

## BRIEF REPORT

## Predictors of Forgiveness Among Divorced Parents

Esther S. Kluwer

Utrecht University and Radboud University

Reine C. van der Wal

Utrecht University

Margreet Visser

Kinder- en Jeugdtraumacentrum, Haarlem, the Netherlands

Catrin Finkenauer

Utrecht University

Forgiveness is crucial for establishing coparenting relationships following divorce, yet little is known about the predictors of forgiveness after divorce. In 2 studies, we explore dispositional and divorce-specific factors that correlate with ex-partner forgiveness. In Study 1, we used data from a convenience sample of 136 divorced parents. In Study 2, we used a clinical sample of 165 parents involved in a complex (high-conflict) divorce, who were referred to treatment because of the threat their conflicts posed to their children's well-being. Across samples, forgiveness was negatively associated with conflict severity, narcissistic entitlement, hostile attributions, and traumatic impact of the divorce, and positively with trust and acceptance of the divorce. The main predictors of forgiveness in both samples were more acceptance of the divorce and less narcissistic entitlement. Forgiveness was unrelated to dispositional self-control and trait anger in either sample. We found no evidence of cross-partner effects in Study 2, except for women's hostile attributions on men's forgiveness. Theoretical and practical implications are discussed.

**Keywords:** forgiveness, divorce, coparenting, high-conflict divorce





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Divorce is prevalent in Western societies and constitutes a major life event with far-reaching consequences for families, social networks, and society as a whole. For divorced parents, establishing and maintaining a constructive coparenting relationship after separation is one of the most difficult aspects of the divorce process, because it requires finding a delicate balance between parental cooperation and the regulation of grief, hurt, anger, and estrangement regarding the ex-partner (Bonach, 2009). Postdivorce coparenting is a potential minefield and may harm both parental and

child well-being. This is illustrated by complex divorce cases with high levels of conflict, aggression, and anger surrounding parental decisions; a complete lack of communication between parents; and/or continuing litigation over coparenting arrangements (often labeled *high-conflict divorces*; Mitcham-Smith & Henry, 2007).

Constructive coparenting requires that divorced parents overcome hurt and hostile feelings toward their ex-partner (Bonach, 2009). A crucial component is *forgiveness*—the motivational change whereby the wronged person becomes decreasingly moti-

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 Esther S. Kluwer, Department of Social, Health and Organizational Psychology, Utrecht University, and Behavioral Science Institute, Radboud University;  Reine C. van der Wal, Department of Social, Health and Organizational Psychology, Utrecht University;  Margreet Visser, Kinder- en Jeugdtraumacentrum, Haarlem, the Netherlands;  Catrin Finkenauer, Department of Interdisciplinary Social Science, Utrecht University.

The current data sets were also used in a Dutch research report, were included in scientific publications (Finkenauer et al., 2018; Visser et al., 2017), and were presented at conferences. In accordance with the data storage protocol at Utrecht University, and due to the confidential nature of the data, the data and materials will be stored on the faculty server, which meets the requirements to which data storage may be subject in terms of security, robustness (integrity and quality), and automatic backing up. Data

and computing scripts will be made available by the corresponding author upon request.

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Correspondence concerning this article should be addressed to Esther S. Kluwer, Department of Social, Health and Organizational Psychology, Utrecht University, P.O. Box 80.140, 3508 TC Utrecht, the Netherlands. E-mail: [e.s.kluwer@uu.nl](mailto:e.s.kluwer@uu.nl)

vated to retaliate against and avoid an offending other and increasingly motivated by conciliation and goodwill (McCullough et al., 1998). Forgiveness has positive effects on postdivorce adjustment, parental well-being, and coparenting because it releases parents from negative thoughts, feelings, and behaviors toward their ex-partner (Bonach, 2009; Guzmán-González, Włodarczyk, Contreras, Rivera-Ottenberger, & Garrido, 2019; Kluwer, 2016; Yárnoz-Yaben, Garmendia, & Comino, 2016). Although ample research has examined forgiveness in intact relationships (e.g., Fehr, Gelfand, & Nag, 2010; Riek & Mania, 2012), surprisingly little is known about the predictors of postdivorce forgiveness. What are the correlates of postdivorce forgiveness, and do they vary across more versus less complex divorces? Here we address this question among a convenience sample of divorced parents (Study 1) and a clinical sample of parents involved in a complex divorce (Study 2).

