The importance of investing in your relationship: Emotional capital and responses to partner

transgressions

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Abstract

Throughout their relationship, couples experience a myriad of small positive moments together, such as sharing leisure activities or laughing with one another. Although these moments may seem trivial in isolation, growing research suggests that accumulating positive moments together helps couples build emotional capital, which can buffer them from the harmful consequences of relationship difficulties. The current study examined two potential mechanisms, relationship attributions and forgiveness, for this buffering effect. Newlywed couples reported their relationships attributions and forgiveness tendencies and completed a 10-day daily diary task assessing emotional capital, negative partner behaviors, and marital satisfaction. Consistent with previous research, spouses who reported accumulating more emotional capital on average across the diary task exhibited a weaker association between their partners' daily negative behaviors and their daily satisfaction. Extending prior work, path analyses revealed a significant indirect effect of emotional capital on reactivity through relationship attributions and forgiveness. That is, spouses who reported more emotional capital tended to make more benevolent and forgiving interpretations of their partners' behaviors, which in turn predicted reduced reactivity to partners' transgressions. These findings contribute to a growing literature illuminating the critical role everyday shared positive moments may play in enhancing relationship well-being.

Keywords: emotional capital, relationship activities, relationship satisfaction, relationship attributions, forgiveness

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Although movies and popular culture often imply that relationships are built on grand

romantic gestures, growing scientific evidence suggests that relationship success may actually

rest on the everyday small positive moments that partners share together. For example, going on

regular date nights, engaging in shared hobbies or leisure activities, and showing gratitude

toward a partner all predict increases in relationship closeness over time (Algoe, Gable, &

Maisel, 2010; Girme, Overall, & Faingataa, 2013). Similarly, simply discussing the best events

of one's day with a partner can lead to a variety of positive relationships outcomes, including

increased commitment, intimacy, satisfaction (Gable & Reis, 2010), and better overall positive

mood for both partners (Hicks & Diamond, 2008). Thus, even routine moments that may seem

trivial have the potential to profoundly shape relationship quality.

The theory of emotional capital provides a foundation for understanding why these

everyday positive experiences may be so beneficial (Gottman, 1999; Driver & Gottman, 2004).

According to this perspective, as couples accumulate positive experiences together, they build

emotional capital, which can act as an important resource within the relationship. Although

emotional capital building experiences can take many forms, these experiences all represent

positive moments which are either "conveyed to the partner (e.g., through compliments,

encouragement) or experienced with the partner," (Feeney & Lemay, 2012, p. 1005). In other

words, emotional capital is comprised of all the daily positive behaviors exchanged between

partners, such as expressing affection, laughing together, engaging in fun activities, asking about

the partner's day, or having meaningful conversations, which make partners feel respected,

loved, and validated (Afifi, Merrill, & Davis, 2016; Feeney & Lemay, 2012). As these

experiences accrue, they create an emotional reserve that can help buffer the couple from the harmful consequences of any relational difficulties that may arise. Thus, the theory of emotional capital unites growing research on the many different types of positive experiences couples can share together by providing an overarching theoretical framework for understanding how those distinct moments can form a single resource that benefits relationship well-being.

Notably, the accumulation of these positive experiences is key; because bad events tend to exert a more powerful influence on well-being compared to good events (Baumeister, Bratslavksy, Finkenauer, & Vohs, 2001), it is argued that many shared positive moments are required to diminish the impact of a single negative interaction. Put another way, the more positive moments couples have accumulated, the less any one negative relationship experience should undermine relationship happiness and stability (Gottman, 1994). Supporting this idea, two independent daily diary studies have revealed that emotional capital moderates the within-person association between daily partner negativity and daily marital satisfaction. Specifically, couples who reported accumulating more emotional capital within the relationship exhibited lower reactivity to their partner's daily negative behaviors; that is, they maintained higher levels of relationship satisfaction on days when their partners transgressed, compared to couples reporting less emotional capital (Feeney & Lemay, 2012; Walsh, Neff, & Gleason, 2017).

Although these studies provide some empirical evidence for the buffering potential of emotional capital, research has yet to examine precisely why an accumulation of everyday shared positive moments can help couples better withstand relational difficulties. Drawing from recent theoretical extensions of emotional capital, which suggest that accumulating positive moments may influence couples' appraisals of their relationship difficulties (Afifi et al., 2016), the current study examined whether emotional capital may be associated with more benevolent

interpretations of a partner's transgressions. In particular, we expected that spouses who reported accruing more emotional capital would make more benevolent attributions for and be more forgiving of their partner's negative behaviors, which in turn would be associated with reduced reactivity to those transgressions.

