

# Unforgiving motivations among divorced parents: Moderation of contact intention and contact frequency

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## Abstract

This research tests the prediction that unforgiving motivations (feelings of revenge and distance) toward the ex-spouse are associated with less reported well-being of divorced parents and their children when the intent to maintain contact with the ex-partner is high rather than low. It is also predicted that unforgiving motivations are associated with more reported conflict with the ex-partner and subsequently with less reported well-being of their children when the actual contact frequency with the ex-partner is high rather than low. Results from an Internet sample of Dutch divorced parents ( $N = 108$ ) largely support these predictions. It is concluded that unforgiving motivations can have both intrapersonal and interpersonal negative effects for divorced parents, but only when contact is frequent or intended.

Even though people divorce for many different reasons (Amato & Previti, 2003), divorce is often accompanied with hurt feelings, anger, and conflict for which divorcing individuals hold their ex-partner to blame. Research suggests that more than half of divorced spouses end their relationships with continuing anger and conflict (Bonach & Sales, 2002). Even low-distress marriages that end in divorce are characterized by more anger and contempt and more negative behaviors, such as blaming, than their married counterparts (Lavner & Bradbury, 2012; see also Sbarra & Emery, 2005, for evidence on the break-up of dating relationships). Thus, feelings of anger, resentment, retaliation, and estrangement toward the ex-partner are common among divorced individuals, and although vengefulness may temporarily relieve one's own distress inflicted

by the ex-partner (Fitness & Peterson, 2008), it escalates rather than de-escalates the conflict, and this furthers rather than reverses relationship deterioration (Karremans, Van Lange, Ouwerkerk, & Kluwer, 2003; McCullough, Bellah, Kilpatrick, & Johnson, 2001). Furthermore, hostile and unforgiving feelings are likely to threaten one's well-being (Niaura et al., 2002; Worthington & Scherer, 2004). As such, the impact of unforgiving motivations is not restricted to the ex-partners as low parental well-being and parental conflict negatively affect child well-being after divorce (Amato & Keith, 1991).

Although not a panacea (see, e.g., McNulty, 2011), forgiveness can contribute to the quality of coparenting relationships (e.g., Bonach & Sales, 2002), and it has attracted the attention of divorce researchers in the past decade. Forgiveness is defined as a prosocial change that takes place within the individual who feels offended, hurt, or injured by another person (McCullough, Pargament, & Thoresen, 2000). Prior research has shown that the forgiveness of an ex-spouse is positively related to postdivorce adjustment, for example, in terms of mental health (Reed & Enright, 2006; Rohde-Brown & Rudestam, 2011; Rye, Folck,

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Heim, Olszewski, & Traina, 2004; Rye et al., 2005, 2012). It has also been found to be positively related to coparenting quality, for example, in terms of less parental conflict, better communication and mutual support (Bonach, 2008; Bonach & Sales, 2002), and parenting behaviors (Rye et al., 2012).

An interesting question is whether forgiveness among divorced partners is beneficial or whether unforgiveness is harmful under all circumstances. The literature on forgiveness generally claims that unforgiveness can have detrimental effects on an individual's psychological well-being (Coyle & Enright, 1997; Freedman & Enright, 1996; Hebl & Enright, 1993; Witvliet, Ludwig, & Vander Laan, 2001). However, research on ongoing relationships has shown that the negative effects of unforgiving motivations depend on relationship commitment. That is, unforgiving motivations have negative consequences for partners' well-being in highly committed relationships but much less in less committed relationships (Karremans et al., 2003; Kluwer & Karremans, 2009). The relationship between partners changes dramatically after divorce, yet divorced individuals might still feel the intention or obligation to maintain contact with their ex-partner, for example, because they share the responsibility for their children. Even though they are no longer partners, they always remain the parents of their children together. Do variations in such postdivorce bonds affect the association between unforgiving motivations toward the ex-partner and ex-partners' well-being and conflict? The current research aims to answer this question by investigating whether the intention to maintain contact and the actual frequency of contact with the ex-partner moderates associations between unforgiving motivations on the one hand and the self-reported well-being of divorced individuals, their reports of conflict with their ex-partner, and the well-being of their children on the other hand.

#### *Unforgiving motivations among divorced parents*

When individuals are severely offended by another person, typically, their immediate, self-interested reactions are characterized by

feelings of hurt and a motivation to avoid contact with the other and feelings of righteous anger and a motivation to seek revenge (McCullough et al., 1998). When people forgive, their thoughts, feelings, motivations, and behavior toward the other person become less negative and more positive—in other words, more benevolent (McCullough et al., 2000). Overcoming such unforgiving motivations toward the other requires a transformation of motivation (Kelley & Thibaut, 1978), which means foregoing immediate self-interested impulses and acting on broader long-term considerations, such as the continuation of the relationship. Relationship commitment is argued to be a major determinant of the transformation of motivation as it is defined as the intent to persist with the relationship (Rusbult, Martz, & Agnew, 1998). Indeed, previous research has provided good evidence that relationship commitment promotes forgiveness (Finkel, Rusbult, Kumashiro, & Hannon, 2002; McCullough, 2000; McCullough et al., 1998). Because letting go of the unforgiving motivations serves a committed individual's goal of continuing the relationship, highly committed individuals also gain more from reducing their revenge and avoidance responses than weakly committed individuals in terms of their well-being. The failure to forgive a partner in a relationship of strong commitment creates psychological tension, which in turn is negatively associated with psychological well-being (Karremans et al., 2003). Forgiving reduces this tension and is therefore beneficial for psychological well-being. Karremans and colleagues (2003) showed that unforgiving motivations did not result in psychological tension when commitment was low.

