



# Individual differences in implicit theories of relationships and partner fit: Predicting forgiveness in developing relationships

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## ABSTRACT

Extending past research on implicit theories of relationships (ITRs), we investigated how the role played by partner fit in predicting forgiveness varies as a function of individual differences in beliefs about the nature of relationships. We focused on developing relationships ( $M_{\text{Duration}} = 2$  months) to examine our proposed hypothesis that strong soulmate theorists, relative to weak soulmate theorists, rely heavily on information about partner fit in deciding whether to forgive. In contrast, work-it-out theorists' decisions about forgiveness do not vary as a function of partner fit. Results supported predictions. Soulmate beliefs, but not work-it-out beliefs, moderated the relation between partner fit and forgiveness. This research suggests that in developing relationships, individual differences in soulmate theories influence the role played by partner evaluations in the forgiveness process. Implications for relationship satisfaction and longevity are discussed.

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## 1. Introduction

Partner offenses are a nearly inevitable aspect of involvement in romantic relationships (Holmes & Murray, 1996). Responding to these offenses with forgiveness is associated with mental (Worthington, Witvliet, Pietrini, & Miller, 2007), physical (Lawler et al., 2003; Worthington & Scherer, 2004), and interpersonal well-being (Williamson & Gonzales, 2007). However, despite these benefits, gut-level impulses in the wake of conflict tend towards retaliation (Finkel, Rusbult, Kumashiro, & Hannon, 2002). Fortunately, after initial unforgiving motivations are evoked, individuals are willing to work towards forgiveness if the relationship and offender are valued (McCullough, 2008).

What influences these perceptions and predicts motivation to forgive? Research suggests that determinants include, for example, personality traits (e.g., Big Five; McCullough & Hoyt, 2002; Mullet, Neto, & Riviere, 2005), relationship functioning (e.g., commitment; Finkel et al., 2002) and features of the offense (e.g., severity; Williamson & Gonzales, 2007). Research has also recognized the importance of social cognitive variables (e.g., empathy; McCullough, Worthington, & Rachal, 1997) including recent research on the role that beliefs about the meaning of relationships play in

the forgiveness process (Finkel, Burnette, & Scissors, 2007). Building on existing research, we propose that willingness to forgive interpersonal offenses is influenced by individual differences in beliefs about the nature of relationships (*implicit theories of relationships*) and by aspects of the relationship, namely perceptions about whether one's current romantic partner is close to ideal (*partner fit*). Specifically, we investigate the idea that, in developing relationships, partner fit is an important component of the forgiveness process. We also suggest that partner fit is especially relevant when deciding whether to forgive for individuals who strongly believe that relationships are meant to be (soulmate theorists). In the next section, we review relevant literature before conceptualizing the current work.

### 1.1. Implicit theories

Individuals hold implicit theories of diverse human characteristics (e.g., intelligence) and these theories vary in the degree to which personal traits are viewed as fixed, called an *entity* theory, or viewed as malleable, called an *incremental* theory (Dweck & Leggett, 1988). The implicit theory approach has been extended beyond academic achievement to understand motivation and behavior in an array of domains including, for example, person perception (e.g., Dweck, Hong, & Chiu, 1993) and negotiation (Kray & Haselhuhn, 2007). What is more closely related to the current research is a new and rapidly expanding literature that demonstrates how implicit theories predict relationship outcomes (e.g., Franiuk,

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Cohen, & Pomerantz, 2002; Knee, 1998; Knee, Patrick, & Lonsbary, 2003).