### Predictors of Forgiveness

The postdivorce process can be conceptualized as adjustment to traumatic experience, which first involves managing the crisis of the separation, then processing and understanding the context of the divorce, and finally letting go of the past and moving forward (Bonach, 2009). Early in the divorce process, ex-partners are likely to suffer from the traumatic impact of the separation, struggle with feelings of attachment to the ex-partner, have biased perceptions and attributions of blame, and experience conflict. Later in the process, ideally, ex-partners increasingly accept their new relationship status and become more trusting of each other (Bonach, 2009). Forgiveness is more likely as this process unfolds, because it involves an effort to decrease distorted cognitions, negative affect, and conflictive interactions with the ex-partner (Bonach, 2009; cf. Gordon, Hughes, Tomcik, Dixon, & Litzinger, 2009).

From this conceptualization, it follows that suffering distress and disturbance, or *traumatic impact*, of the divorce is likely associated negatively with forgiveness, which is generally more difficult when offenses are perceived as more severe (Fehr et al., 2010; Riek & Mania, 2012). Continuing emotional *attachment to the ex-partner* is considered a signal of low adjustment after separation (Sweeper & Halford, 2006) and correlates negatively with forgiveness after divorce (Guzmán-González et al., 2019). Furthermore, in intact couples, ongoing and unresolved *conflict* is negatively associated with forgiveness (Fincham, Beach, & Davila, 2007), as are *hostile attributions*—when victims perceive the offenses they suffer as more intentional and caused by the offender (Fehr et al., 2010; Riek & Mania, 2012). *Narcissistic entitlement*—the belief that one's superiority entitles them to special treatment—predicts reluctance to forgive others (Exline, Baumeister, Bushman, Campbell, & Finkel, 2004; Riek & Mania, 2012). Conversely, more *trusting* partners typically form more benevolent interpretations of events, which facilitate forgiveness (Gordon et al., 2009). Finally, adjustment to traumatic experiences, such as divorce, requires increasing *acceptance* of the current situation, a person's concurrence to the reality of a situation without attempting to change it or protest against it (Thompson, Arnkoff, & Glass, 2011). Nonacceptance of the divorce is a barrier to constructive coparenting (Sbarra & Emery, 2008).

Grounded in work on forgiveness in intact relationships, we also consider dispositional factors.<sup>1</sup> Forgiveness necessitates foregoing impulses toward avoidance, revenge, and even feelings of hate

toward an offender, requiring *self-control* (e.g., Burnette et al., 2014). *Trait anger* predisposes individuals toward anger as an emotional response toward offenders, which may be an emotional barrier to forgiveness (Fehr et al., 2010). In sum, we expected that postdivorce forgiveness would be associated with lower levels of conflict, hostile attributions, narcissistic entitlement, traumatic impact, attachment to the ex-partner, and trait anger and higher levels of trust, acceptance, and self-control (see also the [online supplemental materials](#)).

### The Present Research

Given the importance of forgiveness for psychological well-being and physical health in general (Karremans, Van Lange, Ouwerkerk, & Kluwer, 2003; Lawler et al., 2005) and for postdivorce adjustment and coparenting in particular (e.g., Guzmán-González et al., 2019), gaining insight into its correlates is an important first step to understand, and possibly promote, forgiveness after divorce. Two crucial differences between intact and ex-partner relationships may affect the prediction of forgiveness. First, ex-partners are more likely to be challenged by conflicting interests and needs, frequently accompanied by blaming the ex-partner, hurt, and anger (e.g., Bonach, 2009). Second, romantic partners generally make a motivational shift toward forgiveness to accommodate broader concerns, such as the partner's well-being and relationship maintenance (e.g., Karremans et al., 2003), whereas ex-partners are likely to be more self-oriented (Kluwer, 2016). These differences may make forgiveness more difficult and less imperative for ex-partners, and broader concerns such as the interest of the children may become overshadowed, especially in complex divorces (Mitcham-Smith & Henry, 2007).

We sought to investigate whether predictors of forgiveness found in intact relationships extend to divorced parents. Because more complex divorces may indicate that parents have not been able to move forward in the divorce adjustment process, this may imply greater predictive strength of negative precursors to (un)forgiveness such as hostile attributions and narcissistic entitlement. Furthermore, Study 2 included divorced couples involved in complex divorces, allowing us to explore whether ex-partner predictors relate to parental forgiveness.

