

**THE ROLE OF COMMITMENT IN MOTIVATING FORGIVENESS IN A ROMANTIC  
RELATIONSHIP WITHIN AFRICAN CONTEXT**

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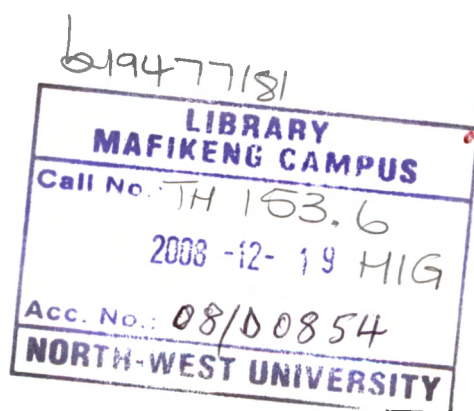
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## TABLE OF CONTENTS

Acknowledgements	ii
Abstract	iii
Manuscript: The role of commitment in motivating forgiveness in a romantic relationship within African context	1
Problem Statement	2
Literature Analysis	2
Aim	6
Method	7
Design	7
Participants	7
Instruments	7
Procedure	10
Ethical aspects	10
Data analysis	10
Results	11
Discussion	15
References	18

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## ABSTRACT

The aim of this study was to test the role of commitment in motivating forgiveness in romantic relationships within an African context. The South African concept of *ubuntu* (humanness/ humanity) and the influence it has or does not have on forgiveness was also explored. A purposive sample of 218 students in their second year of study was selected for this investigation. The students were from the Mafikeng Campus of the North-West University. Participants responded to questions with regard to the degree of commitment in their relationships, forgiveness and certain measures of psychological well-being. The results of the investigation indicated that most of the measures were reliable and valid. Findings indicate that commitment does not play a significant role in forgiveness within an African context. However, the level of commitment is strongly influenced by the degree of fulfillment experienced within a relationship. Thus, the higher the degree of fulfillment within a relationship, the higher the level of commitment within such a relationship. Findings also indicated that neither commitment nor *ubuntu* plays a significant role in forgiveness within a collectivistic relationship. Pertinent conclusions and recommendations are made.

**Key words:** Romantic relationship, forgiveness, commitment, *ubuntu*.



**MANUSCRIPT**

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## PROBLEM STATEMENT

The concept of psychological well-being has brought about a revolution in psychology leading to a de-emphasis on psychopathology and a clear focus on positive aspects of well-being (Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2000). The dynamics of forgiveness (e.g., McCullough, Sandage, Brown, Rachal, Hight, & Worthington, 1998) are one of the research areas that has since developed from this focus on positive aspects of well-being. Following a study by McCullough et al. (1998) on interpersonal forgiveness in close relationships, a number of studies were undertaken in the field of forgiveness in relationships (e.g., Fincham, Paleari, & Regalia, 2002; Kachadourian, Fincham, & Davila, 2004). McCullough, Worthington and Rachal (1997) defined forgiveness as “a set of motivational changes, whereby one becomes decreasingly motivated to retaliate against and maintain estrangement from an offending relationship partner and increasingly motivated by conciliation and goodwill for the offender, despite the offender’s hurtful actions”. Studies regarding the function of commitment in relation to forgiveness in a collectivistic context have been found to be limited. In this study the function of commitment in relation to forgiveness in romantic relationships will be explored within an African context.

## LITERATURE ANALYSIS

In a romantic relationship, certain relationship-relevant norms are laid down and need to be obeyed by both parties (Finkel, Rusbult, Kumashiro, & Hannon, 2002). For example, persons involved in a relationship may implicitly or explicitly agree that some forms of behaviour are unacceptable. They may for instance agree on certain interaction contingencies (e.g., never to argue with a partner the night before significant work-related events), that certain interaction sequences are not to be initiated (e.g., never to humiliate a partner), and that some interaction sequences are not to take place with particular types of partners (e.g., never become sexually intimate with an extra-relationship partner) (Finkel et al., 2002). Should one or the other partner violate these norms, a transgression has occurred. Modipa (1999) states that despite the hurt

caused by transgressions in romantic relationships, many people still become involved in romantic relationships.