Implicit theories of relationships (ITRs) are loosely derived from Dweck and Leggett's (1988) entity and incremental theories of personality. Individuals vary in the degree to which they subscribe to beliefs that romantic relationships are or are not meant to be (soulmate or destiny theory) and to beliefs about whether relationships benefit from the effortful resolution of challenges (work-it-out or growth theory). We adopt the terminology of Franiuk and colleagues' work (2002), referring to these beliefs as soulmate and work-it-out theories. These beliefs represent conceptually distinct dimensions rather than two ends of a single continuum. That is, individuals can believe in both soulmate theories and work-it-out theories. For example, an individual might believe that there is one partner who is right for them and also believe that their relationship with that partner will grow and develop as they work to overcome challenges together. Additionally implicit theories, like other types of schemas and beliefs, can be seen as both stable over time and temporarily accessible situation-level constructs (Franiuk, Pomerantz, & Cohen, 2004). Although research on ITRs suggests that after reading persuasive arguments for a particular theory, participants can be led to temporarily adopt that mode of thought, ITRs are relatively stable across time with test–retest reliabilities ranging from .40 to .74 (Franiuk et al., 2002; Knee, 1998). In the current study, we focus on the stable individual difference in relationship beliefs.

### 1.2. Implicit theories and relationship outcomes

Regardless of whether implicit theories of relationships are induced or assessed, differences in these beliefs influence the meaning assigned to events and consequently predict satisfaction, coping, and longevity in relationships (e.g., Knee & Canevello, 2006; Knee et al., 2003). Although a cursory analysis might lead one to think these beliefs directly influence relationship outcomes, more often they work through interaction and/or mediation effects (Knee & Canevello, 2006). An especially relevant consideration for soulmate theorists is the degree to which their partner matches their ideal (*partner fit*). For example, perceived partner fit, as assessed by the discrepancy between one's current partner and ideal partner, predicted relationship satisfaction for strong relative to weak destiny theorists (conceptually similar to soulmate theorists; Knee, Nanayakkara, Vietor, Neighbors, & Patrick, 2001). Similarly, strong, relative to weak, soulmate theorists who reported their specific partner was ideal also reported more relationship satisfaction and longevity (Franiuk et al., 2002). Additionally, in an experimental study, participants induced to hold a soulmate theory reported greater satisfaction to the degree they reported their partner to be close to ideal. In contrast, across studies, work-it-out theorists did not report fluctuations in relationship outcomes (e.g., satisfaction) as a function of partner fit (e.g., Franiuk et al., 2004; Knee, 1998).

Researchers have also found that ITRs and partner fit play an important role in helping individuals cope with relationship conflict. For example, soulmate theorists who believed that their partner was an ideal match for them engaged in relationship enhancing cognitions to maintain their relationship in response to conflict (Franiuk et al., 2004). In contrast, soulmate theorists who believed that their relationship partner was not an ideal match for them used relationship-detracting cognitive strategies. Inducing individuals to hold a work-it-out theory did not lead to biased processing based on partner fit (Franiuk et al., 2004). Similar patterns emerge when examining the interaction of implicit theories and anxious partner attachment in predicting forgiveness following interpersonal hurts. In the wake of partner betrayals, individuals with strong destiny beliefs, relative to weak destiny beliefs, report less

trust for their partner and reduced forgiveness when experiencing partner specific attachment anxiety. However, for growth theorists, forgiveness and trust do not differ as a function of attachment anxiety (Finkel et al., 2007). Work-it-out or growth theorists do not assign the same level of importance to partner evaluations as soulmate or destiny theorists.

Although past research has investigated the relation between ITRs, conflict and forgiveness, this research has yet to examine the direct effect of partner fit on forgiveness or the moderating role of ITRs in explaining the partner fit and forgiveness association. Additionally, research has not specifically investigated how implicit theories may function in fledgling relationships. In past studies examining the interplay between ITRs and partner fit, researchers have included participants from various stages of relationship development focusing on relationship maintenance in ongoing established relationships and/or examining relationship dissolution (e.g., Knee et al., 2001; Franiuk et al., 2002, 2004). However, recent research has recognized the need for more empirical work during the initiation phases of relationships (Sprecher, Wenzel, & Harvey, 2008). Building on this, we propose examining the interplay between implicit theories and partner fit in predicting forgiveness during relationship initiation stages. We focus on early relationships because it is during this stage that individuals should be vigilant about partner fit, especially strong soulmate theorists. These evaluations should, in turn, be important for forgiveness.

