Fit to Forgive: Exploring the Interaction Between Regulatory Focus, Repentance, and Forgiveness

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Three studies, using diverse methodologies and measures, were conducted to examine the role that the regulatory focus of an injured party and of a transgressor (E. T. Higgins, 1997, 2000) plays in explaining the relationship between repentance and forgiveness. The authors predicted that when a victim’s regulatory focus (i.e., promotion vs. prevention) was congruent (i.e., fit) with the regulatory focus of a transgressor’s repentance (i.e., promotion vs. prevention), there would be greater forgiveness compared with when there was incongruence (i.e., mismatch). Three studies supported these predictions. The results also confirmed one potential explanation for why apologies are not always successful at eliciting forgiveness, namely, feeling right. This research suggests that regulatory focus theory can help inform the scientific study of forgiveness and its related processes.

Keywords: forgiveness, apology, transgression, regulatory focus, regulatory fit

Interpersonal transgressions are ubiquitous and unfortunate consequences of human coexistence, and if left unresolved, their effects can escalate into more serious personal and interpersonal consequences. Forgiveness is one interpersonal mechanism that can resolve such conflicts. Indeed, as a relationship facilitator, forgiveness has shown promise in restoring harmony to relationships interrupted by a transgression (Eaton & Struthers, 2006; Fincham, Beach, & Davila, 2004; Fincham, Paleari, & Regalia, 2002; Karremans & Van Lange, 2004). Given the potentially damaging consequences of transgressions and the power of forgiveness as an interpersonal relationship facilitator, it is important to better understand the boundary conditions under which the forgiveness process operates.

Accordingly, researchers have shown that injured parties are more likely to forgive their transgressors as a function of their commitment to their relationship partner (Finkel, Rusbult, Kumsashiro, & Hannon, 2002; McCullough et al., 1998), empathy toward the transgressor (McCullough, Worthington, & Rachal, 1997; Paleari, Regalia, & Fincham, 2005), dispositional forgiveness (Eaton, Struthers, & Santelli, 2006), self-esteem (Eaton, Struthers, Shomrony, & Santelli, 2007), empathy toward the transgressor (E. T. Higgins, 1997, 2000) plays in explaining the gap between forgiveness and its motivational underpinnings.

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Interpersonal transgressions are ubiquitous and unfortunate consequences of human coexistence, and if left unresolved, their effects can escalate into more serious personal and interpersonal consequences. Forgiveness is one interpersonal mechanism that can resolve such conflicts. Indeed, as a relationship facilitator, forgiveness has shown promise in restoring harmony to relationships interrupted by a transgression (Eaton & Struthers, 2006; Fincham, Beach, & Davila, 2004; Fincham, Paleari, & Regalia, 2002; Karremans & Van Lange, 2004). Given the potentially damaging consequences of transgressions and the power of forgiveness as an interpersonal relationship facilitator, it is important to better understand the boundary conditions under which the forgiveness process operates.

Accordingly, researchers have shown that injured parties are more likely to forgive their transgressors as a function of their commitment to their relationship partner (Finkel, Rusbult, Kumsashiro, & Hannon, 2002; McCullough et al., 1998), empathy toward the transgressor (McCullough, Worthington, & Rachal, 1997; Paleari, Regalia, & Fincham, 2005), dispositional forgiveness (Eaton, Struthers, & Santelli, 2006), self-esteem (Eaton, Struthers, Shomrony, & Santelli, 2007), and perceptions of justice (Karremans & Van Lange, 2005), attributions of responsibility and intent (Fincham, 2000; Struthers, Eaton, Santelli, Uchiyama, & Shirvani, 2008; Weiner, Graham, Peter, & Zmuidinas, 1991), implicit and explicit self-esteem (Eaton, Struthers, Shomrony, & Santelli, 2007), and whether they receive an apology (Darby & Schlenker, 1982; Ohbuchi, Kameda, & Agarie, 1989; Weiner et al., 1991). Research has also shown that injured parties are more forgiving when they are low in neuroticism and high in agreeableness (McCullough & Hoyt, 2002), that those high in narcissistic entitlement are less likely to forgive (Exline, Baumeister, Bushman, Campbell, & Finkel, 2004), and that low dispositional forgiveness is associated with certain traits related to ego defensiveness such as narcissism and need for structure (Eaton, Struthers, & Santelli, 2006).

Another factor that might assist in predicting when repentance is more likely to play a role in the forgiveness process is the regulatory focus of both the injured party and the transgressor (Higgins, 1997, 1998). Given that McCullough et al. (1998) and others have defined forgiveness as a fundamentally motivational phenomenon, understanding the self-regulatory processes in forgiveness decisions should be a priority. Moreover, examining how the self-regulatory processes associated with promotion and prevention orientations (and regulatory fit) can influence forgiveness motivations may help to further illuminate how such motivations function on a basic level. Interestingly, there have been no published studies, to our knowledge, that empirically examined the direct influence of such motivational forces on forgiveness. The primary aim of this research was to explore the role of the self-regulatory goals of victims and transgressors to better understand how they may influence forgiveness. Another aim of this research was to examine one potential explanation for why repentance sometimes succeeds in facilitating, whereas other times it fails to elicit, forgiveness. Recently, researchers have recognized that there is a paucity of theoretical and empirical research addressing variables that may cause temporary fluctuations in forgiveness (see Karremans & Van Lange, 2005). This research is one attempt to bridge the gap between forgiveness and its motivational underpinnings.
Forgiveness and the Role of Repentance

One of the most reliable findings established in the forgiveness literature is the extent to which repentance facilitates forgiveness (see Darby & Schlenker, 1982; Eaton & Struthers, 2006; Enright, Santos, & Al-Mabuk, 1989; Exline & Baumeister, 2000; Gonzales, Haugen, & Manning, 1994; McCullough et al., 1997; North, 1998; Weiner et al., 1991). Although this research illuminates the positive relationship between repentance and forgiveness, not much is known about why repentance is an effective facilitator of forgiveness. Indeed, only a handful of published studies have empirically examined what makes apologies more or less effective. For instance, the extant literature has found that expressions of remorse (Darby & Schlenker, 1989; Scher & Darley, 1997), expressions of responsibility, promises of forbearance, offers of reparation (Scher & Darley, 1997), and appropriate timing (Frantz & Bennigson, 2005) all contribute to the effectiveness of an apology. To date, however, the literature on forgiveness and apology has been silent when it comes to explaining why and how motivational forces impinge upon the effectiveness of an apology.

By examining situations in which transgressions have occurred, the studies presented here seek to answer under what circumstances and why the self-regulatory goals of victims interact with transgressors’ repentance to influence forgiveness. Specifically, we propose that the decision to forgive will be influenced by the goals of victims and offenders when forgiveness is an option. Generally, goal pursuit may involve striving for desirable outcomes or avoidance of undesirable outcomes (e.g., Carver, 2004; Carver & Scheier, 1998; Elliot & Harackiewicz, 1996; Higgins, 1996). Accordingly, victims may be more inclined to forgive transgressors when the goals of the victim are in accord with those of the transgressor. In contrast, victims may be less inclined to forgive when a transgressor’s goals are inconsistent with their own. One theory that incorporates these ideas and might assist in qualifying the relationship between repentance and the forgiveness process is Higgins’s (1997) regulatory focus theory.