### Study 1

#### Method

**Participants and procedure.** We used data from a convenience sample of Dutch divorced parents (Visser et al., 2017). Participants were 136 divorced parents (72% female; mean age 44.5 years,  $SD = 5.8$ , range = 27–58). They had on average two children with their ex-partner ( $SD = 0.7$ ; mean age of the oldest child = 13.8 years,  $SD = 5.0$ ). Seven percent of the parents were lower educated (lower vocational education), 35% had preuniversity or secondary vocational education, 57% had a college or university degree (1% unknown), and 83% had paid work. Sixty-

<sup>1</sup> Personality is also related to forgiveness tendencies (e.g., Fehr, Gelfand, & Nag, 2010; Riek & Mania, 2012). The current data sets included two-item measures for agreeableness and neuroticism, but they were not reliable and we therefore did not include them.

six parents had a new partner (49%). On average, the duration of the relationship was 16 years ( $SD = 7.2$ ), and time since the divorce was 4.6 years ( $SD = 3.9$ ). Additional descriptive information can be found in the online supplemental materials (see Table S1).

We recruited 162 divorced parents via announcements on several Dutch general and divorce-related websites, forums, social media, and online newsletters of divorce mediation agencies, as well as via our social network. We excluded parents with ongoing legal procedures with their ex-partner ( $n = 26$ ), resulting in a sample of 136 parents. All procedures were reviewed and approved by the Science and Ethics of the Faculty of Behavioral and Movement Sciences of the Free University of Amsterdam (VCWE-2015–112). Participants gave informed consent before starting the questionnaire and received a €7.50 (US\$8.90) gift voucher for participation. A power analysis for linear multiple regression ( $\alpha = .05$ , 80% power, nine potential predictors) showed that our sample was large enough to determine medium effects (minimum  $n = 114$ ; G\*Power, Version 3.1.7; Faul, Erdfelder, Buchner, & Lang, 2009) but not small effects (minimum  $n = 166$ ).<sup>2</sup>

### Measures.

**Forgiveness.** We used a 12-item Dutch version of the Transgression Related Interpersonal Motivations Inventory (McCullough et al., 1998) to measure forgiveness of the ex-partner (Kluwer, 2016). It consists of three four-item subscales tapping feelings of revenge, avoidance, and benevolence. Items such as “I want my ex-partner to pay for what (s)he did to me” (reversed-scored) were rated on a 5-point scale from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 5 (*strongly agree*). Higher scores indicated more forgiveness (Cronbach’s alpha = .91).<sup>3</sup>

**Self-control.** We used the 11-item Dutch version of the Brief Self-Control Scale (Tangney, Baumeister, & Boone, 2004). Items such as “I am good at resisting temptations” were rated from 1 (*not at all like me*) to 5 (*very much like me*). Higher scores indicated more self-control ( $\alpha = .70$ ).

**Trait anger.** We used the six-item Dutch version of the Multidimensional Anger Inventory (Siegel, 1986). Items such as “It’s easy to make me angry” were rated from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 5 (*strongly agree*). Higher scores indicated more trait anger ( $\alpha = .64$ ).

**Conflict severity.** Four items (e.g., “Currently, how severe are conflicts with your ex-partner?”; De Smet, Loeys, & Buysse, 2012) measured conflict with the ex-partner on a 5-point scale from 1 (*not at all severe*) to 5 (*very severe*). Higher scores indicated more severe conflict ( $\alpha = .80$ ).

**Trust.** We measured trust with the 11-item Dutch version of the Trust Scale (Rempel, Holmes, & Zanna, 1985), adapted to the ex-partner, with items such as “My ex-partner is very unpredictable; I never know how (s)he is going to react” (reversed-scored), rated from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 5 (*strongly agree*). Higher scores indicated more trust in the ex-partner ( $\alpha = .94$ ).

**Hostile attributions.** We used four items derived from the Relationship Attribution Measure (Fincham & Bradbury, 1992), adjusted to the divorce context. Items such as “My ex-partner is the cause of the current conflicts and difficulties” were rated from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 5 (*strongly agree*). Higher scores indicated more hostile attributions ( $\alpha = .89$ ).