### 1.3. Overview and hypotheses

Specifically, we propose that partner fit will directly predict forgiveness such that believing one's partner is close to ideal will be related to greater forgiveness. Additionally, we suggest that the partner fit-forgiveness association will be moderated by ITRs. Specifically, we suggest that strong, relative to weak soulmate theorists' forgiveness will vary as a function of partner fit. When partner fit is high, soulmate theorists should be interested in maintaining the relationships in the wake of conflict. In contrast, when soulmate theorists are experiencing doubts about their partner, they are especially likely to interpret the offense as indicative of a future filled with unpleasant interactions and thus are more likely to respond with unforgiving sentiments. We base our predictions on (a) research suggesting that soulmate beliefs stem from the stability of impressions, with an emphasis on determining the compatibility of a potential partner based on discrete events (Finkel et al., 2007), and (b) an evolutionary theory that emphasizes the importance of valuing the relationship with the offender for forgiveness (McCullough, 2008).

In contrast to soulmate beliefs, work-it-out beliefs stem from the stability of obstacles with emphasis on development through overcoming challenges (Franiuk et al., 2002; Knee & Canevello, 2006). One might speculate that work-it-out theorists' orientation towards overcoming obstacles as a way to develop a relationship would directly predict forgiveness. However, in line with past ITR and forgiveness research, we suggest that work-it-out theorists should not automatically forgive an offense but rather should be oriented towards active conflict resolution (Finkel et al., 2007; Knee, Patrick, Vietor, & Neighbors, 2004). Additionally, work-it-out theorists are expected neither to be reactive to the vulnerability associated with doubts about one's partner nor to use current perceptions of their partner early in the relationship to diagnose long-term prospects when deciding whether to forgive an offense. Thus, although we expect partner fit to be a direct predictor of forgiveness and especially relevant for strong soulmate theorists, relative to weak soulmate theorists, we do not expect partner fit to interact with work-it-out theories to predict forgiveness.

## 2. Methods

### 2.1. Participants

Participants were undergraduate students ( $N = 109$  total participants, 50 couples) at a mid-sized Midwestern university. We recruited heterosexual couples in new relationships. Participants had been involved with their partners for an average of two months ( $SD = .99$ ). Most were young adults ( $M = 20.36$  years old,  $SD = 2.61$ ) and primarily Caucasian (86.4% Caucasian, 4.2% Native American, 0.8% African American, 3.4% Hispanic, 2.5% Asian, and 2.7% other).

### 2.2. Procedure and materials

We solicited participants through fliers posted on campus. The fliers asked for participation from students in a heterosexual romantic relationship of less than four months. Couples received \$20 for completion of a one-hour session. Couples arrived at the lab together and then completed the same series of questionnaires in separate rooms. Participants first completed a relationship theory questionnaire and a partner fit measure before reflecting on the most hurtful act that their current partner had recently committed. Participants reflected on the offense by writing a brief description to remind them of the event. Examples provided by participants included, “he slept with his ex-girlfriend,” “[she] ditch[ed] an evening that I had specifically set up for her,” “[she] went drinking when I did not want her to,” and “he told me that he has talked about our relationship to his friends – people I did not even know – and it was about things I did not necessarily want his friends knowing about.” The majority of participants (91.7%) reported some sort of offense.

#### 2.2.1. Implicit theories of relationships

Participants completed the relationship theories questionnaire (RTQ; Franiuk et al., 2002). The RTQ consists of 20 Likert-type items (1–7 response scale with higher numbers representing more endorsement of the theory). Participants indicated their agreement with statements on the soulmate scale such as, “Bonds between people are usually there before you meet them.” Participants also indicated the extent to which they agreed with statements on the work-it-out scale such as, “If people would just put in the effort, most marriages would work.” The scales had adequate reliability ( $\alpha = .78$  for the 11 item soulmate scale;  $\alpha = .59$  for the 9-item work-it-out scale).

#### 2.2.2. Partner fit

We assessed participants' perceptions regarding whether their present partner was an ideal match for them. The partner fit scale consisted of seven Likert-type items (1–7 response scale with higher numbers representing closer match to ideal). Participants indicated their agreement with statements such as, “My partner is as close to ideal as a relationship partner as I ever expect to find.” and “My current partner is the ‘right’ person for me.” Internal reliability was good ( $\alpha = .94$ ).