Transgressions against intimate partners are usually unique in nature. This uniqueness is likely to threaten not only the perpetrator's self-regard but also the well-being and security of the relationship (Kearns & Fincham, 2005). Transgressions can appear in the form of broken promises, unfair treatment, lies and betrayal. Negative feelings, negative cognitions and negative behaviours such as anger, resentment, revenge and avoidance are common, creating a potential disruption in the relationship (Fincham, Paleari, & Regalia, 2002; Kearns & Fincham, 2005). Such incidents may also create feelings of interpersonal indebtedness.

In order to move beyond this constellation of negative feelings, negative cognitions and negative behaviours, the victim needs to forgive or to "cancel the debt" (Finkel et al., 2002). Forgiveness is an important step in restoring a relationship toward harmony and trust. Kachadourian, Fincham and Davila (2004) argue that forgiveness can ameliorate existing problems and prevent future problems before they begin. McCullough et al. (1998) reported that forgiveness occurs more frequently in close, committed relationships and that it is associated with restored relational closeness following interpersonal transgressions.

A study done by Knee, Patrick, Vietor and Neighbors (2004) suggests that the more invested individuals are in a relationship and the more resources they have put into the relationship, the more likely they are to feel committed to that relationship and remain in it. Confronting and discussing a problem in a relationship will result in the experience of added investment, which also leads to increased commitment to the relationship (Knee et al., 2004).

Tsuang, McCullough and Fincham (2006) found that forgiveness facilitates the restoration of closeness and commitment despite damage inflicted on a relationship after a transgression. This in turn, indicates that individuals who experience lower levels of avoidance and higher levels of benevolence tend to experience increased closeness and commitment with their transgressor in the relationship.

The purpose of this study is to determine the function of forgiveness in romantic relationships within an African context. *Ubuntu*, (an African term), defines a positive quality supposedly possessed by a person. *Ubuntu* is not only about how humans behave, it is about being, a disposition, and it concerns values that contribute to the well-being of others and of community (Mnyaka & Motlhabi, 2005). Thus the term *ubuntu* in this study is used as a shorthand form signifying commitment in African relationships. One of the goals of this study is to determine the way in which *ubuntu* is applied in the forgiving of a transgressor within a romantic relationship.

When looking at a typical relationship in a collectivistic context, Mnyaka and Motlhabi (2005) are of opinion that every person in an African society values being recognized and treated with respect as an equal. Respect for a person, which is accompanied by acceptable positive behaviour, is highly regarded in terms of the concept of *ubuntu* and according to Frei and Shaver (2002), very important in romantic and marital relationships. It could, therefore, be understood that when a transgression occurs, the perpetrator undermined or ill-treated a person indicating disrespect. It is accepted that if a perpetrator has a sense of right and wrong, he or she will refrain from adverse actions.

According to Mnyaka and Motlhabi (2005), such a disposition is noticeable in that people are conscious of the fact that they share a common humanness, which has a certain dignity, integrity and value that needs to be acknowledged, respected and valued, and that no person is either superior or inferior to another. This in itself is unique to the concept *ubuntu*.

In this investigation it was found that a limited number of studies have been conducted regarding forgiveness within an African context. Previous studies done in America and the United Kingdom, however, indicate that forgiveness facilitates the restoration of closeness and commitment in a relationship (Tsuang et al., 2006) and that the restoration of a relationship will lead to increased commitment (Knee et al., 2004). The overview also addressed the relationship-relevant norms that are laid down in a romantic relationship and the consequences of the violation of such norms or the occurrence of a transgression (Finkel et al.,

2002). The concept of *ubuntu* has been addressed and the potential influence it might have or might not have on forgiveness in romantic relationships.

Research by Fincham et al. (2002) on forgiveness in a marital relationship suggests that men and women tend to differ in their responses to a transgression. Gonzales et al. as cited by Fincham et al. (2002) states that women, relative to men, report higher levels of anger, relationship damage and difficulty of forgiveness. Studies done by Worthington, Sondage and Berry (2000); Berry, Worthington, Parrot, O'Connor and Wade (2001) and Macaskill, Maltby and Day (2002) as cited by Toussaint and Webb (2005), imply that there are no clear-cut gender differences in levels of forgiveness, nor are women more likely to forgive than men. Although there appears to be some inconsistency regarding gender and forgiveness, it is not analyzed in this study and should be considered for future studies.