**Narcissistic entitlement.** Narcissistic entitlement was measured with 13 items adapted from the Sexual Narcissism Scale

(McNulty & Widman, 2013). Participants rated statements regarding the relationship with the ex-partner such as “I deserve to be right” from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 5 (*strongly agree*). Higher scores indicated more narcissistic entitlement ( $\alpha = .77$ ).

**Traumatic impact.** The traumatic impact of the divorce was measured with the 15-item Impact of Events Scale (Weiss & Marmar, 1997), adjusted to the divorce context. Participants were asked to rate whether items, such as “I thought about my ex-partner and our divorce without wanting to”, were applicable during the past seven days on a 5-point scale from 1 (*not at all*) to 5 (*very much so*). Higher scores indicated more traumatic impact of the divorce ( $\alpha = .93$ ).

**Ex-partner attachment.** We used the eight-item ex-partner attachment subscale of the Psychological Adjustment to Separation Test (Sweeper & Halford, 2006). Items such as “I miss my former partner a lot” were rated from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 5 (*strongly agree*). Higher scores indicated more ex-partner attachment ( $\alpha = .85$ ).

**Acceptance of the divorce.** Acceptance was measured with 11 items based on the Acceptance and Action Questionnaire (Bond et al., 2011). Items such as “Regarding my ex-partner, I feel at peace with what and how it is now” were rated from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 5 (*strongly agree*). Higher scores indicated more acceptance of the divorce ( $\alpha = .78$ ).

**Control variables.** We included as possible control variables age and gender (Fehr et al., 2010), time since the divorce (Yárnoz-Yaben et al., 2016), having a new partner (Kluwer & Karremans, 2009), and contact frequency (Kluwer, 2016).

## Results

**Correlational analyses.** Correlational analyses, applying Holm’s (1979) sequential Bonferroni procedure to adjust for familywise error rate,<sup>4</sup> showed significant negative associations between forgiveness and conflict severity, hostile attributions, narcissistic entitlement, and traumatic impact and positive associations between forgiveness and trust and acceptance of the divorce (see Table 1). Self-control, trait anger, and ex-partner attachment were not correlated with forgiveness. To examine the unique association with

<sup>2</sup> Analyses on the full sample ( $N = 162$ ) showed the same results.

<sup>3</sup> Some previous research has used the Transgression Related Interpersonal Motivations Inventory subscales as separate indicators of forgiveness. However, it was recently argued that forgiveness should be conceptualized as a prosocial change along a single attitudinal continuum that ranges from malevolence to benevolence (Forster et al., 2019). Because we had no a priori rationale for why the predictors would affect the three subscales differently, we used the overall mean score of the items as our measure of self-reported forgiveness. We report the analyses for the separate subscales in the online supplemental materials.

<sup>4</sup> The Bonferroni adjustment reduces the risk of making false inferences when examining multiple outcomes (i.e., Type I errors), yet increases the likelihood of incorrectly accepting the null hypothesis (i.e., Type II errors). It can result in an overly conservative statistical approach and an unnecessary reduction in statistical power (Eichstaedt, Kovatch, & Maroof, 2013). Holm’s (1979) sequential Bonferroni procedure protects against Type I error without being overly conservative and maintains a higher level of statistical power. It involves performing each individual comparison and then ordering the resulting  $p$  values from smallest to largest. The comparison with the lowest  $p$  value is tested using the Bonferroni adjustment with all other comparisons, the comparison with the second lowest  $p$  value is tested using one fewer test, and so forth.

Table 1  
Descriptive Statistics and Correlations for Study 1 (N = 136) and Study 2 (N = 165)