Could this rationale be applied to the effects of unforgiving motivations on divorced partners? One might argue that divorced partners are no longer committed to the relationship with their ex-partner and should therefore not suffer from unforgiving motivations. Indeed, Kluwer and Karremans (2009) found that unforgiving motivations were not related to well-being when the transgression under study (i.e., infidelity) was committed by an ex-partner. They assumed that ex-partners were not committed to each other (Arriaga &

Agnew, 2001; Koenig Kellas, Bean, Cunningham, & Cheng, 2008). However, even though ex-partners have given up their long-term orientation, they might still feel the intent or obligation to maintain contact. Fischer, De Graaf, and Kalmijn (2005) report that even 10 years after their separation, almost 50% of the Dutch divorced couples in their sample had some kind of contact with their former spouse. Children generally require incidental or regular contact between ex-partners, whether they want it or not. Other reasons to maintain contact are that ex-partners still feel attached to their former partner or have liberal family values (i.e., they believe that former spouses should still maintain contact; Fischer et al., 2005). Kluwer and Karremans (2009) did not include contact with the ex-partner and did not control for whether ex-partners had children together, so it might be that variations in the intent to maintain contact with the ex-partner affect the association between unforgiving motivations and well-being. Unforgiving motivations are inconsistent with the goal of maintaining contact with the ex-partner, even if this contact is merely because of the children, and this will likely result in psychological tension and obstruct prorelationship motivation and behavior (cf. Karremans et al., 2003).

Prior research on the moderating role of commitment has focused primarily on these intrapersonal effects of forgiveness in terms of psychological and physical well-being (Karremans et al., 2003; Kluwer & Karremans, 2009; see also Karremans & Van Lange, 2008). However, forgiveness also has interpersonal effects in terms of smoother interactions between the forgiver and offender (for a review, see Karremans & Van Lange, 2008). At the interpersonal level, unforgiving motivations toward the ex-partner in combination with actually maintaining frequent contact with the ex-partner are likely to result in increased conflict with the ex-partner. Contact with the ex-partner can stall the emotional adjustment process and reactivate negative emotions (Sbarra & Emery, 2005). When contact is frequent, feelings of distance or revenge are likely to obstruct constructive interactions, resulting in more frequent conflict. Indeed,

Fischer and colleagues (2005) showed that former spouses with joint children had contact quite frequently but that this resulted in antagonistic contact (i.e., verbal harassment, unwelcome contact, aggressive behavior, manipulation) more often than was the case for childless couples who separated. Accordingly, the failure to forgive the ex-partner in combination with wanting or actually having to maintain contact with the ex-partner is expected to result in lowered psychological well-being and increased conflict with the ex-partner.

### *Child well-being*

The negative effects of unforgiving motivations in combination with intending or maintaining contact with the ex-partner might also affect the well-being of joint children. First, continuing conflict, hostility, and a lack of cooperation between divorced parents is a strong and consistent predictor of negative outcomes for children from divorced families (see Amato, 2010). In addition, parental psychological well-being is associated with child outcomes (Anthony et al., 2005). For example, low levels of maternal well-being are related to behavioral problems in children (Carlson & Corcoran, 2001; Lovejoy, Graczyk, O'Hare, & Neuman, 2000), and parental stress and psychological distress lead to less supportive and less sensitive parenting practices, which has a negative effect on child development (Crnic & Low, 2002; Yeung, Linver, & Brooks-Gunn, 2002). As argued previously, unforgiving motivations toward an ex-partner are related to both parental well-being (e.g., Rye et al., 2004) and parental conflict (e.g., Bonach & Sales, 2002). Therefore, unforgiving motivations are expected to be negatively related to the reported well-being of their children through parental well-being and parental conflict (i.e., mediation effects). Based on the expected moderation effects in the previous section, it is further assumed that the combination of unforgiving motivations and a strong intent to maintain contact with the ex-partner negatively affects parental well-being, which is subsequently related to lower reported well-being of children. It is also

assumed that the combination of unforgiving motivations and a high frequency of contact with the ex-partner produces parental conflict, which is subsequently related to lower reported well-being of children.

### *The present research*

The main purpose of this research was to test the following hypotheses:

- H1: *Unforgiving motivations toward the ex-partner are related to lower parental well-being when the intention to maintain contact with the ex-partner is strong rather than weak (i.e., moderation by intent to maintain contact).*
- H2: *Unforgiving motivations are related to more conflict with the ex-partner when the frequency of contact with the ex-partner is high rather than low (i.e., moderation by contact frequency).*
- H3: *Unforgiving motivations are negatively related to the well-being of ex-partners and subsequently the well-being of their children but primarily when the intent to maintain contact with the ex-partner is strong rather than weak (i.e., a moderated mediation effect).*
- H4: *Unforgiving motivations are positively related to conflict between ex-partners, and subsequently the well-being of their children, but primarily when the frequency of contact with the ex-partner is high rather than low (i.e., a moderated mediation effect).*

The focus of the current research is on unforgiving motivations (i.e., feelings of revenge and feelings of distance), rather than feelings of benevolence, as these are expected to have the strongest negative associations with well-being and conflict after divorce. Negative events, emotions, and behaviors generally have more impact than positive ones—called the bad-is-stronger-than-good phenomenon—and this also applies to interpersonal relationships (Baumeister, Bratslavsky, Finkenauer, & Vohs, 2001). Indeed, prior research has shown that a relative lack of forgiveness was associated

with reduced levels of well-being and behavioral responses (e.g., Karremans et al., 2003; Kluwer & Karremans, 2009), and forgiveness seems to primarily involve “letting go of the negative” instead of “embracing the positive” (Pargament, McCullough, & Thoresen, 2000, p. 300). This might pertain especially to relationships between ex-partners as they are generally focused more on the other’s negative qualities and make more negative attributions and attributions of blame than positive ones (Bonach, 2007; Bonach & Sales, 2002; Bradbury & Fincham, 1990). Indeed, Rye and colleagues (2004) showed that the forgiveness subscale “Absence of negative thoughts, feelings and behaviors” was related to better mental health, whereas the forgiveness subscale “Presence of positive thoughts, feelings and behaviors” was not.