## AIM

In this study, the role of commitment in motivating forgiveness in romantic relationships was investigated within an African context. In addition, the degree to which commitment in romantic relationships increases the probability that a transgressor would be forgiven was examined. The South African concept of *ubuntu* and the influence it may or may not have on the sufferer to forgive a transgressor was also explored. The aim of this study was pursued by determining the following: The role that commitment plays in romantic relationships with regard to the motivation to forgive within an African context, and whether *ubuntu* plays a significant role with regard to the forgiving of a transgressor.

## METHOD

### *Design*

In this quantitative study, a cross-sectional survey was applied. Responses and data were gathered on a single occasion in order to eliminate causality. Selected participants were asked to fill in questionnaires indicating their experiences.

### *Participants*

A purposive sample of 218 undergraduate, second year psychology students from the Mafikeng campus of the North-West University were selected on a voluntary basis. The participants each completed a questionnaire handed to them in a group. The religious affiliation of the participants was primarily Christian consisting of denominations such as Catholic, Apostolic, Methodist and Zionist Christian Church. Forty three (19.7%) of the participants were males and 175 (80.3%) were females. All of the participants were second year students at the Mafikeng Campus of the North-West University. Table 1 summarizes other demographic characteristics of the participants.

### *Instruments*

Participants completed the following questionnaires and inventories as part of the study:

#### Transgression-Related Interpersonal Motivation Inventory (TRIM; McCullough et. al., 1998)

The TRIM, a 12-item scale, is used to determine the extent to which a person experiences two negative motivational stakes, namely avoidance and revenge. These traits reportedly underlie forgiveness. The Avoidance subscale comprises seven items and determines a subject's motivation to avoid contact with a transgressor. The Revenge subscale comprises five items and determines a subject's motivation to seek

revenge. Both subscales have high internal consistency ( $\alpha \geq .85$ , moderate test-retest stability, e.g., eight-week test retest  $r_s =$  approximately .50), and evidence of convergent and discriminant validity.

Table 1

Demographic characteristic of participants

Variable	Frequency	Percent
<u>Age</u>		
17 – 21	112	51.4
22 and older	106	48.6
Total	218	100
<u>Length of Relationship</u>		
Not in relationship	36	16.5
0 – 6 months	32	14.7
6 – 18 months	43	19.7
19 months and longer	107	49.1
Total	218	100
<u>Belief in <i>Ubuntu</i></u>		
Do not believe	28	12.9
To a great extent	159	72.9
Somewhat	31	14.2
Total	218	100
<u>More willing to forgive</u>		
To a great extent	107	49.1
Somewhat	96	44.0
Not at all	15	6.9
Total	218	100



The Willingness to Forgive Scale (De Shea, 2003)

The willingness to forgive scale presents scenarios describing a variety of transgressions and kinds of relationships that are presented to participants in an attempt to allow them to project themselves into various situations in which the possible forgiving of another person is indicated (De Shea, 2003). Some construct

validity evidence is presented, as well as the scale's relationship with measures of narcissism, gratitude, self-esteem and the five-factor model of personality.

#### The Relationship Assessment Scale (RAS; Hendrick, 1988)

The RAS is a seven-item measure of global relationship satisfaction. The items e.g., "How well does your partner meet your needs?" are each rated on a five-point Likert scale specific to that item. Average scores range from one to five; total scores range from seven to 35. Higher scores indicate greater relationship satisfaction. Internal consistency of the RAS is high ( $\alpha = .86$ ) (Vaughn & Matyastik Baier, 1999).