Regulatory Focus Theory

The preceding predictions about forgiveness are based on regulatory focus theory (for reviews, see Higgins, 1997, 1998). This theory of self-regulation argues that individuals pursue one of two different types of self-regulatory goals: promotion-focused goals and prevention-focused goals. When engaged in promotion-focused regulation, one is concerned with ideals, advancement, aspiration, and accomplishment (i.e., the presence or absence of positive outcomes; Higgins & Spiegel, 2004). When engaged in prevention-focused regulation, one is focused on protection, safety, duties, and responsibilities (i.e., the absence or presence of negative outcomes).

Insofar as promotion-focused individuals are generally concerned with achievement (i.e., the way things ideally could be) and prevention-focused individuals are concerned with maintaining the status quo (i.e., the way things ought to be), people who are promotion focused prefer to use eagerness-related means to achieve their goals, whereas people who are prevention focused prefer to use vigilance-related means to achieve their goals. Moreover, the use of eagerness-related means by promotion-focused individuals often translates into a proclivity toward risk taking as a means to an end, whereas the use of vigilance-related means by prevention-focused individuals often translates into an aversion toward taking such risks (see Crow & Higgins, 1997; Friedman & Förster, 2001; Levine, Higgins, & Choi, 2000). Thus, promotion-focused people strive to attain idealistic goals, often regardless of the risks involved. In contrast, prevention-focused people are conscientious about fulfilling their duties and responsibilities and are steadfast in their resolve to maintain a secure environment.

Regulatory Fit and Repentance: Are Transgressors Fit to Forgive?

The distinction between promotion and prevention can also be used to examine what has been termed regulatory fit (Higgins, 2000). According to Higgins (2000), regulatory fit occurs when an individual uses strategic means congruent with his or her regulatory orientation to some end. For instance, when the strategies implemented to achieve a goal are carried out with zeal for someone promotion focused and when the strategies employed to achieve a goal are carried out with caution for someone prevention focused, this would in both cases constitute a regulatory fit between the means to an end and one’s regulatory orientation (Higgins, Idson, Freitas, Spiegel, & Molden, 2003).

More germane to the current research, however, is the idea that regulatory fit can also occur when there is a match between one’s regulatory orientation and the environment or situation that one faces. In one study, Camacho, Higgins, and Lugur (2003, Study 4) found that participants who were chronically promotion focused judged an after-school program fitting their regulatory orientation (i.e., eager framing) as more appropriate than an after-school program that did not fit their regulatory orientation (i.e., vigilant framing). Camacho et al. (Studies 1 and 2) also showed that participants felt greater guilt about errors of either commission or omission when these errors did not match their regulatory focus. In yet another study, Camacho et al. (Study 3) found the same pattern of results when examining the impact of regulatory fit on judgments of retrospective conflict resolution strategies that participants had personally experienced. Participants judged conflict resolution strategies that matched their regulatory orientation as more appropriate than those strategies that did not constitute a regulatory fit. Another study, by Higgins et al. (2003), found that participants who were initially primed to be in a state of regulatory fit on an unrelated task and were subsequently asked to view and rate three photographs of dogs rated the dogs as more good-natured than did the participants who were previously primed with a mismatch.

These findings demonstrate two important properties of regulatory fit. First, regulatory fit can occur between one’s regulatory focus and various aspects of the environment (e.g., the way a situation is framed). Second, regulatory fit can often have a “rose-colored glasses” effect on individuals. Under conditions of regulatory fit, people tend to perceive the world around them (e.g., objects, animals, people, decisions) as more valuable and appropriate than under mismatched conditions. To the extent that interpersonal communication is an aspect of the environment, these are potentially important findings for research on forgiveness and repentance, suggesting that an interpersonal regulatory fit between a victim and a transgressor might positively influence forgiveness as compared with a mismatch, which potentially could negatively influence forgiveness.

If repentance from a transgressor is considered an aspect of a victim’s immediate environment and the motivation underpinning...
repentance involves either the attainment of something positive (e.g., a return to positive interpersonal relations) or the avoidance of something negative (e.g., preventing the relationship from deteriorating further), it is reasonable to assume that repentance from a transgressor can be framed as either promotion focused (e.g., repentance emphasizing gains and/or nurturance-related goals) or prevention focused (e.g., repentance emphasizing losses and/or security-related goals). Indeed, research on the effects of regulatory focus within the context of persuasive messages and linguistic signatures provides support for the general notion that regulatory focus may play a role in interpersonal communication/interactions (Cesario, Grant, & Higgins, 2004; Semin, Higgins, de Montes, Estourget, & Valencia, 2005). Therefore, when a promotion-focused victim receives promotion-framed repentance (ProRep) and a prevention-focused victim receives prevention-framed repentance (PreRep), this should result in a state of regulatory fit. Logically, then, when the form of repentance does not match the victim’s regulatory focus, this should result in a mismatch.

For example, a promotion-focused individual might frame his or her repentance as such: “I’m so sorry for what I did. I don’t feel very good about it, and I can’t stand the thought of not having you in my life. I can only imagine living my life with you. Can you please forgive me?” In contrast, a prevention-focused individual might frame his or her repentance as follows: “I’m so sorry for what I did. I feel very bad about it, and I can’t stand the thought of losing you. I can’t imagine living my life without you. Can you please forgive me?” Note how the italicized words above reflect either a positive/gain-framed tenor or a negative/loss-framed tenor.

Hypotheses and Overview of Research

The following two predictions are a product of the theoretical analysis above: (a) Regulatory fit will be associated with more forgiveness, and (b) mismatches will be associated with less forgiveness. Three studies examined the influence of participants’ regulatory focus on forgiveness following an imagined (Studies 1 and 3) and a real-life (Study 2) transgression. Although each study examined the influence of regulatory fit on forgiveness, Studies 1 and 3 specifically examined self-reported forgiveness, and Study 2 examined behaviorally measured forgiveness. Of note, a unique feature of Study 2 is that participants were made to experience an actual transgression. As well, both chronic measures of promotion and prevention focus (Study 1) and situational priming of promotion and prevention focus (Studies 2 and 3) were used to provide convergent evidence of our theoretical propositions. Finally, a potential mechanism was also examined in Study 3.

Study 1

In Study 1, participants completed a questionnaire that measured chronic regulatory focus, read a scenario in which they were to imagine that they had just been the victim of a coworker transgression and that the offender had apologized to them, and then answered items measuring forgiveness. Promotion-focused participants who experienced ProRep were predicted to express greater forgiveness than when they experienced PreRep. In addition, it was posited that prevention-focused participants who experienced PreRep should express greater forgiveness than when they experienced ProRep.