## **Method**

### *Participants and procedure*

A survey was conducted on the Internet among Dutch divorced or divorcing individuals. To recruit participants, we posted several announcements on the Internet. The announcement contained the following text: “Did you divorce in the last 5 years? If so, participate in this scientific study on contact between ex-partners and fill in the online questionnaire.” Participants could then click on a link to the online questionnaire. Participants responded to announcements posted on 15 Dutch Internet sites. Sites varied from sites with information about divorce, general sites for parents, and sites about relationships to magazine sites.

A total of 150 participants (39 men and 111 women) filled in the questionnaire; 108 participants (72%) had children with their ex-partner. For the purpose of this study, we conducted our analyses on the sample of these 108 participants with children (25 fathers and 83 mothers). Their mean age was 41.97 years ( $SD = 8.17$ ). They had divorced on average 2.81 years ago ( $SD = 2.79$ ) after having been married for 12.86 years on average ( $SD = 8.31$ ). Of the participants, 2.8% had completed lower vocational education or less, 46.3% had completed high school

or secondary vocational education, 50.9% had completed higher vocational education or university, and 84.3% had a paid job. On average, participants had 1.45 children with an average age of 11.49 ( $SD = 7.01$ ) with their ex-partner (range = 1–6,  $SD = 1.19$ ). The children were living with the participant 4.77 days per week on average (range = 0–7,  $SD = 2.43$ ). Participants who had children with their ex-partner had significantly more frequent contact with their ex-partner,  $M = 2.91$ ,  $SD = 1.30$ , than participants without children,  $M = 2.10$ ,  $SD = 1.01$ ,  $t(148) = 3.63$ ,  $p < .001$ , but the groups did not differ from each other on intent to maintain contact, revenge and distance motivations, frequency of conflict, or positive and negative affect,  $ts < 1.90$ ,  $ns$ . A total of 42% of the participants in the final sample had a relationship with a new partner.

### Instruments

#### *Unforgiving motivations*

An eight-item Dutch translation of the Transgression-Related Interpersonal Motivations (TRIM) inventory (McCullough et al., 1998; e.g., Karremans et al., 2003; Kluwer & Karremans, 2009) was used to measure feelings of revenge (four items) and distance (four items).<sup>1</sup> Participants were asked what their current thoughts and feelings were toward their ex-partner. Examples of the items are “I want my ex-partner to get what (s)he deserves” (tapping revenge motivations;  $\alpha = .96$ ) and “I want to distance myself from my ex-partner as much as possible” (tapping distance motivations;  $\alpha = .90$ ; 1 = *totally disagree* to 5 = *totally agree*). Higher mean scores indicate higher levels of unforgiving motivations.

#### *Intent to maintain contact*

Intent to maintain contact with the ex-partner was assessed with an adapted version of the

“intent to persist” subscale of the commitment measure developed by Arriaga and Agnew (2001). Intent to maintain contact was measured with four items: “I would like to retain the contact with my ex-partner,” “I intend to continue the contact with my ex-partner,” “I would like to maintain the contact with my ex-partner,” and “I am inclined to keep in touch with my ex-partner” ( $\alpha = .95$ ; 1 = *totally disagree* to 5 = *totally agree*). Higher mean scores indicate greater intent to maintain contact with the ex-partner.

#### *Contact frequency*

The frequency of contact with the ex-partner was measured with three questions: “How often do you talk to your ex-partner face-to-face?” “How often do you talk to your ex-partner on the phone?” and “How often do you have contact with your ex-partner in writing (e.g., by e-mail)?” (1 = *never*, 2 = *less than once a month*, 3 = *once a month*, 4 = *several times a month*, 5 = *several times a week*),  $\alpha = .80$ . Higher mean scores indicate a higher frequency of contact with the ex-partner.

#### *Positive and negative affect*

Following prior research (Karremans et al., 2003; Kluwer & Karremans, 2009), the well-being of ex-partners was operationalized as self-reported positive and negative affect. Current positive and negative affect were assessed with the Positive and Negative Affect Scale (PANAS; Watson, Clark, & Tellegen, 1988). Using 5-point scales (1 = *not at all* to 5 = *very much so*), participants were asked to describe how they felt at that moment. Participants rated 10 items for positive affect (e.g., happy, relaxed, content;  $\alpha = .91$ ) and 10 items for negative affect (e.g., angry, jealous, sad;  $\alpha = .93$ ). Higher mean scores indicate more positive and negative affect.

#### *Conflict with ex-partner*

Conflict with the ex-partner was measured with a one-item measure: “My ex-partner and I often fight” (1 = *totally disagree* to 5 = *totally agree*). The Dutch translation of this item used the word *ruzie*, which is a common and general

1. The questionnaire also included four items measuring feelings of benevolence (e.g., “Despite what my ex-partner has done to me, I would like that we have positive contact again”;  $\alpha = .86$ ). However, due to the focus on unforgiving motivations and because of the potential overlap with the intent to maintain contact variable, this variable was not included in the analyses. The analyses are available upon request.

**Table 1.** Means, standard deviations, and bivariate correlations

	Intent to maintain contact	Contact frequency	Revenge	Distance	Negative affect	Positive affect	Conflict with ex-partner	Child well-being
Contact frequency	.60***							
Revenge	-.48***	-.24*						
Distance	-.77***	-.59***	.59***					
Negative affect	-.22*	.05	.43***	.27**				
Positive affect	.22*	.02	-.34***	-.24*	-.59***			
Conflict with ex-partner	-.16	-.05	.27**	.26**	.45***	-.27**		
Child well-being	-.03	-.07	-.12	-.03	-.37***	.22*	-.41***	
<i>M</i>	3.20	2.91	2.17	3.03	2.00	3.23	2.34	3.93
<i>SD</i>	1.18	1.30	1.20	1.25	0.86	0.94	1.24	0.71

Note. All variables were measured on a 5-point scale.