Variable	Study 1: M (SD)	Study 2: M (SD)	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9
1. Forgiveness	3.56 (0.89)	3.20 (0.77) <sup>a</sup>	—	.106	-.179	-.253 <sup>b</sup>	.284 <sup>b</sup>	-.223 <sup>b</sup>	-.362 <sup>b</sup>	-.165	.366 <sup>b</sup>
<i>p</i>				.179	.022	.001	.000	.004	.000	.035	.000
2. Self-control	3.27 (0.49)	3.47 (0.48) <sup>a</sup>	-.001	—	-.327	-.012	-.044	.082	-.054	-.207	.334
<i>p</i>			.995		.000	.881	.579	.301	.492	.008	.000
3. Trait anger	2.24 (0.56)	2.30 (0.61)	-.101	-.258	—	.115	.138	-.166	.143	.140	-.271
<i>p</i>			.241	.002		.143	.079	.034	.067	.074	.000
4. Conflict severity	2.21 (1.05)	3.41 (0.80) <sup>a</sup>	-.395 <sup>b</sup>	-.079	.111	—	-.387	.225	.137	.129	-.168
<i>p</i>			.000	.359	.198		.000	.004	.079	.101	.031
5. Trust	2.77 (1.07)	1.78 (0.54) <sup>a</sup>	.475 <sup>b</sup>	.046	-.120	-.733	—	-.481	-.211	.081	.089
<i>p</i>			.000	.597	.167	.000		.000	.007	.302	.259
6. Hostile attributions	3.00 (1.20)	3.95 (0.75) <sup>a</sup>	-.489 <sup>b</sup>	-.086	.108	.749	-.831	—	.227	-.043	-.060
<i>p</i>			.000	.322	.214	.000	.000		.004	.584	.445
7. Narcissistic entitlement	2.91 (0.51)	3.18 (0.49) <sup>a</sup>	-.414 <sup>b</sup>	.155	-.036	.352	-.361	.406	—	.004	-.136
<i>p</i>			.000	.071	.677	.000	.000	.000		.955	.084
8. Ex-partner attachment	1.95 (0.79)	1.68 (0.64) <sup>a</sup>	-.059	-.144	.178	.095	-.029	.081	.040	—	-.394
<i>p</i>			.500	.097	.039	.276	.736	.353	.645		.000
9. Acceptance of divorce	3.66 (0.64)	3.26 (0.53) <sup>a</sup>	.502 <sup>b</sup>	.212	-.339	-.495	.455	-.447	-.265	-.475	—
<i>p</i>			.000	.013	.000	.000	.000	.000	.002	.000	
10. Traumatic impact	1.64 (0.74)	—	-.248 <sup>b</sup>	-.214	.226	.244	-.238	.249	.142	.673	-.539
<i>p</i>			.004	.013	.008	.004	.005	.004	.100	.000	.000

Note. Data for Study 1 appear below the diagonal, and data for Study 2 appear above the diagonal. All variables were measured on 5-point scales. Dashes not along the diagonal indicate that data were not obtained among all participants.

<sup>a</sup> Means of Study 1 and Study 2 differ at  $p < .001$ , based on independent-sample  $t$  tests. <sup>b</sup> Significant correlations with the dependent variable ( $p < .05$ ) after Holm’s sequential Bonferroni correction.

forgiveness, we conducted multiple linear regression analyses in SPSS23 (see Table 2). We included only the variables that correlated significantly with forgiveness, constructing a parsimonious model of all potential predictors. We found a unique positive effect for acceptance of the divorce and a negative effect of narcissistic entitlement ( $p < .05$ ) after applying the Holm’s sequential Bonferroni procedure.

**Additional analyses.** Age, gender, time since the divorce, and having a new partner did not correlate with forgiveness ( $r_s < |.15|$ ), but contact frequency did ( $r = .47, p < .001$ ). Controlling for contact frequency in the regression resulted in a positive main effect of contact frequency, but it did not change the results for the other predictors (see Table S2 in the online supplemental materials). Regressions for each forgiveness subscale separately (see Tables S3–S5 in the online supplemental materials) showed that feelings of revenge were predicted by lower acceptance, feelings of avoidance were predicted by lower contact frequency, and

feelings of benevolence were predicted by higher acceptance and lower contact frequency.

### Study 2

#### Method

**Participants and procedure.** We used data from a clinical sample of Dutch parents involved in high-conflict divorces who were referred to treatment (Visser et al., 2017). Participants were 165 parents (49.7% female), of which 116 parents were members of a couple (58 ex-partner couples). They were on average 42.33 years old ( $SD = 5.86$ , range 26–66) and had on average 1.92 children with their ex-partner ( $SD = .80$ ; mean age of the oldest child = 10.95 years,  $SD = 3.43$ ). Forty-one percent of the parents were lower educated, 21% had an intermediate education level,