Method

Participants

Sixty-nine senior university students (York University, Toronto, Ontario, Canada) enrolled in an undergraduate psychology course participated in exchange for a chance to win one of two $20 drawings. Eight participants were not included in our main analysis because they failed to provide complete data, leaving a total of 61 participants (20 male, 41 female). Their mean age was 22 years. Participants’ gender showed no effects in any of our analyses, and so, gender is not discussed further.

Procedure

Study 1 was presented to participants as two separate studies. Participants first completed the chronic measure of regulatory focus, ostensibly as a favor to another graduate student. After completing the chronic measure, participants were asked to complete the second study, which they were told was designed to examine coworker interactions. Participants read a scenario in which they were to imagine they were working as a member of a two-person team (see Appendix A for scenario). They were told that their team member’s name was John and that the researcher was interested in the participant’s thoughts and feelings toward their coworker. The scenario involved John committing a transgression against his partner (i.e., the participant) and then apologizing. Participants then randomly received either ProRep or PreRep. After reading the scenario, participants were instructed to keep in mind their interaction with John as they responded to the questionnaire. Upon completion of the questionnaire, participants were thanked and debriefed.

Materials

Measure of chronic regulatory focus. Each participant completed a measure of chronic regulatory focus developed by Lockwood, Jordan, and Kunda (2002). This measure consists of two subscales designed to directly measure the theoretical underpinnings of chronic promotion concerns (e.g., “I frequently imagine how I will achieve my hopes and aspirations,” “My major goal in school right now is to achieve my academic ambitions”) and chronic prevention concerns (e.g., “I am anxious that I will fall short of my responsibilities and obligations,” “My major goal in school right now is to avoid becoming an academic failure”). Items were rated on a 9-point scale with endpoints labeled 1 (not at all true of me) and 9 (very true of me).

Repentance manipulation. There were two repentance conditions. In the first condition, participants received ProRep. In the second condition, the participants received PreRep (see Appendix A for repentance conditions).

Self-report forgiveness. Participants completed three items that directly asked about their willingness to forgive their transgressor: (a) “How motivated would you be to choose to forgive John?” on a scale from 1 (not at all motivated) to 7 (very motivated), (b) “How likely do you think that you would be to forgive John in this situation?” on a scale from 1 (not at all likely) to 7 (very likely), and (c) “To what extent would you forgive John for what happened?” on a scale from 1 (not at all) to 7 (very much so).
Results and Discussion

On the basis of a significant positive relationship between the three forgiveness items, \( (r_s = .42-48, p < .01) \) and acceptable internal consistency \( (\alpha = .71) \), a composite average self-reported forgiveness score was created. Internal consistency for both the promotion and prevention subscales of the chronic regulatory focus measure was also acceptable \( (\alpha = .80 \text{ and } .70, \text{ respectively}) \).

To test our predictions, we simultaneously regressed self-reported forgiveness on both promotion and prevention goal strength, repentance (coded; 0 = PreRep, 1 = ProRep), and the interactions between these three variables after centering the measures of regulatory focus by subtracting the mean of the regulatory focus scores from each participant’s score and then creating the interaction terms by multiplying the centered measures of regulatory focus by repentance (see Aiken & West, 1991).

The analysis for promotion-focused participants revealed a significant main effect \( (\beta = .26, p = .055) \), such that participants with a stronger chronic promotion focus were more likely to forgive their partner. The main effect for repentance was not significant \( (\beta = .22, p > .05) \). However, the main effect of promotion was qualified by a significant positive Strength of Regulatory Focus \( \times \) Repentance interaction \( (\beta = .32, p = .019) \), indicating that the stronger a participant’s chronic promotion focus, the more forgiving he or she was when repenting (see Figure 1). These results demonstrate the influence of regulatory fit on forgiveness for promotion-focused participants.

Although these results partially supported our predictions, next we examined the relative strength of each participant’s regulatory focus. As Lockwood et al. (2002) pointed out, regardless of the strength of each focus, it is the relative strength that may likely determine which regulatory concerns eventually drive behavior. In fact, this is more relevant to this study because we predicted that it would be the predominant regulatory focus of participants that would interact with repentance, rather than simply the strength of chronic promotion or prevention.

Consequently, following Lockwood et al.’s (2002) example, we created a measure of dominant regulatory focus by subtracting scores on the prevention subscale from scores on the promotion subscale. Higher scores on this measure reflect a relatively stronger promotion than prevention focus. Use of a difference-score measure is justified by the results of the previous analysis, which indicated that both chronic promotion and prevention had independent equal but opposite (i.e., \( \beta = .26 \text{ vs. } \beta = -.27 \)) effects on self-reported forgiveness. As such, these data are in accordance with the criteria required to satisfy the model underlying a difference-score analysis (see Edwards, 1994, 1995).

Following the method used in the above analysis (see Aiken & West, 1991), we regressed self-reported forgiveness on the measure of relative regulatory focus, repentance (coded; 0 = PreRep, 1 = ProRep), and the interaction between these two variables. There was a significant main effect for relative regulatory focus, such that participants with relatively stronger chronic promotion were more likely to forgive their partner \( (\beta = .33, p = .017) \). The main effect for repentance was not significant \( (\beta = .18, p > .05) \). As expected, however, the main effect of relative regulatory focus was qualified by a significant positive Relative Regulatory Focus \( \times \) Repentance interaction \( (\beta = .30, p = .027) \), indicating that the stronger the relative strength of a participant's chronic promotion focus, the more forgiving he or she was when in receipt of ProRep than when in receipt of PreRep.

To illustrate how the dominant regulatory focus of each participant, rather than the construct of prevention and promotion, interacted with repentance to predict forgiveness, we classified participants as predominantly promotion focused or prevention focused. Consistent with established practice in the regulatory focus literature (e.g., Camacho et al., 2003; Liberman, Molden, Idson, & Higgins, 2001; Lockwood et al., 2002), we first calculated a difference score by subtracting chronic promotion scores from chronic prevention scores. We then classified individuals above the median as predominantly promotion focused and individuals below the median as predominantly prevention focused. Predominantly promotion-focused participants had an average self-reported forgiveness score of 5.76 when they received ProRep and 4.84 when they received PreRep, whereas predominantly prevention-focused participants had an average self-reported forgiveness score of 4.79 when they received PreRep and 4.58 when they received ProRep (see Figure 1). These results are consistent with our predictions, as they demonstrate the influence of regulatory fit, via repentance, on forgiveness, although primarily for promotion-focused participants.

Despite the novel findings of Study 1, this study was conducted using a quasi-experimental design. As such, it is not possible to draw full causal conclusions from the results or rule out alternative explanations. We therefore decided to employ a fully experimental design in Study 2. In addition, Study 2 included behavioral measures of forgiveness, which are often neglected in forgiveness research despite being a critical component of forgiveness.