\* $p < .05$ . \*\* $p < .01$ . \*\*\* $p < .001$ . (two-tailed).

word used for having a fight, a conflict, a disagreement, or an argument. The term *conflict*, which is the same in Dutch, was not used as it a less common term to use in Dutch and tends to evoke the representation of heavy, intense, and escalated conflict (see also Kluwer & Johnson, 2007).

#### Child well-being

The questionnaire included 11 items that assess problematic child behavior based on the sources of support and strain inventory (Jansma & Klugkist, 1996). Parents were asked to rate how often their child(ren) showed the listed behaviors (1 = *never* to 5 = *very often*). Examples are “not doing well in school,” “having problems with other children (pestering, fighting),” “being unhappy, sad, in tears,” “lying and cheating,” and “anxious, nervous, or fearful” ( $\alpha = .90$ ). The items were reversed so that higher scores indicate more child well-being (less problematic behavior).

#### Control variables

Several descriptive variables that correlated with one or more key variables in the study, namely, the time since divorce, the number of children, the age of the children, and the quality of the relationship with the child(ren), were included as control variables. One item assessed the quality of the relationship with the child(ren) (1 = *very bad* to 5 = *very good*). Participants with a new partner did not differ

from those without a new partner on any of the variables under study,  $t_s < 1.70$ , *ns*. In addition, men and women did not differ on any of the variables under study,  $t_s < 1.70$ , *ns*. Finally, the number of days that the child(ren) lived with the participant did not correlate with any of the variables under study,  $r_s < \pm .16$ , *ns*. Therefore, these variables were not entered as control variables. Correlational analyses with the control variables are available upon request.

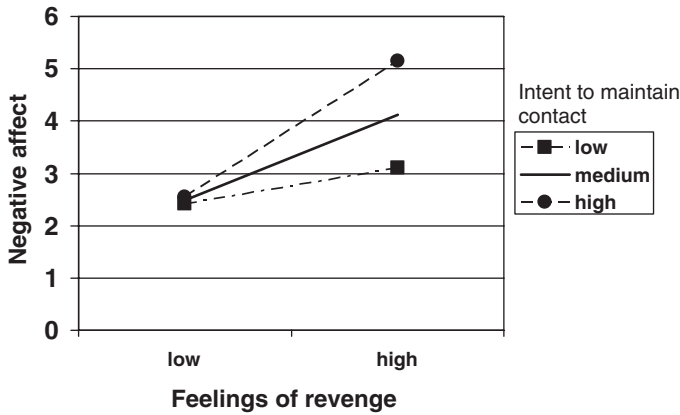
## Results

### Descriptive analyses

The means, standard deviations, and correlations between all study variables are reported in Table 1. On average, participants had contact with their ex-partner almost once a month and reported an above mid-scale intent to maintain contact. Participants were asked what the main reason was for the divorce, and about one third (31%) mentioned a transgression such as infidelity, abuse, or addiction; 26% mentioned growing apart, boredom, or own infidelity; 30% mentioned having too much conflict or communication problems; and 13% mentioned something else (often a transgression of the ex-partner).

### Moderation by intent to maintain contact

H1 was that unforgiving motivations toward the ex-partner are related to lower parental



**Figure 1.** Interaction of revenge motivations with intent to maintain contact on negative affect.

well-being when the intention to maintain contact with the ex-partner is strong rather than weak (i.e., moderation by intent to maintain contact). The moderation was tested for the regression of feelings of revenge and distance on negative and positive affect.

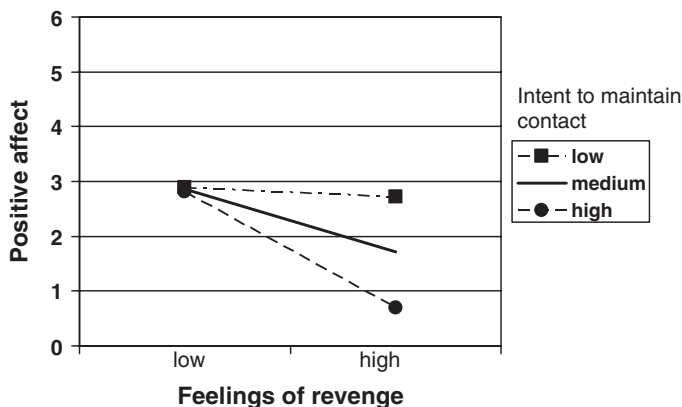
#### *Revenge and negative affect*

Following recommendations by Aiken and West (1991), a hierarchical regression analysis was conducted for negative affect in which revenge motivations and intent to maintain contact (all standardized) were entered in Step 1, and the two-way interaction of intent to maintain contact by revenge motivations were entered in Step 2. It controlled for the time since divorce, contact frequency with the ex-partner, the number of children, the age of the children, and the quality of the relationship with the child(ren). The regression model was significant,  $F(8, 102) = 4.12$ ,  $p < .001$ ,  $R^2 = .26$ . The significant main effect of revenge motivations,  $\beta = .41$ ,  $t = 3.66$ ,  $p < .001$ , showed that more reported revenge motivations were related to more reported negative affect. The main effect of intent to maintain contact,  $\beta = -.16$ ,  $t = 1.32$ , was not significant. As predicted, the two-way interaction of intent to maintain contact by revenge motivations accounted for a unique variance in negative affect,  $\beta = .23$ ,  $t = 2.49$ ,  $p = .014$ . None of the control variables had significant effects. Figure 1 presents the regression lines of revenge motivations on negative affect

for three levels of intent to maintain contact. The simple slopes were significant for high,  $b = .64$ ,  $t = 4.42$ ,  $p < .001$ , and medium,  $b = .41$ ,  $t = 4.09$ ,  $p < .001$ , levels of intent to maintain contact, but not for low,  $b = .18$ ,  $t = 1.56$ ,  $ns$ , levels of intent to maintain contact. Thus, in support of H1, the association between revenge motivations and negative affect was more pronounced when the intent to maintain contact with the ex-spouse was strong rather than weak.