Table 2  
Regression of Forgiveness in Studies 1 and 2

Variable	Study 1 (N = 136)					Study 2 (N = 165)				
	<i>b</i>	<i>SE</i>	$\beta$	<i>t</i>	<i>p</i>	<i>b</i>	<i>SE</i>	$\beta$	<i>t</i>	<i>p</i>
Conflict severity	.105	.096	.123	1.091	.277	-.097	.071	-.102	-1.367	.173
Trust	.140	.109	.169	1.289	.200	.192	.117	.135	1.646	.102
Hostile attributions	-.149	.101	-.200	-1.471	.144	-.058	.080	-.057	-0.725	.469
Narcissistic entitlement	-.384	.135	-.218 <sup>a</sup>	-2.856	.005	-.418	.110	-.267 <sup>a</sup>	-3.786	.000
Acceptance of divorce	.505	.129	.364 <sup>a</sup>	3.906	.000	.427	.099	.297 <sup>a</sup>	4.306	.000
Traumatic impact	.048	.099	.040	0.485	.629	—	—	—	—	—
	$F(6, 127) = 13.68, p < .001, R^2 = .39$					$F(5, 157) = 12.37, p < .001, R^2 = .28$				

Note. Dashes indicate that data were not obtained among all participants.

<sup>a</sup> Significant effect on the dependent variable ( $p < .05$ ) after Holm’s sequential Bonferroni correction.

36% were higher educated (2% unknown), and 92% had paid work. Seventy-two parents had a new relationship (63%). The average relationship duration was 12 years ( $SD = 5.9$ ), and the average time since the divorce was 3.8 years ( $SD = 2.7$ ). Additional descriptive information can be found in the online supplemental materials (see Table S1).

Parents were recruited from 10 outpatient health care institutions in The Netherlands and Belgium as part of a larger study. They were referred by judges, Youth Care Agencies, or physicians, because the well-being of the children was compromised by their parents' long-lasting conflicts or disturbed communication surrounding parental decisions and because out-of-home placement was imminent. After the referral, parents voluntarily enrolled in the intervention No Kids in the Middle (Visser & Van Lawick, in press). During the first clinical intake, parents individually and voluntarily signed up for the research project, after which the consent form was signed. Parents completed the online questionnaire before the start of the intervention. Of the 302 parents who were invited, 203 agreed to participate (67%) of which 165 completed the online questionnaire (81%). All procedures were reviewed and approved by the Science and Ethics of the Faculty of Behavioral and Movement Sciences of the Free University at Amsterdam (VCWE-2015-112). A power analysis for linear multiple regression ( $\alpha = .05$ , 80% power, eight potential predictors) and a power analysis for multiple regression testing partner effects showed that the sample was large enough to determine small effects (minimum  $n = 159$  for individual effects: Faul, Erdfelder, Buchner, & Lang, 2009; minimum  $n = 50$  for partner effects: Maas & Hox, 2005; G\*Power, Version 3.1.7).

**Measures.** We used the same measures as in Study 1 to assess forgiveness ( $\alpha = .90$ ), self-control ( $\alpha = .73$ ), trait anger ( $\alpha = .74$ ), conflict severity ( $\alpha = .71$ ), trust ( $\alpha = .79$ ), hostile attributions ( $\alpha = .84$ ), narcissistic entitlement ( $\alpha = .79$ ), ex-partner attachment ( $\alpha = .79$ ), and acceptance of the divorce ( $\alpha = .70$ ; after omitting two items). Due to missing values for 55 participants, traumatic impact was not included as a predictor in Study 2.<sup>5</sup>

## Results

Independent-samples *t* tests showed that the parents in Study 2 scored significantly higher on conflict severity, hostile attributions, and narcissistic entitlement and lower on trust and acceptance than did parents in Study 1 (see Table 1), supporting that Study 2 included more complex divorces than did Study 1.

**Correlational analyses.** As in Study 1, correlational analyses revealed negative associations between forgiveness and conflict severity, hostile attributions, and narcissistic entitlement and positive associations between forgiveness and trust and acceptance after applying the Holm's sequential Bonferroni procedure (see Table 1). Because within-couple variation was negligible and cross-partner correlations were significant for only conflict severity and hostile attributions (see Table S9 in the online supplemental materials), we included all participants as individuals in a multiple linear regression analysis with the predictors that correlated significantly with forgiveness. This analysis showed a unique positive effect of acceptance and a unique negative effect of narcissistic entitlement (surviving Holm's sequential Bonferroni procedure; see Table 2).