Emotional Capital and the Appraisal of Relationship Difficulties

Although small, shared positive moments with a partner, such as laughing together or talking about the events of one's day, may seem unremarkable in isolation, converging perspectives argue that when accumulated, these experiences form an invaluable resource for weathering relationship difficulties (Afifi et al., 2016; Gottman, 1994; Kelley, 1983). For example, according to several theories as couples build emotional capital, they are likely to feel a greater sense of cohesion, or communal orientation within the relationship, and thus should become more likely to appraise any relational problems that may arise from a broader, more positive mindset (Afifi et al., 2016; Kelley, 1983). In other words, when couples with more emotional capital encounter the occasional negative relationship experience, that negativity is weighed against the broader context of their previously accumulated positive moments. In this way, emotional capital serves as a cushion that can encourage couples to give one another the benefit of the doubt and enact coping responses aimed at preserving and repairing the relationship, thereby fostering greater resilience to relational difficulties (Driver & Gottman, 2004). When emotional capital is lacking, however, the ratio of positive to negative relationship experiences is diminished; without the protective cushion that emotional capital provides, spouses can feel more disconnected from one another and negative events will carry more weight within the relationship (Gottman, 1994). Essentially, negative experiences may be appraised as more threatening, resulting in the erosion of relationship well-being (Afifi et al., 2016).

Given that emotional capital is argued to promote more positive, less threatening appraisals of negative relationship experiences, we suggest that spouses' attributions for their partner's transgressions may represent one mechanism through which emotional capital promotes resilience to relational difficulties. Attributions represent a process in which spouses determine whether their partners' specific behavioral transgressions are indicative of larger shortcomings in the relationship or whether these behaviors are immaterial to the quality of the relationship. Specifically, spouses determine whether their partner was the cause of the transgression (e.g., whether the behavior was a result of stable aspects of the partner's personality) and whether the partner was responsible for the behavior (e.g., whether the behavior was intentional and thus the partner should be blamed for their actions). Importantly, attributions are associated with spouses' reactivity to their partner's negative behaviors, such that spouses who rely on temporary, situational attributions to describe their partner's transgressions maintain higher levels of relationship satisfaction in the face of those transgressions compared to spouses who utilize more stable, blaming attributions (McNulty & Karney, 2001). Thus, when couples accumulate more emotional capital, they should be more inclined toward giving their partner the 'benefit of the doubt' (i.e., making benevolent attributions for negative partner behavior), which should weaken the link between negative partner behaviors and marital happiness.

At times, however, given that no partner is perfect, even spouses with greater levels of emotional capital may find fault in their partner's actions. In these circumstances, emotional capital may encourage individuals to move past those transgressions and to forgive their partners. When faced with a partner's blameworthy, hurtful behaviors, spouse can choose to harbor feelings of resentment and ruminate on their desires for revenge, or they can forgive their partner and work towards restoring harmony within the relationship (Fincham, 2000). Not surprisingly,

forgiving a partner for minor transgressions can be essential for successfully overcoming relationship difficulties and maintaining relationship happiness. Forgiveness has been linked to pro-relationship responses to partner transgressions, including improved communication (Fincham, 2000), increased relational effort (Braithwaite, Selby, & Fincham, 2010), and better conflict resolution (Fincham, Beach, & Davila, 2004). Despite these benefits, forgiving a partner can be quite difficult, and growing research suggests that the relationship context plays an important role in shaping spouses' willingness to forgive. Specifically, spouses who feel closer and more connected to their partner (Hoyt, Fincham, McCullough, Maio, & Davila, 2005) and whose relationships are characterized by more positive emotional valence (Worthington & Wade, 1999) are more likely to respond to transgressions in a forgiving manner. Consequently, we suggest that forgiveness may represent a second mechanism through which emotional capital may promote resilience to relationship difficulties. By accruing shared positive moments together, couples create a relational context that should facilitate forgiving responses to transgressions; in this way, increased forgiveness may at least partially explain the buffering effect of emotional capital on responses to relational difficulties.

Overview of the Current Study

Although it has been theorized that emotional capital should be associated with more benevolent appraisals of relationship difficulties (Afifi et al., 2016), to date no empirical studies have tested this assertion. To better understand the beneficial effects of emotional capital, the current study examined whether emotional capital may have an indirect effect on spouses' reactivity to their partner's transgressions through relationship attributions and forgiveness tendencies in a sample of newlywed couples. These processes were examined in newlywed spouses as some research indicates that accumulating emotional capital during the early "honeymoon" period may be especially important for the stability of the marriage over time;

couples who remain married report fewer decreases in their daily shared positive experiences with one another during the first two years of their marriage compared to couples who eventually divorce (Huston, Caughlin, Houts, & George, 2001).