#### *Revenge and positive affect*

The same regression analysis was then conducted for positive affect,  $F(8, 102) = 3.72$ ,  $p = .001$ ,  $R^2 = .24$ . The significant main effect of revenge motivations,  $\beta = -.29$ ,  $t = 2.53$ ,  $p = .013$ , showed that more reported revenge motivations were related to less reported positive affect. The control variable amount of contact with the ex-partner had a significant negative effect,  $\beta = -.26$ ,  $t = 2.04$ ,  $p = .044$ . More reported contact was related to less reported positive affect. As predicted, the two-way interaction of intent to maintain contact by revenge motivations accounted for a unique variance in positive affect,  $\beta = -.25$ ,  $t = 2.61$ ,  $p = .011$ . Figure 2 presents the regression lines of revenge motivations on negative affect for three levels of intent to maintain contact. The simple slopes were significant for high,  $b = -.53$ ,  $t = 3.50$ ,  $p < .001$ , and medium,  $b = -.29$ ,  $t = 2.73$ ,  $p < .001$ , levels of intent to maintain contact, but not for low,  $b = -.04$ ,



**Figure 2.** Interaction of revenge motivations with intent to maintain contact on positive affect.

$t=0.33$ , *ns*, levels of intent to maintain contact. Thus, in support of H1, the association between revenge motivations and positive affect was more pronounced when the intent to maintain contact with the ex-spouse was strong rather than weak.

#### *Distance and negative affect*

The same analysis was conducted with feelings of distance as an independent variable,  $F(8, 102) = 2.25$ ,  $p = .03$ ,  $R^2 = .16$ . This analysis did not provide evidence for the moderation of intent to maintain contact on the association between feelings of distance and negative affect,  $\beta = .00$ ,  $p = .99$ .

#### *Distance and positive affect*

The analysis with feelings of distance as an independent variable,  $F(8, 102) = 2.49$ ,  $p = .017$ ,  $R^2 = .18$ , did not reveal evidence for the moderation of intent to maintain contact on the association between feelings of distance and positive affect,  $\beta = -.09$ ,  $p = .38$ .

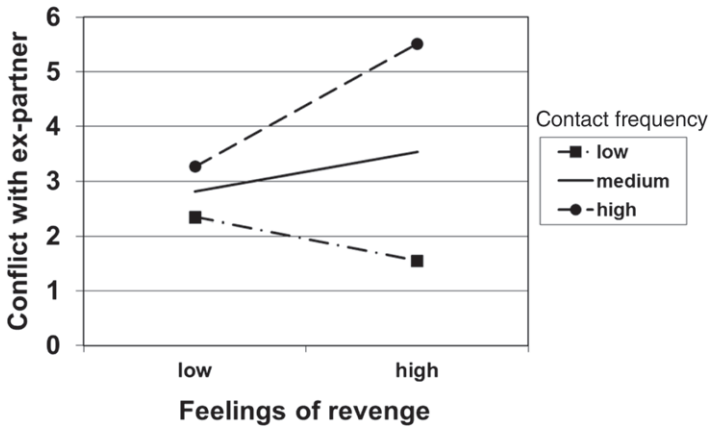
#### *Moderation by contact frequency*

H2 was that unforgiving motivations are related to more conflict with the ex-partner when the frequency of contact with the ex-partner is high rather than low (i.e., moderation by contact frequency). The moderation was tested for the regression of feelings of revenge and distance on self-reported conflict with the ex-partner.

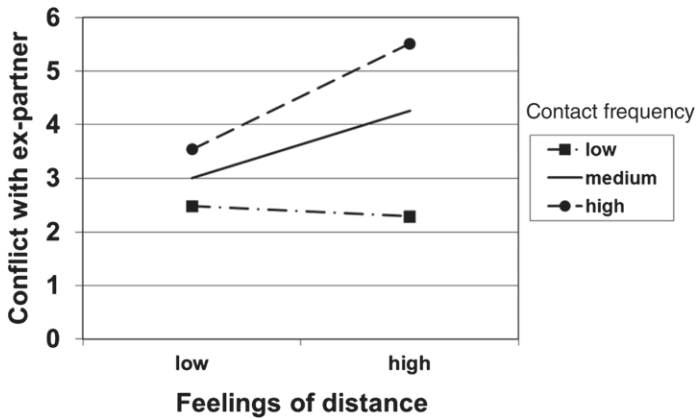
#### *Revenge and conflict with ex-partner*

A regression analysis was conducted for conflict with the ex-partner, with revenge motivations, contact frequency, and the interaction of contact frequency with revenge motivations as independent variables. It controlled for the time since divorce, the intent to maintain contact with the ex-partner, the number of children, the age of the children, and the quality of the relationship with the child(ren). The regression model was significant,  $F(8, 96) = 4.24$ ,  $p = .001$ ,  $R^2 = .28$ . The main effect of revenge motivations was only marginally significant,  $\beta = .18$ ,  $t = 1.68$ ,  $p = .097$ . The control variable quality of the relationship with the child(ren) had a significant negative effect,  $\beta = -.27$ ,  $t = 2.80$ ,  $p = .006$ . A better reported quality was related to less reported conflict with the ex-partner. As predicted, the two-way interaction of contact frequency by revenge motivations accounted for unique variance in conflict with the ex-partner,  $\beta = .38$ ,  $t = 3.98$ ,  $p = .001$ . Figure 3 presents the regression lines of revenge motivations on conflict for three levels of contact frequency. The simple slopes were significant for high contact frequency,  $b = .56$ ,  $t = 2.78$ ,  $p = .007$ , but not for medium,  $b = .18$ ,  $t = 1.23$ , *ns*, or low,  $b = -.20$ ,  $t = 1.03$ , *ns*, contact frequency. Thus, in support of H2, the positive association between revenge motivations and conflict with the ex-partner was more pronounced when contact frequency was high rather than low.