![Figure 1](image-url)

Figure 1. Forgiveness as a function of predominant regulatory focus and framing of repentance (Study 1).
In Study 2, we sought to replicate and extend the findings of Study 1 using a fully experimental methodology and by including behavioral measures of forgiveness. Participants ostensibly worked with another student over a computer network. Either a promotion or a prevention focus was induced in the participant (the victim), and the framing of the transgressor’s repentance was manipulated, creating a 2 (participant’s regulatory focus: promotion, prevention) × 3 (transgressor’s repentance: promotion framed [ProRep], prevention framed [PreRep], no repentance [NoRep]) between-groups design. Finally, behavioral measures of forgiveness were utilized to assess the important, yet scarcely examined, behavioral component of forgiveness. The addition of the NoRep condition to the repentance manipulation served as a control condition, which enabled an exploration of how regulatory fit and mismatch compare with instances in which victims do not receive repentance. In fact, this third condition was critical if we were to answer the overarching question of this research: Can mismatches account for some instances in which there is no forgiveness, despite repentance?

We predicted a Participant’s Regulatory Focus × Transgressor’s Repentance interaction effect on forgiveness. Specifically, promotion-focused participants who received ProRep and prevention-focused participants who received PreRep should be more forgiving than when they encountered repentance that did not match their regulatory focus.

**Method**

**Participants**

Seventy-two university students (York University) enrolled in an introductory psychology course participated in exchange for partial course credit. Two participants were excluded from our analysis because they did not complete the study, leaving a total of seventy participants (27 male, 43 female). Their mean age was 19.36 years.

**Procedure**

The following experiment utilized a double-blind procedure. Participants were randomly assigned to one of the conditions and tested individually. Upon entering the laboratory, participants were directed to another room. Once inside the room, participants were informed that the purpose of the study was to investigate how individuals work together over a computer network. Participants were led to believe that they would be working with another participant, who was located within the same building, on a task that involved reading a case study and answering some related questions. Participants were also provided with guidelines they were to follow during the task, one of which was not to drag the cursor into a covered area at the top of the computer screen.

Before beginning the computerized task, participants were asked to complete a brief pilot questionnaire to help out another psychology student. This task (the regulatory focus priming question) activated semantic representations associated with either a promotion or a prevention focus. After completing the regulatory focus manipulation, participants began the computerized task when signaled by the experimenter.

Although participants were led to believe they were working with another participant, they were actually working with the computer. Ultimately, the ostensible partner did not adhere to the guidelines that the experimenter had set forth at the beginning of the study (i.e., the partner dragged the cursor into the covered area of the screen and caused the computer program to fail), and consequently, the study was made to appear as if it could not continue. The participants were informed that they would have to return at another time to complete the study. This constituted the transgression. Following the realization that the participant could not complete the study, the computer was programmed to send a message to the participant that appeared to come from their partner and contained one of the three forms of repentance (see Appendix B for complete text).

To promote realism, the experimenter received a telephone call. Following the phone call, the experimenter revealed to participants that the partner they had been working with was coming to the laboratory to discuss what had happened. In the interim, participants were told that they should fill out ballots for a $50 drawing that each of them was eligible to enter. Participants were then given 10 ballots and told that they could anonymously divide the ballots between themselves and their partner in any manner they wished. They were then given time to complete the ballots in private.

Once their ballots were complete, the experimenter reentered the room and told participants that he thought the two of them should go upstairs together to see if they could discover what was going on, given that the partner had not yet arrived. The experimenter then led participants out of the laboratory into a hallway where there was a waiting area with a row of eight chairs. A jacket had been placed on either the first or last chair (jacket position was counterbalanced to control for potential anchoring and adjustment effects). As participants walked with the experimenter by the row of chairs, the experimenter abruptly stopped when participants were positioned in front of the fourth chair (out of the seven that were unoccupied) and commented to participants that the jacket must belong to their partner, and that their partner must have just gone to the washroom. Participants were then instructed to have a seat while the experimenter decided what to do next. At that point, the experimenter made a note of which chair participants were sitting in. Shortly thereafter, participants were given a funnel debriefing, in which they were probed for suspicion. All of the participants believed that they were working with another individual online, and none of them could guess the hypothesis of the study.

**Materials**

**Regulatory focus manipulation.** Each participant completed one of two versions of an established regulatory focus manipulation (see, e.g., Higgins, Roney, Crowe, & Hymes, 1994; Liberman, Idson, Camacho, & Higgins, 1999). Following the procedure used in prior studies, participants in the promotion-priming condition were asked to describe their current hopes and aspirations and how these differed from their hopes and aspirations as they were growing up. Participants in the prevention-priming condition were asked to describe their current sense of duty and obligation and how it differed from their sense of duty and obligation as they were...

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1 Jacket position had no effect on the dependent measures and is therefore not addressed in the results section.
growing up. A blank page was provided, and participants were encouraged to spend about 10 min on this task.

**Repentance manipulation.** There were three repentance conditions. In the NoRep condition, the transgresser did not repent for his or her transgression. The ProRep condition used promotion-framed repentance, and the PreRep condition used prevention-framed repentance (see Appendix B for a complete script).

**Behavioral measures of forgiveness.** Two behavioral measures of forgiveness were used in this study. For the first behavioral measure of forgiveness, participants were asked to divide between themselves and their ostensible partner 10 ballots, each providing one opportunity to win a cash prize in a $50 drawing. Given that forgiveness involves increased motivation “to act in ways that will benefit the transgressor” (McCullough, 2001, p. 194), forgiveness was operationalized as the more ballots participants gave to their partner. Indeed, recent research by Exline et al. (2004) demonstrated that a money allocation procedure can be used as a behavioral indicator of forgiveness, which is a defining characteristic of forgiveness.

**Results and Discussion**

To test our predictions, analyses of variance (ANOVA)s for Regulatory Focus (promotion, prevention) × Repentance (ProRep, PreRep, NoRep) were conducted on the two dependent variables (ballot assignment, social distance). Greater forgiving responses were predicted in conditions of regulatory fit versus conditions in which there was a mismatch.

Examining the ballot measure first, there were no main effects for regulatory focus and repentance (Fs < 3.11). As predicted, there was a significant Regulatory Focus × Repentance interaction, F(2, 69) = 5.70, p = .005, η² = .14. Inspection of the means indicated that participants who experienced regulatory fit kept significantly fewer ballots for themselves than did participants who experienced a mismatch (see Figure 2). Given that all comparisons were predicted to be unidirectional in nature, all comparisons reported are one-tailed. Planned comparisons revealed that promotion-focused participants who received ProRep (i.e., a fit; M = 5.00), as opposed to PreRep (i.e., a mismatch; M = 7.85) or NoRep (M = 6.80), kept fewer ballots for themselves, t(23) = −4.49, p = .001, and t(20) = −2.73, p = .007, respectively. In contrast, the difference between prevention-focused participants who received PreRep (i.e., fit; M = 5.50) and those who received ProRep (i.e., mismatch; M = 6.15) or NoRep (M = 6.80) was not significant, t(23) = .95, p > .17, and t(23) = .95, p > .17, respectively. There was no significant difference when promotion-focused participants received NoRep (M = 6.80) versus PreRep (M = 7.85), t(21) = −1.11, p > .13, and a marginally significant difference when prevention-focused participants received NoRep (M = 6.80) versus PreRep (M = 5.50), t(20) = −1.62, p = .06. These results indicate that both promotion-focused and prevention-focused participants assigned to themselves approximately the same number of ballots regardless of their receiving NoRep or a mismatched form of repentance.