In the current study, couples completed questionnaires assessing their relationship attributions and their general tendency to forgive their partner. Couples also completed a 10-day daily diary survey, which assessed spouses' shared positive experiences with their partner, the negative behaviors they received from their partner, and their marital satisfaction each day. Consistent with prior work (e.g., Feeney & Lemay, 2012; Walsh et al., 2017), reactivity was defined as the within-person association between daily partner negativity and daily marital satisfaction; a stronger negative association indicates greater reactivity to partner transgressions. In line with previous research illustrating that emotional capital buffers spouses' daily marital satisfaction from the damaging effects of relationship difficulties (Feeney & Lemay, 2012; Walsh et al., 2017), we expected that spouses who reported more emotional capital on average across the 10 diary days would exhibit a weaker association between their daily reports of partner negativity and daily marital satisfaction compared to spouses who reported less emotional capital. Extending prior work, we also expected that spouses reporting more emotional capital on average would be more likely to make benevolent attributions for and be more forgiving of their partner's transgressions compared to spouses reporting less emotional capital; these benevolent attributions and forgiveness tendencies, in turn, were expected to be associated with reduced reactivity to negative partner behaviors. Finally, we expected these associations to emerge when adjusting for spouses' general level of marital satisfaction across the diary task.

Method

Participants

Eighty-four different-sex newlywed couples were recruited to participate in a larger study of marriage through advertisements placed in local newspapers, premarital counseling offices, wedding vendors (e.g. bridal shops), and online websites (e.g., *Facebook)*. Data collection for the study began in April 2009. Couples were screened to ensure this was the first marriage for each partner, they were married less than six months, and neither spouse had children. As the primary goals of the broader study were to examine issues not directly relevant to the current paper (i.e., stress spillover effects in marriage), sample size was determined through a power analysis for detecting these other effects, coupled with funding constraints. The current study utilized data from the 79 husbands and 80 wives who chose to participate in the daily diary task described below. Thus, we included all participants who provided data on the key measures of interest for this study. For a full overview of the protocol and measures used in the broader study, visit https://osf.io/9rdqv/.

On average, husbands were 27.5 (*SD* = 4.6) years of age and wives were 25.6 (*SD* = 3.7) years of age. The majority of spouses (60.3% of husbands and 74.2% of wives) held a Bachelor's degree or higher. Most husbands (83.3%) identified as White, 13.1% as Hispanic/Latino, and 3.6% as Asian American. Similarly, 81% of wives identified as White, 9.5% as Hispanic/Latina, 8.3% as Asian American, and 1.2% as other race(s). The median combined income of couples was approximately $60,000. In general, this sample was somewhat less diverse and more highly educated than the community population from which it was drawn.

Procedure

Within the first six months of marriage, all 84 couples completed a packet of questionnaires at home before attending a laboratory session in which couples completed some additional questionnaires and engaged in a series of videotaped interactions not relevant to the

current study. After the lab session, spouses were then asked to complete a 10-day daily diary

survey. Of the original 84 couples, 79 husbands (94%) and 80 wives (95%) chose to participate

in the daily diary task. Spouses were provided with all 10 surveys in pre-stamped envelopes and

were instructed to independently complete one survey each night before going to bed and to

place the survey in a mailbox the following morning. Postmark dates on the envelopes confirmed

89% of the daily diaries were mailed the morning following their completion. On average,

spouses completed nine daily surveys, and 85% of spouses completed all 10 days. Spouses who

completed fewer than 10 daily surveys did not significantly differ from those who completed all

the surveys on the demographic variables of age, race/ethnicity, and income or on the measures

of relationship attributions or forgiveness. Couples were paid $75 for completing the initial

questionnaire and attending the lab session, and $25 for completing the daily diary task. All

measures used in the current study can be found in the Supplementary Materials.