#### 2.2.3. Forgiveness

To assess forgiveness, we used three items adapted from research on implicit theories and forgiveness (Finkel et al., 2007). Using instructions from the transgression-related interpersonal motivations (TRIM), a frequently used measure of forgiveness with evidenced reliability and validity (e.g., McCullough & Hoyt, 2002), we asked participants to imagine what their current thoughts and feelings would be regarding the offense when answering the three items: “I’m going to get even” (reverse

scored), “I’d keep as much distance between us as possible” (reverse scored), and “I grant forgiveness”. Additionally, based on theoretical approaches to forgiveness emphasizing the importance of reducing unforgiving motivations in conjunction with more benevolent motivations (Fincham, Beach, & Davila, 2004; McCullough & Hoyt, 2002), we included an item assessing benevolent feelings toward the offender (“I will feel positive emotions toward my partner”). We combined these four items to create an overall measure of forgiveness (higher numbers indicate more forgiving motivations;  $\alpha = .62$ ).

#### 2.2.4. Severity of offense

We included a single item measure of offense severity for statistical control. Participants rated on a 1 (completely disagree) to 7 (completely agree) scale the degree to which the offense was one of the most severe betrayals they had experienced.

## 3. Results

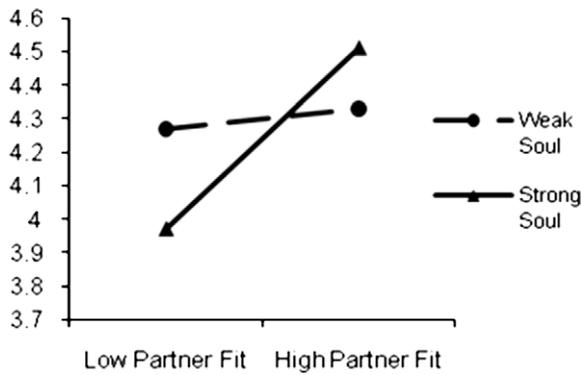
### 3.1. Analysis strategy

The data provided by the two partners in a given relationship are not independent. To account for this nonindependence, we report results from multilevel modeling analyses (Raudenbush & Bryk, 2002). Using SAS PROC MIXED, we modeled a two-level data structure, in which partner (Level 1) was nested within couple (Level 2), allowing intercept terms to vary randomly across couples (see Kenny, Kashy, & Cook, 2006). The equation for predicting forgiveness is:  $F_{ic} = \beta_0 + \beta_1(SB_{ic}) + \beta_2(PF_{ic}) + \beta_3(SB_{ic} \times PF_{ic}) + r_{ic}$ , where  $F_{ic}$  is the forgiveness score for individual  $i$  nested within couple  $c$ ,  $SB_{ic}$  is the soulmate beliefs score for individual  $i$  nested within couple  $c$ ,  $PF_{ic}$  is the partner fit score for individual  $i$  nested within couple  $c$ , and  $r_{ic}$  is a residual component in the forgiveness score. We also tested additional models but do not provide the relevant equations due to space constraints. The models are straightforward extensions of the equations presented above.

### 3.2. Primary hypothesis

To test the hypotheses that partner fit directly predicts forgiveness and that this direct effect is moderated by soulmate theories, we first regressed our measure of forgiveness on our measures of soulmate beliefs, partner fit, and their interaction term. In line with the main effect hypothesis, results revealed a significant direct effect for partner fit on forgiveness [ $\beta = .24$ ,  $t(44) = 2.25$ ,  $p < .05$ ], with greater partner fit predicting more forgiveness. In addition, the soulmate beliefs  $\times$  partner fit interaction effect was significant [ $\beta = .20$ ,  $t(44) = 2.01$ ,  $p = .05$ ]. Consistent with the soulmate moderation hypothesis, tests of simple slopes revealed that the association of partner fit with forgiveness was especially robust for strong, relative to weak, soulmate theorists (see Fig. 1). Specifically, simple effects testing conditioned one standard deviation above and below the mean of soulmate beliefs (Aiken & West, 1991) revealed a non-significant association of partner fit among individuals with weak soulmate beliefs ( $\beta = .05$ ,  $p > .05$ ), but a significant association of partner fit with forgiveness among individuals with strong soulmate beliefs ( $\beta = .44$ ,  $p < .05$ ). This analysis also revealed a non-significant main effect for soulmate beliefs.