**Additional analyses.** Age, gender, time since the divorce, and having a new partner did not correlate with forgiveness ( $r_s < \pm .15$ ), but again contact frequency did ( $r = .23$ ,  $p = .003$ ). Controlling for contact frequency resulted in a positive main effect of contact frequency but did not change the results for the other predictors (see Table S2 in the online supplemental materials). Regressions for each forgiveness subscale (see Tables S6–S8), showed that feelings of revenge and avoidance were predicted by more narcissistic entitlement and less acceptance of the divorce; feelings of benevolence were predicted by more acceptance of the divorce.

**Partner models.** We additionally tested within-dyad predictors of forgiveness in the subsample of 58 ex-partner couples through correlational analyses between men and women of the same couple (see Table S9 in the online supplemental materials). For women's forgiveness, there were no significant correlations with their ex-partner's predictor variables. For men, their own forgiveness correlated negatively with their ex-partner's hostile attributions. Multiple linear regression analysis showed that the ex-partner's hostile attributions uniquely predicted men's forgiveness above and beyond their own conflict severity, trust, hostile attributions, narcissistic entitlement, and acceptance (see Table S10).

## General Discussion

Extending research on forgiveness in intact relationships and conceptualizations of the divorce as an adjustment process, our results showed that postdivorce forgiveness was negatively associated with conflict severity, hostile attributions, and narcissistic entitlement (and traumatic impact in Study 1) and was positively associated with trust and acceptance of the divorce. We replicated the findings in two different samples, showing no notable differences in the prediction of forgiveness between more versus less complex divorces.

A theoretically novel and practically useful insight emerging from our study is that forgiveness was predicted by mainly acceptance of the divorce. The forgiveness literature generally addresses cognitions and emotions that involve the ability and motivation to forgive but has not considered (non)acceptance of the situation as it is. Our results suggest that accepting the divorce may be an important ingredient of postdivorce interventions (Sbarra & Emery, 2008). Many forgiveness interventions aim to promote acceptance, by fostering the ability to be present with a painful experience without trying to alter or deny it (Akhtar & Barlow, 2018; Bonach, 2009). Our results provide empirical support for such a focus in the divorce context.

In addition, our findings identify narcissistic entitlement, the belief that one is superior and entitled to more rights than is the ex-partner, as an important predictor of unforgiveness in both studies. Especially in complex divorces, parents tend to have low empathy for the ex-partner and interpret events and interactions in dualistic (i.e., "black and white") self-serving ways, and this can promote the vicious cycle of negative exchanges (Mitcham-Smith & Henry, 2007). Developing a more nuanced view of the self and the ex-partner could be an important ingredient of interventions

<sup>5</sup> The measure for traumatic impact was added to the questionnaire later, and the first 55 participants did not fill in this measure.

aimed at solving intractable parental disputes (Bonach, 2009), and focusing on changing one's own behavior, cognitions, and emotions, rather than the ex-partner's, may enhance those interventions even more (Visser & Van Lawick, in press).

In the ex-partner couples in Study 2, we found neither an association between the ex-partners' levels of forgiveness nor evidence for ex-partner effects, except for women's hostile attributions on men's forgiveness. This remarkable absence of partner effects contrasts with evidence for the interpersonal nature of forgiveness between parents in intact families (Gordon, Hughes, Tomcik, Dixon, & Litzinger, 2009). Although this may partly be explained by the fact that we did not include important interpersonal variables such as apologies or making amends, which increase empathy toward the ex-partner (Riek & Mania, 2012), our findings suggest that postdivorce forgiveness is also an *intrapersonal* phenomenon, at least in complex divorce couples. Stimulating forgiveness may therefore be an important leverage point for postdivorce interventions because it can be pursued irrespective of the ex-partner (Rye et al., 2005) and has positive effects on personal health and well-being (Karremans, Van Lange, Ouwerkerk, & Kluwer, 2003) and on postdivorce adjustment and coparenting (Guzmán-González, Włodarczyk, Contreras, Rivera-Ottenberger, & Garrido, 2019; Yárnoz-Yaben, Garmendia, & Comino, 2016).

Our findings add to the small body of work on forgiveness after divorce, although the correlational nature of the data prohibits causal inferences. It provides further impetus for studies aimed at understanding and promoting forgiveness among divorced parents, especially complex divorces with their well-documented deleterious impact on ex-partners and their children. Helping ex-partners to come to terms with their divorce and to nuance (overly self-serving) views of their role and entitlements after divorce may help ex-partners not only to forgive each other but also, and therefore, to engage in constructive coparenting.

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