**Figure 3.** Interaction of revenge motivations with contact frequency on conflict with the ex-partner.



**Figure 4.** Interaction of distance motivations with contact frequency on conflict with the ex-partner.

#### *Distance and conflict with ex-partner*

A regression analysis was then conducted for distance as the independent variable and the same control variables,  $F(8, 96) = 4.32$ ,  $p = .001$ ,  $R^2 = .28$ . The main effect of distance motivations was significant,  $\beta = .31$ ,  $t = 2.03$ ,  $p = .045$ , showing that more distance motivations were related to more reported conflict. The control variable quality of the relationship with the child(ren) was again significant,  $\beta = -.25$ ,  $t = -2.67$ ,  $p = .009$ . The two-way interaction between contact frequency and distance motivations accounted for unique variance in conflict with the ex-partner,  $\beta = .36$ ,  $t = 3.62$ ,  $p = .001$ . Figure 4

presents the regression lines of distance motivations on conflict for three levels of contact frequency. As expected, the simple slopes were significant and positive for high contact frequency,  $b = .67$ ,  $t = 2.97$ ,  $p = .004$ , and not significant for medium,  $b = .31$ ,  $t = 1.60$ , *ns*, or low,  $b = -.05$ ,  $t = -0.19$ , *ns*, contact frequency. Thus, in support of H2, the positive association between distance motivations and conflict with the ex-partner was more pronounced when contact frequency was high rather than low.

#### *Parental affect and child well-being*

H3 was that unforgiving motivations are negatively related to the reported well-being of their

children via the well-being of ex-partners but primarily when the intent to maintain contact with the ex-partner is strong rather than weak (i.e., a moderated mediation effect). The moderated mediation was tested for the revenge models that were found significant in the prior section.

First, the indirect effect of revenge motivations on reported child well-being via negative affect was tested with no moderator in the model, using the SPSS macro SOBEL discussed in Preacher and Hayes (2004). The indirect effect was significant with a bootstrapped confidence interval, 95% CI [-.1744, -.0378], with 5,000 resamples and a Sobel  $z = -2.9691$ ,  $p = .003$ . As expected, revenge motivations were positively related to negative affect (the mediator),  $b = .30$ ,  $SE = .06$ ,  $t = 4.83$ ,  $p < .001$ , and negative affect was negatively related to child well-being,  $b = -.32$ ,  $SE = .08$ ,  $t = -3.84$ ,  $p < .01$ . The moderated mediation hypothesis was then tested by using the SPSS macro MODMED of Hayes (2013), as discussed in Preacher, Rucker, and Hayes (2007). Child well-being was significantly predicted by negative affect,  $b = -.28$ ,  $SE = .08$ ,  $p < .001$ ; by revenge motivations,  $b = .28$ ,  $SE = .13$ ,  $p = .027$ ; and by the interaction between revenge motivations and intent to maintain contact (Independent Variable  $\times$  Moderator,  $b = -.10$ ,  $SE = .04$ ,  $p = .019$ ). The main effect of intent to maintain contact,  $b = .16$ ,  $SE = .11$ ,  $p = .14$ , was not significant. The significant interaction effect supported the assumption of moderated mediation (Hayes, 2013). In support of H3, negative affect mediated the effect of revenge motivations on child well-being at high (+1 *SD*), Sobel  $z = -2.6582$ ,  $p = .008$ , and mean (*M*), Sobel  $z = -2.7021$ ,  $p = .007$ , levels of intent to maintain contact, but not when intent to maintain contact was low (-1 *SD*), Sobel  $z = -1.9158$ ,  $p = .06$ .

The indirect effect of revenge motivations on child well-being via positive affect was not significant, Sobel  $z = -1.7330$ ,  $p = .08$ . Because a significant unconditional indirect effect does not constitute a prerequisite for testing conditional indirect effects (Preacher et al., 2007), moderated mediation was tested. Although this analysis revealed a significant interaction between revenge motivations and

intent to maintain contact,  $b = -.11$ ,  $SE = .04$ ,  $p = .01$ , the indirect effects of revenge motivations on child well-being via positive affect did not reach significance at high (+1 *SD*), Sobel  $z = -.9607$ ,  $p = .34$ ; mean (*M*), Sobel  $z = -1.5186$ ,  $p = .13$ ; or low (-1 *SD*), Sobel  $z = -1.5483$ ,  $p = .12$ , levels of intent to maintain contact.

#### *Parental conflict and child well-being*

H4 was that unforgiving motivations are negatively related to the reported well-being of their children via conflict between ex-partners but primarily when the frequency of contact with the ex-partner is high rather than low (i.e., a moderated mediation effect). The moderated mediation was tested for the revenge and distance models that were found significant in the prior section.

The indirect effect of revenge motivations on reported child well-being via conflict with the ex-partner was significant with a bootstrapped confidence interval, 95% CI [-.1523, -.0093], with 5,000 resamples and a Sobel  $z = -2.2090$ ,  $p = .027$ . As expected, revenge motivations were positively related to conflict (the mediator),  $b = .29$ ,  $SE = .11$ ,  $t = 2.71$ ,  $p = .008$ , and conflict was negatively related to reported child well-being,  $b = -.22$ ,  $SE = .05$ ,  $t = -4.05$ ,  $p < .001$ . The moderated mediation hypothesis was then tested as described previously. Child well-being was significantly predicted by conflict,  $b = -.24$ ,  $SE = .06$ ,  $p < .001$  but not by revenge motivations,  $b = -.13$ ,  $SE = .15$ ,  $p = .37$ . In addition, the interaction between revenge motivations and contact frequency (Independent Variable  $\times$  Moderator) was not significant,  $b = .04$ ,  $SE = .05$ ,  $p = .43$ , even though the conditional indirect effects were as expected, with significant indirect effects of revenge motivations on child well-being via conflict at high (+1 *SD*), Sobel  $z = -2.9543$ ,  $p = .003$ , and mean (*M*), Sobel  $z = -2.5456$ ,  $p = .01$ , but not at low (-1 *SD*), Sobel  $z = -0.05$ ,  $p = .96$ , levels of contact frequency.