With regard to social distance, there were no main effects (Fs < 1.03). As predicted, the Regulatory Focus × Repentance interaction was significant, F(2, 69) = 8.34, p = .001, η² = .20, indicating that participants who experienced regulatory fit sat significantly closer to where they believed their partner would be seated than did participants who experienced a mismatch (see Figure 3). Planned comparisons revealed that promotion-focused participants who received PreRep (i.e., fit; M = 2.33), as opposed to ProRep (i.e., mismatch; M = 5.00) or NoRep (M = 4.10), sat significantly closer to where they anticipated their partner would be seated, t(23) = 5.28, p = .001, and t(20) = −3.09, p = .003, respectively. In contrast to the nonsignificant result of the ballot measure on the same comparison, the difference between prevention-focused participants who received PreRep (i.e., fit; M = 2.92) and those who received ProRep (i.e., mismatch; M = 4.23) was marginally significant for the social distance measure, t(23) = 1.63, p < .06. The difference between prevention-focused participants who received PreRep (M = 2.92) and those who received NoRep (M = 3.50) was not significant, t(20) = −0.66, p > .25. Once again, there was no significant difference when promotion-focused participants received NoRep (M = 4.10) versus PreRep (M = 5.00) and when prevention-focused participants received NoRep (M = 3.50) versus ProRep (M = 4.23), t(21) = 1.28, p > .11, and t(21) = 0.91, p > .18, respectively. Again, these results indicate that both promotion-focused and prevention-focused participants sat equally close to their partner regardless of whether these participants received NoRep or a mismatched form of repentance.

Study 2, then, replicated in an experimental, high-impact study the effect of regulatory fit on forgiveness found with promotion-focused participants in Study 1. Specifically, regulatory fit, relative to a mismatch, resulted in greater forgiveness on two behavioral indicators of forgiveness when participants were primed with...
promotion. Moreover, unlike in Study 1, regulatory fit, relative to a mismatch, had a marginal effect on the social distance participants sat relative to their transgressor’s jacket.

The results of Study 2 also indicate that both promotion- and prevention-focused individuals experience a mismatched form of repentance to be as ineffective at eliciting forgiveness as no repentance. Across regulatory focus conditions, both groups of participants assigned similar amounts of ballots to themselves and sat at approximately the same distance from where they anticipated the transgressor would be seated regardless of whether they received mismatched repentance or no repentance at all. This finding, coupled with the finding that regulatory fit results in more forgiveness than a mismatch, provides early evidence for the general proposal that mismatches may account for some instances in which individuals find it difficult to forgive, despite repentance.

Thus, when a victim receives repentance from a transgressor and this repentance does not fit with the regulatory focus of the victim, the results of this study indicate that such repentance not only will be less effective in eliciting forgiveness than repentance constituting a fit but also is likely as ineffective as no repentance. The implications of this finding are obviously stark in terms of the notion of repentance as a universally effective method of eliciting forgiveness. This issue is addressed further in the General Discussion section.

Although the results of Study 2 seem to suggest that regulatory fit may cause people to be more forgiving than they would normally be when they receive repentance, an alternative explanation is that mismatches are causing people to be less forgiving. Without a condition in which participants receive a neutral/unframed form of repentance, we cannot say with certainty whether it is regulatory fit or mismatch that is driving the observed effects. As such, we attempted to examine this issue in Study 3 by including what we call a plain repentance condition (PlainRep).

Study 3

In Study 3, we sought to systematically replicate and extend the findings of Study 1, as well as conceptually replicate the results of Study 2, by converting the quasi-experimental paradigm used in Study 1 to a fully experimental design. In addition to the use of a more psychometrically established measure of unforgiveness, an attempt to examine the underlying mechanisms of the observed effects in the first two studies was also undertaken. To gain a fuller understanding of the phenomena under study, an additional level of repentance was also added to the repentance manipulation. Therefore, Study 3 was designed to provide converging evidence for the results of Studies 1 and 2 and to extend them by examining a potential mechanism and a new repentance condition.

Method

Participants

In total, there were 95 participants in Study 3. Forty university students (10 male, 30 female; York University) enrolled in an undergraduate psychology course participated in exchange for partial course credit. Fifty-five nonstudents (4 male, 51 female), recruited by the undergraduate participants through a snowball sampling technique, also participated in exchange for a chance to win one of two $50 drawings. The mean age was 18.3 years for the student sample and 28.4 years for the nonstudent sample. Results did not differ between the two samples, and they were therefore merged. Combined, both samples totaled 95 participants (14 male, 81 female), with a mean age of 24.1 years.

Procedure

The procedure for Study 3 was identical to Study 1 except for one important change and one addition. Rather than measure chronic regulatory focus, participants first completed the same priming method used in Study 2. In addition, a new repentance condition was added. Any new measures that were collected were done so in the same fashion as Study 1.

Materials

Regulatory focus manipulation. Each participant completed one of two versions of the same regulatory focus manipulation used in Study 2 (Higgins et al., 1994; Liberman et al., 1999).

Repentance manipulation. There were three repentance conditions. The ProRep and PreRep conditions were identical to those used in Study 1. In the PlainRep condition, the transgressor’s repentance was neutral in terms of its regulatory focus (see Appendix A for a complete script).

Mechanism. Three items were used to measure the feeling-right component of regulatory fit (see Camacho et al., 2003; Cesario et al., 2004). For example, for the item “To what extent do you feel that something about the situation is still not right?”, 1 = not at all, and 7 = very much so; for the item “How uneasy do you feel about the situation with John?”, 1 = not at all uneasy, and 7 = very uneasy.

Forgiveness (unforgiveness). Participants’ forgiveness-related motivations (i.e., avoidance and revenge) were measured with McCullough et al.’s (1998) Transgression-Related Interpersonal Motivations Inventory (TRIM-12), which is a measure of unforgiveness. We adapted this measure to suit the circumstances of the study by referring to the target (i.e., the coworker, John) within each question. The TRIM-12 is a 12-item self-report measure comprising two subscales. Five items compose the Revenge subscale, which measures motivation to seek revenge (e.g., for “To...
what extent would you want to see John hurt and miserable?”, 1 = not at all, and 7 = very much so), whereas seven items compose the Avoidance subscale, which measures motivation to avoid contact with a transgressor (e.g., for “To what extent would you avoid John?”, 1 = not at all, and 7 = very much so). McCullough et al., found both subscales to have acceptable psychometric properties.

Results and Discussion

The TRIM–Avoidance and TRIM–Revenge subscales were highly intercorrelated (r = .70), and therefore, we computed a total score (i.e., TRIM) by averaging the two scales together. Given the high intercorrelations between the two subscales, we used only the merged scale in our analysis (α = .91). On the basis of a significant positive relationship between the three mechanism items, (rs = .37–.52, ps < .01) and acceptable internal consistency (α = .70), a latent feeling-right variable was used to conduct our mediation analysis.

