\chi^2 (1) = 6.66$, $p = .04$, CFI = .87, RMSEA = .14, this model provided only a modest fit to the data. Additionally, silencing the self did not moderate the effect of commitment on denial of injury ($\beta = .12$, $p > .05$).

Discussion

This study assessed potential mechanisms that help to illuminate the relation between different aspects of commitment and forgiveness in a population of women residing in domestic violence shelters in east Tennessee. Specifically, it was hypothesized that the higher a woman's personal dedication and/or constraint commitment, the more likely she would deny the severity of the injury to herself, which in turn would make her more likely to forgive her partner, even when controlling for the level of violence. Results did not support the original mediation hypotheses, which were that denial of injury would mediate both commitment factors and forgiveness when each commitment factor was separately represented in the model (see Figure 1), possibly because they shared too much variance. Consequently, as both constraint commitment and personal dedication were predictive of denial of injury in separate models (Gilbert, Gordon, Christman, Hellmuth & Willett, 2009), they were collapsed into one total commitment score, which then replaced the individual commitment factors in the original model (see Figure 2). When this new model was evaluated, denial of injury mediated the relation between overall commitment and forgiveness in this sample.

First, it is notable that neither type of commitment uniquely predicted denial of injury in the model, even though both types predicted it in separate models (Gilbert et al., 2009). This pattern may suggest that it is a woman's global sense of commitment to her relationship, whether it stems from dedication or constraint that affects denial of injury and the likelihood of forgiveness. Whereas much research recognizes the importance of the constraints that keep many women in abusive relationships, it is important to recognize that a more complete picture of commitment also would include the truly positive feelings that these women often experience,

such as those desires and feelings that are encompassed in the construct of personal dedication (Adams & Jones, 1997; Johnson, 1991; Stanley & Markman, 1992).

Additionally, results suggest that the relationship between commitment and forgiveness of abuse is explained by denial of the severity of injury, regardless of a woman's reported frequency of physical and psychological aggression on other measures that specifically ask about the presence or absence of violent behaviors. As previously mentioned, it is possible that women who are committed to their partners and are also faced with IPV feel very conflicted about their relationships and their commitment to them. These current findings suggest that in order for these women to reduce this potential distress they might actively deny the severity of the violence to themselves, which would allow them to feel justified in their commitment, thus reducing the experienced dissonance.

Furthermore, whereas research suggests that forgiveness can be a crucial factor in healing troubled relationships and improving mental health (e.g., Enright & Reed, 2006; Gilbert et al., 2010; Hargrave, 1994; Tsang, McCullough, & Fincham, 2006a), this study and others (Gordon, et al., 2004; McNulty, 2008; Murphy, 2005; Tsang & Stanford, 2007) suggest that women in abusive or severely distressed relationships may be a population for whom forgiveness is less beneficial. The current study indicates that women in these difficult relationships might achieve "forgiveness" through actively denying the magnitude of their partners' transgressions. Forgiveness of severe IPV in this context may be detrimental in many ways; for example, women might fail to hold partners accountable for the abuse and/or they might be more likely to re-enter these harmful relationships, thus potentially endangering themselves further.

Additionally, we initially expected that silencing the self would moderate the relation between commitment and denial of injury, such that the degree to which someone silences

themselves would affect the strength of the relationship between commitment and denial of injury. However, the results did not support this hypothesis; thus it is possible that the trait of silencing the self is not critical to this model. Additionally, it also is possible that silencing the self would be better as a mediator in this model, such that it is a stable trait that accounts for the relation between women's commitment to their partners and the mechanism of denial of injury, or alternatively, that silencing the self actually gives rise to commitment in this population. At this time, it is difficult to predict which construct precedes the other without longitudinal data. Finally, it would be interesting to see if these same findings extend to a sample of women who have not left their partners; perhaps there would be higher levels of silencing the self in those that have not yet left the relationship.

Limitations

There are some significant limitations to this study. First, relationship satisfaction was not assessed, and it is possible that adding this construct would have created a more comprehensive theoretical model for this study. Although relationship satisfaction and interpersonal commitment (personal dedication) are often positively correlated, personal dedication is not the same construct as relationship satisfaction (Rhoades, Stanley & Markman, 2010). One can be unsatisfied in a relationship, yet still have high personal dedication. Relationship satisfaction is a key part of Rusbult's (1980) investment model, and in hindsight, it would have been informative to also have explored the effects of relationship satisfaction when assessing commitment and forgiveness in this population.

Additionally, the fact that all participants were living in a shelter may have influenced the study's results. This sample is unique in that these women have already left their partners at least once and it is likely that those who leave as opposed to those who stay may differ greatly on

levels of commitment, forgiveness, and denial of injury, which are all related to women's stay/leave decisions. Thus, these findings are limited and not generalizable to those women in abusive relationships who are still residing with their partners.