Questionnaires

  Relationship attributions. As part of the initial at-home questionnaire packet, spouses

completed the Relationship Attributions Measure (Fincham & Bradbury, 1992). This measure

presents participants with four negative scenarios likely to occur in most relationships (e.g.,

"Your spouse does not pay attention to what you are saying"). For each scenario, spouses were

asked to rate their agreement with several statements reflective of spouses' attributions for their

partner's behavior (1 = strongly disagree; 7 = strongly agree). The causality attributions subscale

assesses the perceived locus, globality, and stability of the cause of the negative behavior (e.g.,

"My spouse's behavior was due to something about him/her"). The responsibility attribution

subscale captures the extent to which spouses consider their partners' behaviors as intentional,

selfishly motivated, and blameworthy (e.g., "My spouse did not pay attention to me on purpose

rather than unintentionally"). A summed composite score was computed for each subscale; however, because the subscales were moderately to highly correlated in the current study (wives $r = 0.66$, $p < .001$; husbands $r = 0.44$, $p < .001$), an overall relationship attributions composite score was created by averaging the causality and responsibility scores, consistent with some prior work (McNulty, O'Mara, & Karney, 2008). This composite score could range from 12 to 84, with higher scores indicating less benevolent (i.e., more stable and blaming) relationship attributions ($\alpha = .90$ for wives and .86 for husbands).

Forgiveness. As part of the questionnaires completed during the laboratory session, participants completed a 6-item measure assessing their general tendency to forgive their partner (Fincham & Beach, 2002). Participants responded to items such as "I try to live by the motto 'let bygones be bygones' in my marriage" and "I am quick to forgive my partner" using a 6-point scale (1 = do not agree; 6 = agree completely). Summed composite scores were created with possible ranges from 6 to 36, and higher scores indicated a greater tendency to forgive their partner ($\alpha = .80$ for wives and .69 for husbands).

Daily Diary Measures

Emotional capital. As part of the daily survey, spouses were presented with a checklist of 19 relationship behaviors and asked to indicate whether any of the behaviors had occurred that day (1 = yes; 0 = no). Six items captured everyday positive moments that spouses may share together (i.e., "Spouse said something that made you feel loved," "Spouse showed an interest in the events of your day," "You enjoyed a leisure activity with spouse," "You shared physical intimacy with spouse," "You showed an interest in the events of your spouse's day," and "You tried to make your spouse feel loved") and were used to assess emotional capital.[1] Notably, this

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[1] Four of the 13 remaining items in the behavioral checklist assessed partner transgressions, which are described in the next section. The remaining nine items captured constructs outside the scope of the current study, including

measure captures a sampling of the types of everyday positive moments shared between partners that are highly similar to those assessed in prior research (Feeney & Lemay, 2012; Walsh et al., 2017). Summed composite scores were created for each spouse on each day, and the average daily emotional capital score across all diary days was created for each participant. Thus, higher scores indicated that individuals accumulated more emotional capital on average over the duration of the diary task. As emotional capital was assessed using a checklist of distinct, concrete behaviors, which generally serves to reduce internal consistency, the daily measure exhibited moderate between-person reliability when estimated for an average given day ($\alpha = .57$ for wives and .60 for husbands). However, the between-person reliability for average emotional capital across the diary days was high ($\alpha = .94$ for wives and .93 for husbands), suggesting that there were stable individual differences in the emotional capital reported across the diary task (see Cranford et al., 2006 for a detailed discussion of reliability estimates for daily measures).

Daily partner transgressions. As part of the behavioral checklist described above, spouses also indicated whether their partner had engaged in any of four negative behaviors that day (i.e., "You had an argument with spouse," "Spouse let you down or broke a promise," "Spouse criticized you," and "Spouse showed anger or impatience toward you"). Summed composite scores were created on each day, with higher scores indicating a greater number of negative behaviors reported on a given day. Again, because transgressions were assessed using a behavioral checklist, the measure was not expected to exhibit high levels of between-person reliability for a given day ($\alpha = .41$ for wives and .50 for husbands); however, it did exhibit high

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whether the participant was "unable to spend time with [their] spouse" (one item), negative behaviors participants enacted toward their partner (e.g., "you showed anger or impatience toward your spouse"; three items), and instrumental support behaviors received from and enacted toward a partner (e.g., "You helped your spouse with something important"; five items). Given that receiving instrumental support can have negative consequences, such as increased negative mood and anxiety (e.g., Gleason & Iida, 2015), these behavioral exchanges do not necessarily capture shared positive moments; thus, consistent with prior work (Walsh et al., 2017) we did not include instrumental support items in the emotional capital construct.

levels of between-person reliability across diary days ($\alpha = .87$ for wives and .91 for husbands). Moreover, and particularly relevant to the current study, the reliability of change coefficient, which examines whether the scale can reliably detect true change in the construct across time, was also good ($\alpha = .69$ for both spouses).