We followed the same procedure above to rule out severity of the offense reported as a plausible alternative explanation. After controlling for reported offense severity, the direct effect of partner fit remained significant, [ $\beta = .24$ ,  $t(43) = 2.21$ ,  $p < .05$ ] as did the soulmate beliefs  $\times$  partner fit interaction [ $\beta = .20$ ,  $t(43) = 2.03$ ,  $p = .05$ ].



**Fig. 1.** In fledgling relationships, partner fit moderates the link between soulmate beliefs and forgiveness.

**Table 1**  
Means, standard deviations, and Bivariate Associations among key variables.

Variable	M	SD	1	2	3	4	5
1. Work-it-Out	4.28	.64	-	-.12	-.01	.03	.10
2. Soulmate	5.02	.72	-.10	-	.08	-.16	-.01
3. Partner Fit	4.76	1.19	-.02	.14	-	-.05	.33**
4. Severity	5.06	2.17	.03	-.15	-.09	-	-.08
5. Forgiveness	4.28	.60	.09	-.02	.17*	-.07	-

Note: The bivariate associations are from multilevel modeling analyses where both variables were standardized and intercept terms were allowed to vary randomly. For all associations, the column variable was modeled as the predictor and the row variable was modeled as the outcome.

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

3.3. Work-it-out beliefs

Although we predicted that work-it-out beliefs would not interact with partner fit, for exploratory purposes, we replicated the primary analysis above, this time replacing soulmate beliefs with work-it-out beliefs. This multilevel analysis revealed a non-significant effect for the work-it-out belief  $\times$  partner fit interaction [ $\beta = -.09$ ,  $t(44) = -1.69$ ,  $p > .05$ ]. This analysis also revealed a non-significant main effect for work-it-out beliefs but replicated the significant main effect of partner fit on forgiveness [ $\beta = .17$ ,  $t(44) = 2.75$ ,  $p < .05$ ] (see Table 1 for means, SDs, and correlations among all variables in the models).<sup>2</sup>

4. Discussion

Researchers have presented compelling arguments that implicit theories, especially soulmate beliefs, operate through perceptions of one’s partner (e.g., Franiuk et al., 2002, 2004; Knee & Canevello, 2006). In the present article, we have extended this line of research to understanding forgiveness. Supporting our hypotheses, results revealed that in fledgling relationships partner fit directly predicted forgiveness. It follows in early relationship initiation, that partner evaluations would have important implications for the meaning assigned to offenses and subsequent forgiveness. However, the relevant importance of these evaluations can be influenced by individual differences in beliefs about relationships. Specifically, strong soulmate theorists evaluate how close the cur-

rent partner matches his or her ideal and base subsequent decisions about forgiveness on these evaluations (see Fig. 1).

The current findings also may relate to past research regarding the ITR-longevity association. Soulmate theorists who believe their partner is not ideal report less satisfying relationships and report more quickly terminating the relationship than soulmate theorists who believe they are with the right person (Franiuk et al., 2002; Knee, 1998). The current research suggests strong soulmate theorists who believe that their partner is not an ideal match are less likely to forgive their partner’s transgression than are weak soulmate theorists. These behaviors, in turn, may reinforce their beliefs that their partner is not the right match for them which can increase the likelihood that they will end the relationship to search for a more ideal partner. This is speculative in nature and thus future research is needed to build upon the current work to examine the potential influence of unforgiving motivations on relationship dissolution.

4.1. Limitations

First, like much research in personality and social psychology, our sample was limited to university students in the United States. It seems plausible that there could be cultural differences in adherence to implicit theories of relationships (Franiuk et al., 2002). Additionally, the processes identified herein could function differently in various stages of relationship development.