Further, this study was not longitudinal in nature and researchers were unable to assess long-term change or effects of the measured variables. Due to the cross-sectional nature of this study, we were unable to take full advantage of Structural Equation Modeling and cannot make causal judgments about true predictors of forgiveness without assessing the sample at multiple time-points.

Finally, this study only recruited information from female partners. Gathering data from both members of a couple can provide a richer understanding the couple dynamics in a less-biased fashion. Additionally, only using self-report data can pose potential problems as participants may answer in ways they believe the rater may want them to, thus presenting themselves in a more desirable or more troubled light, rather than answering honestly. Furthermore, this study used a single method of collecting data and did not implement multiple measures of key concepts, which suggests that some associations might simply arise from shared method variance rather than from real relationships between the variables. Future research should employ additional methods of assessment or collect information from multiple sources.

Future Directions

This study highlights cognitive mechanisms that might allow women to minimize the severity of their experienced abuse, which in turn might increase their forgiveness of that abuse. This study is unique in that it is the first to empirically examine the mechanism of denial of injury in this population. Thus, these findings have potential for new insight and future research on this cognitive explanatory mechanism. It is important for researchers to incorporate this

knowledge into their work, in hopes of further examining other factors related to denial of injury in this population, such as relationship satisfaction, and pressures outside of the relationship (e.g. social pressures) that may make a woman more likely to minimize the severity of the abuse.

Additionally, these findings are important for clinicians and advocates, alike, who are constantly looking for ways in which to better understand the stay/leave decision in this population. Whereas the mechanism of denial of injury has immediate benefits (i.e. reducing the experienced dissonance), helping clients explore the potential costs and benefits of this process is important for future clinical work with this population. It is likely that Motivational Interviewing, a therapeutic approach designed to help ambivalent individuals struggling with substance abuse, may help these clients weigh their options (Miller & Rollnick, 2002). This technique could allow clients the space to explore both the positive and negative aspects of staying in a relationship, in order to make a healthy, well-considered stay/leave decision.

Further, this study supported previous findings identifying a variety of commitment factors (e.g. Adams & Jones, 1997; Johnson, 1973, 1991; Stanley & Markman, 1992) that affect one's forgiveness and potentially stay/leave decisions. Whereas individually both constraints and commitment factors outside of constraints (i.e. personal dedication) may affect one's forgiveness and potentially stay/leave decisions, this study suggests that when considered simultaneously, both forms of commitment share a similar explanation for their relation to denial of injury and forgiveness. Further research should continue to assess commitment factors, in addition to traditional constraint variables, to better understand the underlying phenomenon behind women's forgiveness and/or decisions to continue or terminate their relationships.

Previous research has contributed significant insight into factors that make a woman more or less likely to return to her abusive partner, such as constraint commitment and forgiveness. This study builds on this body of literature in two important ways; first by suggesting that the effects of commitment on forgiveness of IPV might be broader than previously defined, and second by exploring the mechanism of denial of injury and its role in predicting forgiveness. Whereas this study contributes to the understanding of forgiveness in IPV relationships, much more research is needed in order to fully understand the complicated nature of forgiveness in this population, as it has such clear benefits and emerging potential costs to romantic relationships and personal safety.

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Appendix A

	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
1. Total Commitment							
2. Personal Dedication	.95**						
3. Constraint Commitment	.86**	.65**					
4. Denial of Injury	.26**	.26**	.21*				
5. Silencing the Self	.31**	.32**	.23*	.20*			
6. Acts of Forgiveness	.22*	.20*	.19*	.29**	-.12		
7. Frequency of psychological and physical aggression	-.01	-.00	.01	-.02	.10	-.33**	
Mean	178.25	111.70	66.55	15.83	98.66	106.81	53.93
Standard Deviation	30.33	20.57	12.63	6.12	19.07	27.37	19.14