#### The Commitment Inventory (Stanley & Markman, 1992)

The commitment inventory assesses two aspects of individuals' commitment to their close relationships (Stanley & Markman, 1992). In this inventory there are two subscales namely: 1) The dedication subscale which assesses the participants' commitment to their relationship based on their desire to improve or maintain the significance of the relationship for the benefit of both parties, and 2) The constraint subscale which assesses commitment based on the participants' perception of constrained feelings which pertain to staying in the relationship due to external or internal pressures. The Commitment Inventory has high levels of internal consistency across a range of samples with alpha coefficients averaging .82 as well as theoretically consistent factor structures. This illustrates theoretically consistent relationships regarding the stage of the relationship, relationship adjustment, problem intensity and various measures of religiosity.

#### Demographic Questionnaire – (Developed by researcher).

Demographic aspects such as age, gender and religious orientation were obtained from the participants by way of this questionnaire. The concept of *ubuntu* was also addressed by means of this questionnaire as well as the influence that it might have or might not have on forgiving a transgressor. Participants were studied



from a collectivistic stance (cf. Hofstede, 1984). Collectivism according to Hofstede (1991) as cited by Allik and Realo (2004) pertains to societies in which people from birth onwards are integrated into strong, cohesive in-groups, which throughout people's lifetime continue to protect them in exchange for unquestioning loyalty. The concept of *ubuntu* is quite close to the ethos of collectivism.

### *Procedure*

The data collection was completed in a group setting. Each participant had the opportunity to complete the abovementioned questionnaires and inventories. All scales were bound into a booklet and handed out to participants. All participants signed informed consent forms before commencing with the completion of the questionnaires.

### *Ethical aspects*

Ethical permission for this study was obtained from the Department Board of Psychology at the North-West University (Mafikeng Campus). The right of each participant to withdraw from the study at any time was explained to all. The participants were also aware that a psychologist would be available for debriefing if required.

### *Data analysis*

All analyses were computed with the aid of SPSS (version 13). Measures of central tendency and dispersion were employed as a description of the scales and inventories used in this study (cf. Everett, 1996; Gravetter & Forzano, 2006). Additionally, a reliability analysis was also conducted and the pertinent Cronbach Alpha coefficients are reported. Nunnally and Bernstein (1994) suggest that a Cronbach Alpha coefficient of 0.70 indicates good reliability.

In order to elicit differences in the mean scores of participants who were involved in relationships and those who were not in terms of all the scales and inventories, the Student T-Test for differences between means was computed. Pertinent parameters are reported as an indication of the differences between these 2 groups.

One-way ANOVAs were computed to test the influence of commitment with regard to forgiveness. To test the practical significance of the findings, effect sizes were used following the criticisms leveled at the use of statistical significance testing as a routine procedure (cf. Wilkinson, 1999).  $\eta^2$  is reported as an indication of this practical significance. Effect sizes represent a family of indices that measure the magnitude of a treatment effect. Effect sizes are independent of sample size.  $\eta^2$  represents the proportion of the total variation attributable to the independent variable's influence on the dependent variable.

## RESULTS

The table below summarizes the descriptive statistics obtained on the measuring scales used in this study. Overall, the table shows that all the scales used are reliable except for a relatively low Cronbach Alpha that was obtained for the constraints subscale of the Commitment Inventory. Based on the descriptive statistics, the results generally indicate that the participants are more likely to avoid a transgressor after a transgression has occurred and that they are more likely not to forgive the transgressor. Further findings, as indicated by the Relationship Assessment Scale and the Commitment Inventory, illustrate that participants are generally satisfied with their current relationship and that they are devoted to their partners.

Table 2

Descriptive Statistics of measuring scales

Variables	Min	Max	Mean	SD	Variance	Reliability
TRANSGRESSION-RELATED						
INTERPERSONAL MOTIVATION						
INVENTORY						
Revenge Sub-scale	5	25	12.32	4.57	20.9	0.79
Avoidance Sub-scale	7	35	24.26	6.38	40.73	0.85
WILLINGNESS TO FORGIVE	2	63	28.91	12.38	153.16	0.77
COMMITMENT INVENTORY						
Devotion Sub-scale	9	42	30.01	7.43	55.28	0.7
Constraints Sub-scale	14	50	31.15	6.86	47.08	0.5
RELATIONSHIP ASSESSMENT SCALE	11	35	26.66	4.59	21.05	0.7



To test the differences between participants who were in a relationship and those not, a Student T-Test was computed. Table 3 below shows that there were no significant differences in relation to the following scales: The Transgression-related interpersonal motivation inventory and the Willingness to Forgive Scale. However, differences were observed in relation to the following scales: Commitment Inventory and the Relationship Assessment Scale. The latter is confirmed by the general findings in the descriptive statistics as indicated above.