The indirect effect of distance motivations on reported child well-being via conflict with the ex-partner was significant with a bootstrapped confidence interval, 95% CI

$[-.1278, -.0128]$ , with 5,000 resamples and a Sobel  $z = -2.2140$ ,  $p = .027$ . As expected, distance motivations were positively related to conflict (the mediator),  $b = .27$ ,  $SE = .10$ ,  $t = 2.67$ ,  $p = .009$ , and conflict was negatively related to reported child well-being,  $b = -.23$ ,  $SE = .05$ ,  $t = -4.22$ ,  $p < .001$ . The moderated mediation hypothesis was then tested as described previously. Child well-being was significantly predicted by conflict,  $b = -.21$ ,  $SE = .06$ ,  $p < .001$ , but not by distance motivations,  $b = .16$ ,  $SE = .15$ ,  $p = .29$ . In addition, the interaction between revenge motivations and contact frequency (Independent Variable  $\times$  Moderator) was not significant,  $b = -.05$ ,  $SE = .05$ ,  $p = .29$ , even though the conditional indirect effects were again as expected, with significant indirect effects of distance motivations on child well-being via conflict at high (+1 *SD*), Sobel  $z = -2.7929$ ,  $p = .005$ , and mean (*M*), Sobel  $z = -2.3310$ ,  $p = .02$ , but not at low (-1 *SD*), Sobel  $z = -0.0319$ ,  $p = .97$ , levels of contact frequency.

## Discussion

Divorce rates in both North America and Europe have been high for the past decade (Amato, 2010; Centraal Bureau voor de Statistiek, 2013; Cherlin, 2010; González & Viitanen, 2009; U.S. Bureau of the Census, 2011). There is strong empirical support for the notion that divorce negatively affects the mental and physical well-being of ex-partners and their children (for reviews, see Amato, 2000, 2010). These negative effects are largely due to conflict and hostility between the ex-partners (Amato, 2000). The major purpose of the present research was to illuminate our understanding of whether and when unforgiving motivations toward the ex-partner are associated with parental conflict and the reported well-being of divorced parents and their children. Building on forgiveness research and using principles of interdependence theory, it was argued that the negative effects of unforgiving motivations are more pronounced when ex-partners intend to maintain contact or actually have frequent contact.

As predicted, and consistent with previous research (Karremans et al., 2003), this research revealed that unforgiving motivations toward the ex-partner were associated with less positive affect and more negative affect when the intent to maintain contact was strong rather than weak. These findings are in line with the growing evidence that the lack of forgiveness is associated with decreased psychological well-being, but only or primarily in relationships of strong commitment (Karremans et al., 2003). The present research extends earlier work by showing that even in the case of ex-partner relationships, unforgiving motivations are related to decreased positive affect and increased negative affect when the intent to maintain contact with the ex-partner is high as opposed to low. The findings suggest that conflicting cognitions and emotions with regard to the ex-partner are related to the well-being of divorced individuals and underscore the importance of taking into account relationship-specific cognitions and motivations for understanding the effects of unforgiving motivations after a divorce.

Apart from the intrapersonal effects of unforgiving motivations on well-being, this study also showed evidence for interpersonal effects on conflict with the ex-partner. Unforgiving motivations toward the ex-partner were associated with more reported conflict with the ex-partner when the actual contact frequency was high rather than low. Frequent contact with the ex-partner while bearing a grudge is likely to activate negative emotions and behavior toward the ex-partner, resulting in more frequent conflict (cf. Fischer et al., 2005; Sbarra & Emery, 2005). Together, the findings of the current study qualify earlier work that showed evidence for the positive effects of forgiveness of an ex-spouse on post-divorce adjustment (Reed & Enright, 2006; Rohde-Brown & Rudestam, 2011; Rye et al., 2004; Rye et al., 2005; 2012) and coparenting quality (Bonach, 2008; Bonach & Sales, 2002) and prior evidence that unforgiveness regarding the infidelity of an ex-partner was not related to well-being (Kluwer & Karremans, 2009). That is, the current work suggests that the negative effects of unforgiving motivations regarding the ex-partner occur only or

primarily in combination with a high contact intention or frequency. Thus, an important implication is that research should include measures of contact intention and frequency when studying the effects of (un)forgiveness among divorced individuals.

An additional aim of this research was to investigate the potential interactive effects of unforgiving motivations and contact intentions and frequency via parental well-being and conflict on parental reports of child well-being. As predicted, negative affect mediated the negative association between unforgiving motivations and child well-being as reported by the parent at high and mean levels of intent to maintain contact, but not when intent to maintain contact was low. This suggests that the negative consequences of divorced parents' unforgiving motivations for the well-being of children vary as a function of the parents' intent to maintain contact. Unforgiving motivations are more harmful for child well-being when the intent to maintain contact is high due to inconsistent motivations and subsequent lower parental well-being. Furthermore, the data showed that parental conflict mediated the negative association between unforgiving motivations and child well-being. That is, unforgiving motivations were related to more reported parental conflict, which subsequently was related to lower parental reports of child well-being. These results are in line with studies that showed that forgiveness is positively related to parental mental health and coparenting quality (Bonach, 2008; Bonach & Sales, 2002; Rye et al., 2012). They also support research that has identified parental well-being and parental conflict as consistent predictors of negative outcomes for children from divorced families (Amato, 2010; Carlson & Corcoran, 2001; Crnic & Low, 2002; Lovejoy et al., 2000; Yeung et al., 2002). The current research adds to prior research by linking parents' unforgiving motivations to child well-being via parental well-being and parental conflict.