To test our predictions, an ANOVA for Regulatory Focus (promotion, prevention) × Repentance (ProRep, PreRep, PlainRep) was conducted on the TRIM dependent variable. Lower TRIM scores were predicted in conditions of regulatory fit versus conditions in which there was a mismatch.

There were no main effects for regulatory focus and repentance (Fs < 2.75). As predicted, there was a significant Regulatory Focus × Repentance interaction, F(2, 94) = 5.71, p = .005, η² = .11. Beginning with an examination of the critical conditions (i.e., ProRep, PreRep), inspection of the means indicated that participants who experienced regulatory fit had significantly lower TRIM scores than did participants who experienced a mismatch (see Figure 4). Planned comparisons revealed that promotion-focused participants who received ProRep (i.e., a fit; M = 2.34), as opposed to PreRep (i.e., a mismatch; M = 3.29), had significantly lower TRIM scores, t(29) = −3.09, p = .002. Unlike Studies 1 and 2, the difference between prevention-focused participants who received PreRep (i.e., fit; M = 2.70) and those who received ProRep (i.e., mismatch; M = 3.26) was significant, t(29) = 1.97, p < .03. Thus, these results replicated the significant findings from the first two studies and provide an empirical confirmation of our predictions across promotion and prevention conditions.

Next, we examined PlainRep in relation to ProRep and PreRep. There was no significant difference in TRIM scores when promotion-focused participants received ProRep (M = 2.34) versus PlainRep (M = 2.38), t(34) = −0.13, p > .44, but there was a significant difference when promotion-focused participants received PreRep (M = 3.29) versus PlainRep (M = 2.38), t(35) = 3.22, p = .001, indicating that when promotion-focused participants received PreRep, they were less forgiving than when they received PlainRep. Similarly, there was no significant difference in TRIM scores when prevention-focused participants received PreRep (M = 2.70) versus PlainRep (M = 2.56), t(34) = −0.13, p > .44, but once again, there was a significant difference when prevention-focused participants received ProRep (M = 3.26) versus PlainRep (M = 2.56), t(35) = 3.22, p = .001. These results indicate that both promotion-focused and prevention-focused participants were just as forgiving when they received PlainRep or a form of repentance that fit their regulatory focus but were significantly less forgiving when they received mismatched repentance versus PlainRep (see Figure 4). Taken in conjunction with the results of Study 2, which indicated that participants did not differ in their forgiveness-related behaviors following the receipt of NoRep or a mismatching form of repentance, these results suggest that mismatches were the driving force behind the effects found thus far. That is, regulatory fit does not seem to be causing people to be more forgiving, but rather, it is those cases in which there are mismatches that are causing people to be less forgiving.

To test whether feeling right mediates the relationship between regulatory fit and forgiveness, we created a regulatory fit variable that combined both fit conditions (coded; 1 = fit) and both mismatch conditions (coded; 0 = mismatch). The control condition, which was labeled plain repentance because it was neutral in terms of its regulatory focus, was dropped from this analysis as it did not map on to either the fit or the mismatch conceptualization. This resulted in an N of 75 for the mediation analysis.2 Following the procedures outlined by Baron and Kenny (1986), we used regression and structural equation modeling techniques to test the interrelationships among the regulatory fit, TRIM, and the latent feeling-right variable. The correlation matrix of the variables, their means, and their standard deviations used in this analysis is presented in Table 1. First we regressed the TRIM on regulatory fit (β = −.43, p < .05). Next, we tested a simple mediation model using structural equation modeling techniques with covariances and maximum likelihood estimation (using EQS statistical software; Bentler, 1995). Paths tested included those from

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2 Small sample sizes and failure to meet the assumption of multivariate normality can influence fit statistics and accuracy of parameter estimates, and therefore, they are important to consider. Research suggests that five cases for each parameter estimated (Bentler & Chou, 1987) and 15 cases per measured variable (Stevens, 1996) are acceptable. Other research shows that maximum likelihood estimation performs acceptably when the N is small and the variables are multivariate normal (Jackson, 2001). Visual inspection of the Q–Q plots and Z tests examining the skew and kurtosis of our variables indicates that the tests fall below the critical value of 3.29, indicating that the variables do not depart significantly from multivariate normality. On the basis of these criteria, we concluded that this analysis was reliable.
regulatory fit to the latent feeling-right mechanism ($\beta = .30$, $p < .05$), and from the latent feeling-right mechanism to the TRIM ($\beta = -.53$, $p < .05$). The relationship between regulatory fit and the TRIM dropped from $\beta = -.43$, $p < .05$, to $\beta = -.30$, $p < .05$, when the latent feeling-right variable was taken into account and the full model was tested (see Figure 5). To demonstrate mediation, the significant relationship between the predictor and the criterion should disappear, or at least be reduced, when the effects of the mediator are controlled for (Baron & Kenny, 1986). To establish statistical mediation, we conducted a Goodman test $= 2.00$, $p < .05$. MacKinnon, Lockwood, Hoffman, West, and Sheets (2002) showed that products of coefficient tests (e.g., Goodman) had acceptable Type I error rates and statistical power. Testing a simple mediation model with a structural equation model, while following up with a Goodman test, is equivalent to testing indirect effects within the actual structural equation model (Preacher & Hayes, in press). Therefore, the significant results of the Goodman test, in conjunction with the drop in the relationship between regulatory fit and the TRIM while controlling for the feeling-right latent construct, suggests meaningful partial mediation and the possibility of other mechanisms.

Study 3, then, replicated the significant results found in Studies 1 and 2. Most importantly, by demonstrating the effects of fit (and mismatch) on forgiveness for both promotion- and prevention-focused participants, Study 3 confirmed our predictions. Moreover, the results of Study 3, in conjunction with those of Study 2, suggest that the effects of regulatory fit on forgiveness are actually being driven by conditions in which participants are experiencing mismatches. Finally, feeling right was found to be a partial mediator of these effects.

### Meta-Analysis

Despite the positive findings across the three studies, the weakness in the prevention fit conditions in Studies 1 and 2, relative to the promotion fit conditions, remained a minor concern. In addition, the validity of the measure of regulatory focus used in Study 1 has recently been called into question. Molden, Lee, and Higgins (2008) suggested that the measure of regulatory focus developed by Lockwood et al. (2002) may confound promotion and prevention concerns with general approach and avoidance motivations, respectively. Given these concerns, a meta-analysis of the effect of prevention fit (promotion fit) versus mismatch on forgiveness across all three studies was conducted to directly examine these issues (Egger, Smith, & Phillips, 1997).

The meta-analysis was conducted using the Meta program developed by Kenny (2003). This program is designed to compute an effect size for each study, pool these effect sizes, and test them for homogeneity. Cohen’s $d$ was used as the basic measure of effect size (the Meta program computes these basic measures). To create a single dependent measure for Study 2, both the social distance and ballot dependent variables were first standardized and then summed and averaged to create a composite dependent measure to be used in the meta-analysis.