Table 3

Differences between participants in/or not in a relationship

Variables	T	df	P
TRANSGRESSION-RELATED INTERPERSONAL MOTIVATION INVENTORY			
Revenge Sub-scale	1.094	216	0.275
Avoidance Sub-scale	-0.388	216	0.699
WILLIINGNESS TO FORGIVE SCALE	0.336	216	0.737
COMMITMENT INVENTORY			
Devotion Sub-scale	4.297	216	0
Constraint Sub-scale	-1.891	216	0.06
RERLATIONSHIP ASSESSMENT SCALE	4.559	216	0

Devotion and constraints as measures of commitment were used as independent variables influencing forgiveness. One-way Analyses of Variance were computed with the TRIM (Transgression-Related Interpersonal Motivation Inventory) and WTF (Willingness to Forgive) as dependent variables. Devotion played a significant role in forgiveness with respect to the TRIM ( $F = 194$ ,  $df = 12/175$ ,  $p = 0.000$ ). An effect size of 0.93 based on  $\eta^2$  was obtained for this computation. A significant finding was also obtained for constraints ( $F = 150.34$ ,  $df = 12/171$ ,  $p = 0.000$ ,  $\eta^2 = 0.91$ ). Computation of the devotion measures in relation to the WTF indicated significance. ( $F = 76.219$ ,  $df = 12/175$ ,  $p = 0.000$ ,  $\eta^2 = 0.91$ ). Constraint played a significant role in the willingness to forgive as indicated by  $F = 55.99$ ,  $df = 12/171$ ,  $p = 0.000$ . An effect size of 0.79 based on  $\eta$  squared was acquired for this calculation.

Table 4

Correlations among constructs used in the study

Variables	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
TRIM: Revenge										
TRIM: Avoidance	0.354**									
Willingness to Forgive	-0.08	-0.105								
Commitment Inventory: Dedication	-0.006	-0.36	0.095							
Commitment Inventory: Constraint	0.134*	0.081	0.139*	-0.181**						
Relationship Assessment Scale	0.002	-0.076	0.017	0.489	-0.229**					
Ubuntu?	0.022	0.029	0.041	0.031	0.078	0.023				
How long in a relationship?	0.105	0.036	0.01	0.270**	-0.180**	0.280**	0.001			
More willing to forgive	0.213**	-0.056	-0.140*	-0.054	-0.099	0.109	0.137*	0.019		
What extent?	0.066	0.205**	-0.003	-0.146*	0.075	-0.108	0.150*	0.028	0.036	



\*\* . Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (two tailed)

\* . Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level (two tailed)

The table above presents the correlations among all the scales used in the study with the following independent variables: *Ubuntu*, the positive quality supposedly possessed by a person and the concerns that contribute to the well-being of others and of community and the duration of the relationship, indicates the period of time participants remained in a romantic relationship. The variable: more willing to forgive indicates how much more the participant perceives himself or herself as being more willing to forgive than their partners, and the extent to which the participant believes *ubuntu* influences their relationship. Overall, the table illustrates that revenge with regard to a transgression correlates positively with the participants willingness to forgive their partners as being more likely than their partners' willingness to forgive them ( $r = 0.213, p = 0.01$ ). This may suggest that if reconciliation were possible, the transgressor would be forgiven. Calculations of the variables: dedication and constraints, in the Commitment Inventory indicate a negative correlation ( $r = -0.181, p = 0.01$ ). This may suggest that the higher the dedication in a relationship, the lower

the constraints within that relationship. This is confirmed by the negative correlations between the constraints in the Commitment Inventory and the Relationship Assessment scale ( $r = -0.229$ ,  $p = 0.01$ ). This implies that the higher the gratification in the relationship, the lower the constraints in the level of commitment.