Second, our forgiveness assessment was limited with average internal reliability. A substantial drawback of using brief but valid measures is that their unreliability diminishes the likelihood of detecting effects that actually exist in the population. However, we still found support for our hypotheses in the present research in spite of diminished reliability. Additionally, the current research did not employ behavioral or longitudinal measures of forgiveness. Although one could readily make the case that self-reports are a good measure of the forgiveness process, our conclusions would be bolstered by replications employing additional forgiveness assessments.

Third, although past research has shown that implicit theories cause relationship partners to adopt different cognitive strategies in the wake of conflict depending on partner fit (Franiuk et al., 2004), we are unable to draw causal conclusions with the present research design. Given past research, we suspect that the soulmate theory influences the forgiveness process as a function of partner fit. However, we are unable to rule out alternative explanations. For example, we only controlled for severity of offense but did not rule out other aspects of the offense such as time since occurrence. Thus, experimental research is necessary to rule out alternative explanations and to address the causal direction of the link between ITRs, partner fit and forgiveness.

Fourth, although we developed our hypotheses from McCullough’s (2008) evolutionary theory of forgiveness, we did not directly test the mediating mechanism. Building on an evolutionary theory of forgiveness, strong soulmate theorists with low partner fit should struggle to forgive because they doubt the value of their relationship partner. However, other possibilities exist. For example, building on past ITR and forgiveness research, strong soulmate theorists who are with a less than ideal partner might lose trust in their partner as they do when they are anxiously attached (Finkel et al., 2007). Building on the current findings and past forgiveness research, future work should empirically examine potential mediators of the soulmate by partner fit moderation effect on forgiveness.

4.2. Future directions and conclusions

The current research has provided some insight into how individual differences in beliefs about relationships influence the

<sup>2</sup> We also examined models in which all variables and their higher order effects were included to explore the possibility of a three-way interaction between soulmate beliefs, work-it-out beliefs, and partner fit. This three-way interaction was non-significant,  $p = .29$ . Additionally, with all variables in the model, the same results emerged for primary hypotheses.

importance of partner fit for the forgiveness process in fledgling relationships. However, questions remain about the associations between ITRs, partner fit, and forgiveness in long-term relationships. In more established relationships, soulmate theorists' evaluations of their partner should be relatively positive and stable considering their tendency to terminate relationships early if partner fit is less than ideal. Thus, perhaps in established relationships, soulmate theorists respond to a partner's transgressions with forgiveness and this effect is driven by high partner fit. Past research suggests that once with their ideal match, soulmate theorists use cognitive strategies – like downplaying their partners' faults and exaggerating their partners' strengths – to maintain their relationships (Franiuk et al., 2004). Forgiveness for a partner's transgressions reduces negative feelings and minimizes conflict in a relationship. Therefore, strong soulmate theorists who are in committed relationships may seem more accommodating in their approach to everyday relationship problems than weak soulmate theorists. However, although forgiveness is usually viewed as a positive act in a relationship and one that will likely strengthen a relationship (e.g., Fincham, Paleari, & Regalia, 2002), there are certainly times when forgiveness is unwise. Thus, future work should also consider potential costs of forgiveness in addition to the benefits. Eagerness to forgive by a soulmate theorist desperate to believe that his or her partner is the right person may lead that person to remain in an unhealthy relationship. An obvious example is an abusive relationship, but soulmate theorists may stay in non-abusive (yet not ideal) relationships because they have mistakenly convinced themselves that their partner is an ideal fit and have used forgiveness too liberally (McCullough, Pargament, & Thoresen, 2000).

Additionally, future work should examine the interplay of couple's theories in the forgiveness process. In the current paper, we focus on the role of individual differences in ITRs early in relationship development and do not directly postulate hypotheses regarding couple interactions. However, forgiveness in romantic relationships is an interpersonal process in which apologies, amends, relationship satisfaction, commitment and future goals all play a role. These processes may vary as a function of different combinations of relationship constructs between partners. We suggest that potential couple interactions are likely more relevant in longer relationships as individuals discover their partner's beliefs. In summary, future research is needed to investigate how relationship processes affect ITRs (and vice versa) over long periods of time and through significant relationship transitions (e.g., marriage). We hope this initial extension of implicit theories to understanding forgiveness in developing relationships fosters such explorations.

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