Results of the meta-analysis showed that across the three studies, prevention fit and promotion fit were associated significantly with forgiveness ($Z = 2.77$, $p < .006$, and $Z = 3.46$, $p < .0006$, respectively). Moreover, the difference between these two $Z$ scores was not significant ($Z = 0.48$, $p = .32$; see Rosenthal, 1991). Therefore, although the effect of prevention fit on forgiveness did not reach statistical significance in Stud-

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**Table 1**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variable</th>
<th>1</th>
<th>2</th>
<th>3</th>
<th>4</th>
<th>5</th>
<th>6</th>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Feeling right 1</td>
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<td>—</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Feeling right 2</td>
<td>.13</td>
<td>.60</td>
<td>—</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. Feeling right 3</td>
<td>.20</td>
<td>.50</td>
<td>.48</td>
<td>—</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. TRIM</td>
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<td>-.43</td>
<td>-.32</td>
<td>-.39</td>
<td>-.26</td>
<td>—</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6. Latent feeling right</td>
<td>.28</td>
<td>.91</td>
<td>.79</td>
<td>.64</td>
<td>.90</td>
<td>.86</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Note.** TRIM = Transgression-Related Interpersonal Motivations Inventory (McCollough et al., 1998).

**Figure 5.** Structural equation modeling feeling-right mediation model (Study 3). $\beta$ is the standardized parameter estimate. For ease of presentation, the following statistics are presented here: Feel Right 1, $\beta = .82$, $E = .58$; Feel Right 2, $\beta = .72$, $^* E = .69$; Feel Right 3, $\beta = .64$, $^* E = .77$; Feeling Right latent construct, $D = .95$. TRIM-12 = Transgression-Related Interpersonal Motivation Inventory. $^* p < .05$. 

Goodman Test $= 2.00$, $p < .05$
ies 1 and 2, the general effect of prevention fit on forgiveness across all three studies was statistically significant. Furthermore, this general effect of prevention fit on forgiveness did not differ statistically from the general effect of promotion fit on forgiveness across the three studies.

General Discussion

Prior research has demonstrated the effect of regulatory focus and regulatory fit in a number of domains (for a review, see Higgins & Spiegel, 2004). The present article extends these findings to the domain of forgiveness by demonstrating that self-regulatory mismatches via incongruence between repentance and a victim's regulatory focus affect the extent to which people are likely to forgive their transgressors. To our knowledge, the influence of regulatory focus on forgiveness has never been documented before.

The present studies support our proposal that mismatches may account for some instances in which, following an apology, forgiveness is not as forthcoming as one might typically expect. Taken together, these studies support the notion that regulatory fit and mismatch can occur between a transgressor's regulatory focus expressed via repentance and a victim's regulatory focus and that this influences forgiveness. When participants' chronic (Study 1) and primed (Studies 2 and 3) regulatory focus was congruent with the regulatory focus of a transgressor's repentance, participants were more forgiving on both self-reported forgiveness (Studies 1 and 3) and behavioral measures of forgiveness (Study 2). Therefore, across three studies, using a combination of thought experiments and high-impact studies, quasi-experimental and experimental methodologies, chronic and primed regulatory focus, and behavioral and self-report measures of forgiveness, the theoretical predictions of this research were largely supported.

These studies have implications for understanding how goals can influence the forgiveness process. The goals of victims and transgressors have not been typically taken into account in the extant literature on forgiveness. The results of these studies, however, suggest that goals and motivational states are aspects of the individual and of the environment that have the potential to significantly affect the forgiveness process. As a result, research examining interpersonal interactions following transgressions should consider the goals of victims and transgressors to gain a better understanding of what is actually happening in these situations. Also, it is of note that Study 2 was the first study of which we are aware to have used an implicit behavioral indicator of forgiveness as a dependent measure (i.e., the chair/social distance measure). The findings of Study 2, in conjunction with the speculation by Exline and Baumeister (2000) that implicit expressions of forgiveness are used more often than explicit ones, suggest that future research on forgiveness might consider using this apparently effective technique to gauge the occurrence of implicitly expressed forgiveness behavior.

These studies also have implications for regulatory focus research. Perhaps the most important of these implications is that regulatory fit can actually occur at the interpersonal level when an individual is made aware of the regulatory focus of another individual. Moreover, the effects of this interpersonal fit were found to influence interpersonal interactions; in this case, we demonstrated the effects of regulatory fit on forgiveness. This finding indicates that, on a daily basis, people may experience a number of instances of regulatory fit between themselves and other individuals and, similarly, a number of mismatches. If this is so, regulatory fit (and mismatch) may have a direct bearing on many of the judgments, decisions, behaviors, and feelings people regularly experience in relation to other individuals. Thus, it is important that future research apply this understanding of regulatory fit to the study of phenomena at the interpersonal level, in addition to phenomena at the intrapersonal level. Indeed, first steps have already been made toward this end (see Cesario et al., 2004; Semin et al., 2005).

There are also a number of practical implications to consider. For instance, how long would the effects reported here last in the real world? The current set of studies cannot answer this question, nor does there exist, to our knowledge, any research examining the temporal effects of regulatory fit or mismatch. Thus, the long-term effects of fit or mismatch on forgiveness are not yet known. Practically speaking, however, an equally important question to ask about the real-world implication of these effects is not how long they last but whether they actually occur. If one operationalizes forgiveness as a motivated decision, it seems logical that regardless of how long the effects of fit or mismatch last, as long as they influence the initial forgiveness decision then they may likely influence the extent to which someone will ultimately forgive. That said, we also know that forgiveness is a process that unfolds over time (McCullough, Fincham, & Tsang, 2003), and future research will need to address how, if at all, regulatory fit or mismatch influences the temporal unfolding of forgiveness.

Another relevant issue to consider is what the implications of this research are for different types of interpersonal relationships. Given that the current research dealt only with single episodic relationships between individuals, we can only speculate how these effects generalize to close relationships. We imagine, however, that similar effects would be found within close relationships. In fact, it would only be within close relationships that individuals would actually stand a chance of knowing the motivational orientation of their relational partner, which means that people in close relationships should be more easily able to utilize this new understanding of regulatory focus and forgiveness if they are made aware of how it works. Nevertheless, one must also consider the fact that close relationships may be confounded with other variables that could also influence forgiveness (e.g., transgression history), and it is too early to tell whether regulatory mismatch or fit will exert its effect on forgiveness over and above the effect of these variables.

So, what does this mean for individuals interacting with strangers on an interpersonal level? Obviously, people are unaware of the motivational orientations of strangers, which could make it difficult to correctly formulate an apology that fits the intended target. These data suggest that the safest approach to take is a cautious one, in which a simple apology without much explanation and detail is given to the victim. Given that fit was shown to be just as effective as neutral repentance, the risk of a mismatch resulting from an elaborate apology does not seem warranted. Thus, offenders wishing to apologize to strangers are likely best served by ensuring their apologies are kept simple.
There remain a number of other issues that future research will also need to address. For instance, more work needs to be done to clarify why mismatches seem to be driving the effects. According to research on regulatory fit (Cesario et al., 2004; Higgins et al., 2003), experiencing fit and the associated feelings of rightness provides an intuitive confirmation to one’s initial response to something, in this case, an apology. Typically, people respond positively to apologies, particularly when offered in response to moderate transgressions (Darby & Schlenker, 1982; Ohbuchi et al., 1989; Weiner et al., 1991). Thus, regulatory fit would serve to confirm the positive reaction individuals typically feel following an apology, which would simply cause them to forgive as much as they generally would under similar circumstances. In contrast, a mismatch would cause individuals to intuitively question their initial positive reaction to the apology, and feelings of wrongness associated with a mismatch would therefore cause them to be less forgiving than usual. As Cesario et al. (2004) demonstrated, this constitutes a case of misattributing the fit or mismatch experience to one’s initial reaction, in this case, to an apology.