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

Table 1: Bivariate Correlations and Descriptive Statistics of Study Variables

Appendix B

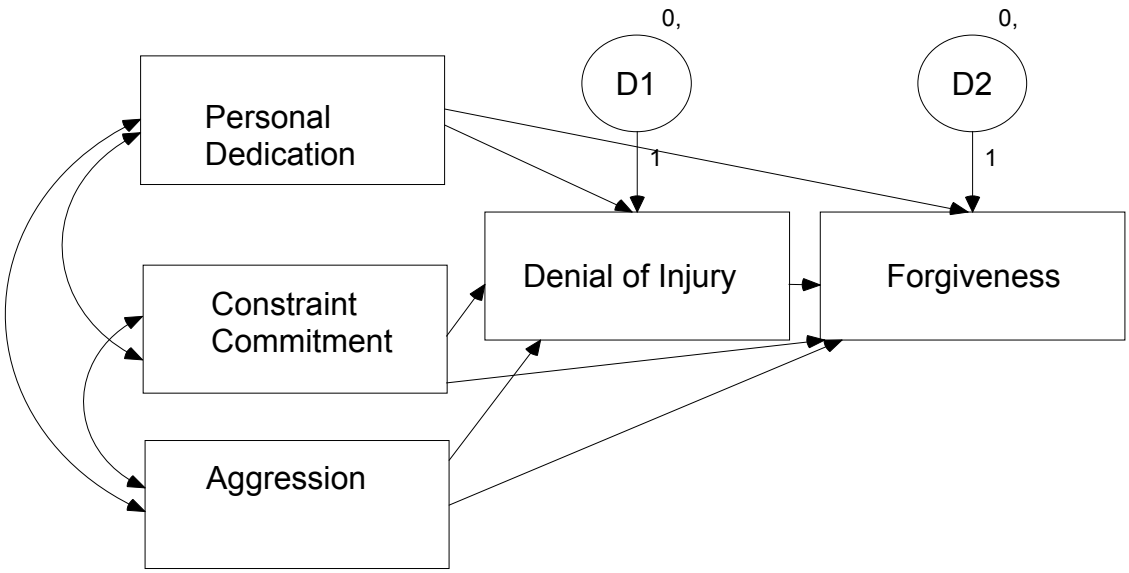


Figure 1: Denial of Injury as a Mediator in the Relation Between Distinct Commitment Factors and Forgiveness

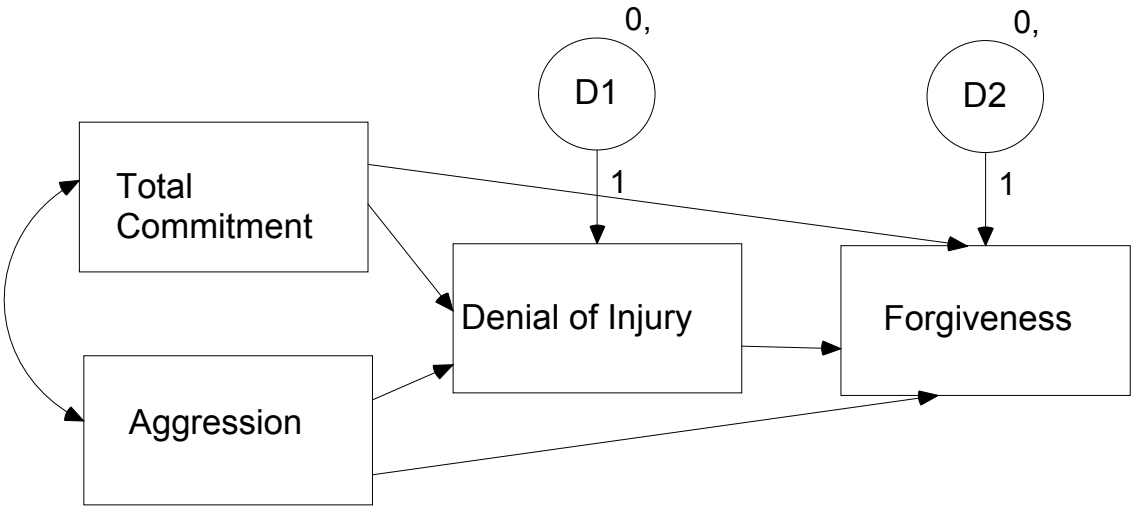


Figure 2: Denial of Injury as a Mediator in the Relation Between Total Commitment and Forgiveness