It needs to be noted that the concept of *ubuntu* only correlated positively with the avoidance variable in the TRIM scale ( $r = 0.205$ ,  $p = 0.01$ ). This might suggest that the more the concept of *ubuntu* influences the participant's relationship, the more avoidant behaviour would be observed towards the transgressor.

## DISCUSSION

A relationship transgression has negative consequences for both the victim and the transgressor (Tsang et al., 2006). It also has a destructive influence on the level of commitment in the relationship in which it occurs (cf. Finkel et al., 2002). The results of this study indicate that the victim reverts to avoidant behaviour after a transgression has occurred. This relationship-destructive reaction is normal according to Tsang et al. (2006). However, individuals who are more committed to a relationship should be more willing to forgive the transgressor after a betrayal (Finkel et al., 2002), which is not the case according to the results of this study. The results indicate that partners in a relationship are more likely not to forgive the transgressor following a transgression, even though their level of commitment may be high as indicated by the Commitment Inventory and the RAS (Relationship Assessment Scale).

A study conducted by McCullough, Fincham and Tsang (2003) indicates that individuals' motivation regarding avoidance and revenge tends to decrease over time. These researchers also concluded that the average person tends to forgive within a time period of weeks following transgressions which they had experienced. The results of this study coincide with these findings which are evident in the differences between participants in a relationship and participants not in a relationship. Participants in a relationship at

the time of the study appeared to be dedicated to their relationship and experienced limited constraints. Results also imply that participants within a relationship are mostly satisfied with their relationship.

Consistent with previous studies (McCullough et al., 1998; Fincham et al., 2002; Kachadourian et al., 2004), the results of this study indicate that the more satisfied individuals are in a relationship, the more committed they are to that relationship. The findings of this study, however, do not correspond with those of previous studies as far as the willingness to forgive is concerned. No correlation could be found between the relationship satisfaction of the participants and their willingness to forgive. The study done by Kachadourian et al. (2004) suggests that the more satisfied individuals are in a relationship, the more willing they are to forgive. It, therefore, appears that within an African context, relationship satisfaction plays a significant role in commitment but not in forgiveness.

Part of this study was to explore the influence of *ubuntu* with regard to forgiveness in romantic relationships within an African context. Findings indicate that *ubuntu* influences partners' behaviour significantly as far as avoidance is concerned. It can therefore be assumed that if a person believes in *ubuntu*, he or she is more likely to avoid a transgressor after a transgression has occurred. Individuals who accept *ubuntu* believe in self-understanding, self-preservation and growth. They also believe that a person has the right to be respected, protected and to be afforded compassion and love (Mnyaka & Motlhabi, 2005). Through avoiding (and perhaps not confrontational) the transgressor adherents of *ubuntu* are doing exactly that.

The question arises whether *ubuntu* influences the willingness to forgive a transgressor. No substantial evidence could be found in the results to indicate that *ubuntu* has an impact on the willingness to forgive a partner within a romantic relationship. Mnyaka and Motlhabi (2005) are of the opinion that colonization, apartheid, the struggle against apartheid and urbanization is to blame for the loss of this philosophy as an enduring value. Therefore, it should be considered whether more Westernized relationships would still be influenced by the value of *ubuntu* when conflict arises as result of a transgression.

The findings of this study thus indicate that neither commitment nor *ubuntu* play a significant role in forgiveness within a collectivistic relationship. This may not suggest that the constructs are insignificant as far as forgiveness within a collectivistic context is concerned. However, it is important to note that commitment (at least as it is defined within a Western context) and the disjunction between the lack of fit among the constructs of *ubuntu*, communication and forgiveness may illustrate the difference in how African and Western systems perceive these issues.

It was also established that the higher the satisfaction within a romantic relationship, the higher the level of commitment. The question of commitment and its conceptualization within a collectivistic context also needs to be addressed. Further research is suggested to establish whether commitment in an African context is understood in the same way as it is understood in a Westernized context. It should also be established whether African cultures experience relationship satisfaction in the same way as Westernized cultures.

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