Had the studies presented here used more severe and intentional transgressions, would participants have responded in the same manner? We would predict a different set of results when the severity of the transgression increases. The severity of the transgressions in the current set of studies is moderate by design, the logic being that by keeping all of the transgressions moderately severe and unintentional, we controlled potential confounds known to influence victims’ willingness to forgive transgressions. In fact, we predict that the results would actually change direction, precisely for the same reasons outlined above. If someone were to receive an apology for an extremely severe and intentional transgression, research has found that the recipient would perceive such an apology as disingenuous and initially react negatively to it (Boon & Sulsky, 1997; Girard & Mullet, 1997; Miller & Vidmar, 1981; Struthers et al., 2008). As such, someone experiencing fit following such an apology would deem his or her initial reaction as right, whereas someone experiencing mismatch might deem his or her initial reaction as wrong, thus causing him or her to be more forgiving than he or she might otherwise have been. We believe that the optimal manner in which to study these effects would be to separate the manipulation of fit and mismatch from repentance (or no repentance) while manipulating transgression severity/intentionality. Doing this would provide for a more fine-grained exploration of this phenomenon, which is something we are currently in the process of pursuing as the next phase of this research. Therefore, to the extent that life is filled with a range of transgressions, from those that are relatively minor to those that are extremely severe, future research would be well served to examine how different levels of transgression severity and intentionality influence the effects of regulatory fit on forgiveness.

The issue of mediators was also addressed in the current research. Although Study 3 demonstrated that feelings of rightness and wrongness associated with the interaction with the transgressor partially mediate the effects of fit and mismatch, other factors could have been influenced in the causal chain leading to forgiveness as well. That is, did feeling right or wrong about the interaction also influence how individuals felt about other variables that are typically involved in the forgiveness process? For instance, did victims feel that transgressors were more or less genuine, blame-worthy, and/or trustworthy? Could it be that victims felt more or less empathy toward transgressors during fit or mismatch? Future research will need to examine whether there are more proximal mediators at work here and to what extent these variables could also account for the effects found in the current set of studies.

Some specific limitations of the current research also merit noting. For instance, college students were used in most of the studies (although a large portion of Study 3 involved a nonstudent sample, which did not differ from the student sample in the results), the situations in which we examined forgiveness were largely lab-based situations, the relationships studied were ones in which the people did not know each other well or at all, and third-variable explanations could not be ruled out in Study 1 (although Studies 2 and 3 were fully experimental and the participants were randomly assigned to the conditions).

Conclusion

Transgressions occur frequently within most interpersonal relationships. Although repentance is often used to elicit forgiveness and to remedy such events, the present findings show that the motivational content of an apology may also influence the extent to which that apology is effective in eliciting forgiveness. This finding has theoretical implications for the social psychology of forgiveness and regulatory focus theory and practical implications for interpersonal transgressions. Thus, the need for continued research in this area should remain high.

In demonstrating that the effect of repentance on forgiveness differs as a function of one’s regulatory focus, this study has shown that regulatory fit or mismatch between victims and repentant transgressors can indeed influence forgiveness. These findings also offer one potential explanation for those instances in which forgiveness, despite repentance, is not as forthcoming as would normally be expected. Thus, the results of this study suggest that regulatory focus theory can offer novel and valuable insights into the forgiveness process. Consequently, regulatory focus theory and self-regulation in general should be taken into consideration when conducting forgiveness research.

References


### Appendix A

#### Scenario and Repentance Manipulations for Studies 1 and 3

On February 20, 2004, you and your coworker John were to make a presentation to your boss for an account you had both been working on together. For some reason, John is not at work this morning. Your only option is to go into your boss’s office and tell him that you are not prepared to make the presentation, given that John is not at work. You are seriously reprimanded by your boss for not being prepared to make the presentation and you leave his office very angry with John for making you look so bad.

Later that morning, you receive a phone call from John. He tells you the reason he did not show up at work was because he ran out of gas during his morning commute, and was stuck waiting for a tow truck.

**ProRep**

John then says he is sorry and that he feels badly about what has happened: “I’m so sorry and I have to apologize for what happened. I feel terrible and I want you to know that I feel obligated to do whatever it takes to not lose your trust. If you have any ideas about how I ought to help ensure you don’t lose your next promotion please let me know and I will assist you in making sure you don’t lose it.”

**PreRep**

John then says he is sorry and that he feels badly about what has happened: “I’m so sorry and I have to apologize for what happened. I am responsible for this and I feel it’s my duty to repair our relationship. I feel terrible and I want you to know that I feel obligated to do whatever it takes to not lose your trust. If you have any ideas about how I ought to help ensure you don’t lose your next promotion please let me know and I will assist you in making sure you don’t lose it.”

**PlainRep (Study 3 only)**

John then says he will be back in the office shortly. He also says that he is sorry and that he feels badly about what happened: “I’m so sorry and I have to apologize for what happened. I want to repair our relationship. I feel terrible and I want you to know that I will do whatever it takes for you to trust me. If you have any ideas about how I can help you out, please let me know and I will assist you any way I can.”

(Appendices continue)
Appendix B

Repentance Manipulations for Study 2

NoRep

Your partner: Hey I’ve just been told that i screwed thing up. I wanna start this thing over from the beginning . . . the people here are telling me that we cant because there’s no time. They say we might have to come back some other time to get our bonus points. When can you come back? Let me know!

ProRep

Your partner: Hey I’ve just been told that i screwed thing up. I’m really really so sorry about this. That’s what you get for being too eager and trying to be successful (I guess I wasn’t allowed to go back and reread the instructions—sorry). I wanna start this thing over from the beginning . . . the people here are telling me that we cant because there’s no time (thanks to me). They say we might have to come back some other time to get our bonus points. I think the most important thing is that they gain all their data. When can you come back? Let me know!

PreRep

Your partner: Hey I’ve just been told that i screwed thing up. I’m really really so sorry about this. That’s what you get for being too cautious and trying to not screw up (I guess I wasn’t allowed to go back and reread the instructions—sorry). I wanna start this thing over from the beginning . . . the people here are telling me that we cant because there’s no time (thanks to me). They say we might have to come back some other time to get our bonus points. I think the most important thing is that they don’t lose all their data. When can you come back? Let me know!

Received March 6, 2006
Revision received April 29, 2008
Accepted May 21, 2008