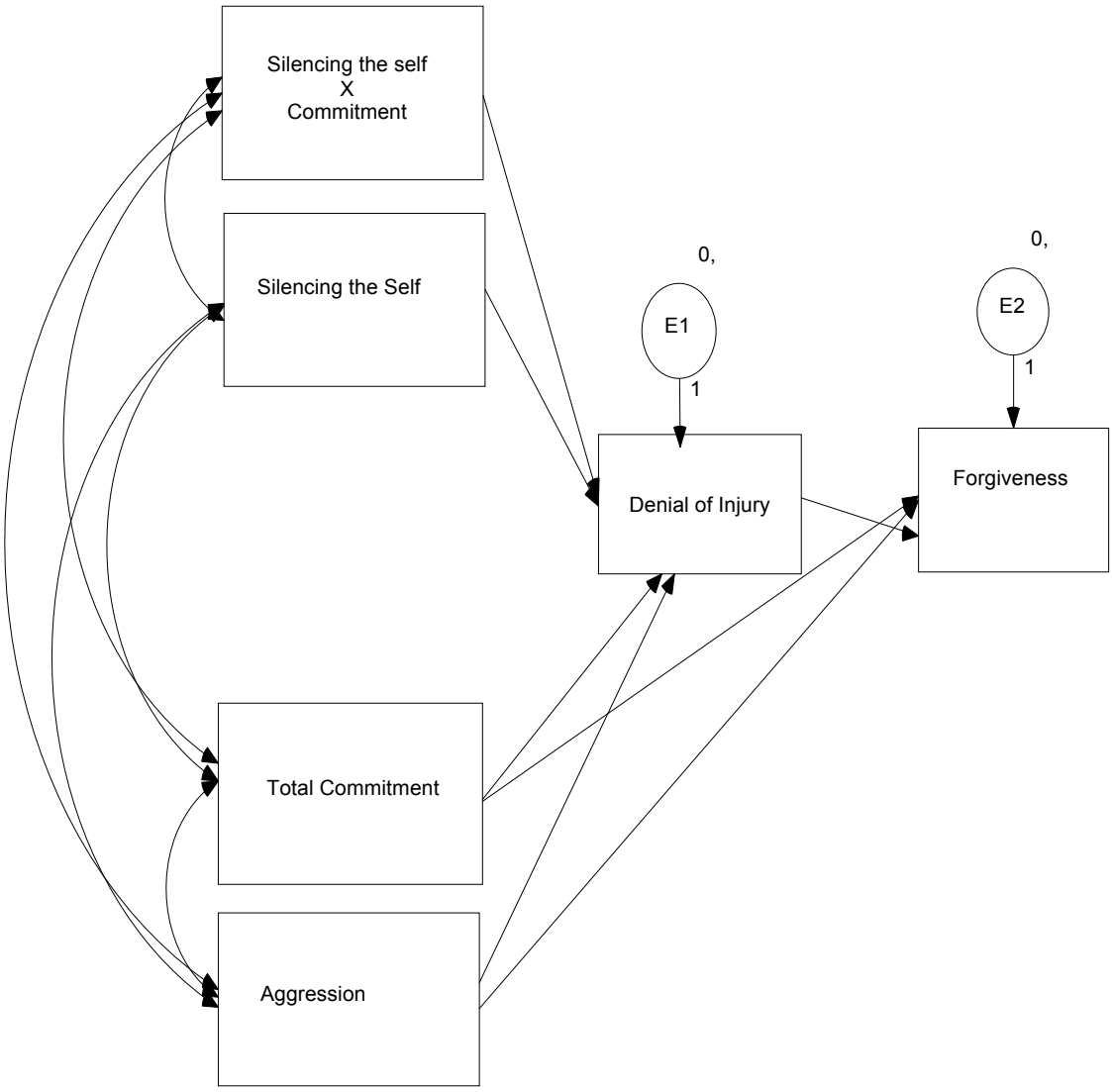


Figure 3: Silencing the Self as a Moderator in the Relation Between Total Commitment and Denial of Injury

Appendix C

Denial of Injury Scale

Please think about what you consider to be disagreements or fights you and your partner have had. Indicate your agreement with these statements using the following scale:

1	2	3	4	5
Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Neutral	Agree	Strongly Agree

___ 1. I don't tell other people about our fights.
___ 2. I find myself telling lies to prevent others from suspecting my partner and I fight.
___ 3. I tried to "cover up" evidence of our fights.
___ 4. Sometimes I think that our fights did not really happen.
___ 5. I think I imagined these fights.
___ 6. I tell myself I'm just blowing these fights out of proportion.
___ 7. Our fights are no different than other couples' fights.
___ 8. Our fights are not really abusive.
___ 9. I try to prevent my parents or friends from finding out about our fights.
___ 10. Sometimes I think I'm crazy when I think about whether our fights ever happened.
___ 11. Our fights are not out of the ordinary.
___ 12. My partner's actions are to be expected.
___ 13. My partner makes me think I'm crazy when I talk about our fights.
___ 14. I want to forget about our fights after they happen.

Vita

Sarah E. Gilbert was born in Durham, NC in 1985. She attended high school and college in North Carolina, earning a B.A. in Psychology from The University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill in 2007. At The University of North Carolina, she had the pleasure of working with Dr. Donald Baucom on a study assessing the overall couple functioning of heterosexual couples faced with a recent diagnosis of breast cancer. In the fall of 2008, Sarah began her graduate career at the University of Tennessee, where she works with Dr. Kristina C. Gordon. Sarah is interested in researching overall couple functioning and is actively building her knowledge and skills of the clinical applications of psychology in the practice of psychotherapy with couples and individuals.