The mediation effect of parental conflict occurred regardless of contact frequency. Even though the pattern of results was in the expected direction, with indirect effects of unforgiving motivations on child well-being

via conflict at high and mean but not at low levels of contact frequency, the expected interaction effect did not become significant. Because the interaction effect was significant for the moderation of intent to maintain contact, this might not be due to a power problem. It might rather indicate that the mediation effect of parental conflict overrules the moderation of contact frequency given the strong impact of parental conflict on child well-being in general (e.g., Amato, 2010). More research is needed to further investigate the moderating effects of contact frequency.

It should be noted that child well-being was measured as perceived by the parent, and the perceptions of the parent might not necessarily agree with the perceptions of the child. In general, the reports of parents and their children tend to agree about observable behaviors, such as fighting and temper tantrums, but less on covert behaviors, such as stealing, lying, fears, and anxiety (Waters, Stewart-Brown, & Fitzpatrick, 2003). Children tend to report experiencing more covert problematic behaviors and feelings than their parents report about them. This would suggest that the effects might even be stronger when child reports would have been obtained. Future research should ideally include children's reports of their own well-being and of parental conflict as children might not always be aware of the conflicts between their divorced parents. In addition, nonresidential parents may be less accurate in their perceptions of their children's behavior and feelings than residential parents simply because they see their children less often. Nevertheless, the number of days that the child(ren) lived with the participant did not correlate with any of the variables under study.

Although the results are in line with research on ongoing relationships, ex-partners are likely to be motivated to forgive by different considerations than partners in intact relationships. That is, divorced parents might forego their immediate self-interested impulses and act on broader long-term considerations, such as self-healing and self-protection (Sbarra, Smith, & Mehl, 2012; Strelan, McKee, Calic, Cook, & Shaw, 2013), or in the interest of their child(ren) (see also Bonach, 2007). Divorced parents will be less motivated to forgive in

the interest of the relationship, namely, to reconcile with their ex-partner, than partners in ongoing relationships. In addition, and partly because of the foregoing, forgiveness of an ex-partner might depend more on deliberative cognitive processes instead of automatic processes that occur in ongoing close relationships. Karremans and Aarts (2007) found that inclinations to forgive appeared to be a more effortful process when the offender was a nonclose than when the offender was a close other (i.e., partner, close friend, family member). This concurs with Bonach (2008) who found that the cognitive dimension of forgiveness had the most significant contribution to the coparenting quality of ex-partners. Bonach (2007) further acknowledges that the best interests of the child(ren) may serve as a powerful motivator for this process.

#### *Limitations and directions for future research*

Some limitations might qualify the results of this research. First, the sampling method might have caused self-selection bias. For example, less educated participants were underrepresented in the sample. In addition, the imbalanced gender ratio in this study (77% female) adds to the difficulty of interpreting the generalizability of the results. In general, women tend to be more willing to participate in survey research, and this might especially be the case when the subject of research is the (ex-)partner relationship and children (see also Kluwer & Karremans, 2009). There is some evidence that divorced women are characterized by more unresolved feelings of anger and blame associated with their divorce than divorced men, even several years after the divorce (Dreman & Aldor, 1994). Thus, the generalizability of our findings should be carefully considered. Second, the correlational design of this study prevents from drawing conclusions about causal links or feedback loops among unforgiving motivations, affect, conflict, and child well-being. In addition, the findings are all based on self-reports by the parent, which might have caused common method variance or bias. Related to this, conflict between the ex-partners was measured with a one-item measure. Even though

single-item measures to assess interparental conflict frequency are not uncommon (see also Tschann, Flores, Pasch, & Marin, 1999; Tschann et al., 2002), parental conflict is a multidimensional construct that includes not only frequency but also content, intensity, behavior, child involvement, and resolution (Tschann et al., 1999). Future research should include such multidimensional measurements of conflict.

One might argue that the results can be explained by a negativity effect: Divorced parents who are in a bad relationship with their ex-partner experience negative emotions and higher levels of unforgiving motivations. However, these parents should then also have negative scores on intent to maintain contact, which was not the case. In fact, the lowest score on positive affect and the highest score on negative affect was among unforgiving parents with a strong intent to maintain contact. Furthermore, the correlations between the (un)forgiveness constructs (revenge and distance) and affect (positive, negative) ranged from weak to moderate. Indeed, the TRIM was found to be a reliable and valid measure for assessing (un)forgiveness through self-report, with subscales showing discriminant validity through small correlations with positive affectivity, negative affectivity, and social desirability (e.g., McCullough et al., 1998). This suggests that (un)forgiveness is different, conceptually and empirically, from general affect.

Apart from this, it cannot be ruled out that third variables, such as personality factors, have affected the results. For example, several studies demonstrate that people who are high in emotional stability score higher on dispositional measures of forgiveness than less emotionally stable people (Berry, Worthington, Parrott, O'Connor, & Wade, 2001; McCullough & Hoyt, 2002). Fischer and colleagues (2005) found that having a neurotic personality increased the probability of having contact with the ex-partner, especially that of antagonistic contact. Future research should rule out that personality factors can explain or strengthen the moderating role of intent to maintain contact and contact frequency. Finally, it should be noted that only positive and negative affect were measured as opposed

to obtaining extensive information on overall psychological health. Additional research is needed to verify these findings using samples representative of the divorced population as a whole and using more comprehensive measures of parental and child well-being.

### Conclusion

To conclude, the findings further our understanding of whether and when unforgiving motivations regarding an ex-partner are related to parental well-being, parental conflict, and reported child well-being. The results showed that unforgiving motivations have negative effects for divorced parents and their children but primarily when contact is frequent or intended. Although forgiveness has its dark sides, for example, in abusive relationships (McNulty, 2011), overcoming such motivations might benefit divorced coparents and their children (Bonach, 2008; Bonach & Sales, 2002; Rohde-Brown & Rudestam, 2011; Rye et al., 2012). The current results highlight the importance of reducing unforgiveness among divorced parents who have a coparenting arrangement that requires frequent contact with the ex-partner and suggest that letting go of vengeful feelings is a crucial ingredient of interventions aimed at facilitating forgiveness between ex-partners.

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