Daily marital satisfaction. Daily marital satisfaction was assessed each day using three items from the Kansas Marital Satisfaction Scale modified for daily use (e.g., "How satisfied were you with your marriage today?"; Schumm, et. al., 1986). Participants responded to items using a 7-point scale (1 = very unsatisfied; 7 = very satisfied). An average score was created for each spouse on each day, with higher scores indicating greater satisfaction on a given day. This measure exhibited high levels of between-person reliability within days ($\alpha =.86$ for wives and .92 for husbands) and across days ($\alpha =.98$ for wives and .99 for husbands), as well as good reliability of change ($\alpha = 0.93$ for both spouses).

Analytic Strategy

In order to test the potential indirect effects of emotional capital on reactivity through attributions and forgiveness, we first modeled spouses' reactivity to their partner's daily negative behaviors as the within-person association between daily partner negativity and daily satisfaction using Hierarchical Linear Modeling (HLM; Raudenbush, Bryk, & Congdon, 2013). Notably, preliminary analyses indicated that most of the variance in daily marital satisfaction and daily negative partner behaviors was at the within-person level (daily marital satisfaction: 66% for wives and 60% for husbands; daily negative partner behaviors 83% for wives and 77% for husbands), suggesting that spouses generally fluctuated in their day-to-day responses to these measures. Interdependence within couples was accounted for using procedures described by Laurenceau and Bolger (2005) for analyzing dyadic diary data, such that wives' and husbands'

effects were estimated simultaneously and dummy variables were used to nest wife and husband data within each couple. The equation for the model is as follows:

Level 1: Daily Satisfaction $= b_0$ (Wives) $+ b_1$ (Husbands)

$+ b_2$ (Wives' Diary Day) $+ b_3$ (Husbands' Diary Day)

$+ b_4$ (Wives' Report of Daily Negative Partner Behavior)

$+ b_5$ (Husbands' Report of Daily Negative Partner Behavior) $+$ error

Level 2: $b_0 = \gamma_{00} + \gamma_{01}$(Wives' Average Report of Daily Negative Partner Behavior) $+ r_0$

$b_1 = \gamma_{10} + \gamma_{11}$(Husbands' Average Report of Daily Negative Partner Behavior) $+ r_1$

b_2 thru $b_5 = \gamma_{20\text{-}50} + r_{2\text{-}5}$

In this equation, we modeled each individual's daily satisfaction as a function of their report of their partner's same day negative behaviors (b_4 for wives and b_5 for husbands), which was within-person centered. The model also included diary day (b_2 for wives and b_3 for husbands) to adjust for any linear changes in marital satisfaction across the diary task. Finally, to adjust for the fact that some spouses generally reported greater levels of partner negativity than did others, individuals' average report of negative partner behaviors across all diary days was centered between persons and added to the between-person level of analysis (Level 2). Including this variable allows us to fully disentangle the within-person and between-person effects of negative partner behaviors on satisfaction (Bolger & Laurenceau, 2013; Curran & Bauer, 2011). The between-person equation for each coefficient in the model included a random effect.

On average, spouses exhibited significant reactivity to their partner's daily negative behaviors (wives: $t(78) = -10.85$, $p < .001$, $b = -0.54$, $SE = 0.05$, 95% CI [-0.71, -0.37]; husbands: $t(78) = -7.62$, $p < .001$, $b = -0.39$, $SE = 0.05$, 95% CI [-0.56, -0.22]), such that spouses reported lower marital satisfaction on days with more (vs. fewer) partner transgressions. Nonetheless, there was significant variability across spouses in the extent of this reactivity

(wives: $\chi^2(55) = 165.28$, $p < .001$; husbands: $\chi^2(55) = 189.42$, $p < .001$), indicating that some

spouses exhibited greater reactivity than others. Thus, for our primary analyses of interest, we

exported each spouse's unique reactivity coefficient from the HLM analysis to be used as the

outcome measure in the path analyses described below. For ease of interpretation, this reactivity

coefficient was multiplied by -1 so that larger, positive scores would indicate a greater reactivity

to partner transgressions.

After estimating the reactivity coefficients, we then examined our primary hypotheses by

conducting a path analysis in Mplus 7.4, which allowed for full-information likelihood estimates

to handle missing data as well as model fit estimates to assess the extent to which the proposed

model is reasonably consistent with the data (Muthén & Muthén, 2015).[2] Specifically, as seen in

Figure 1, we conducted a structural equation model in which spouses' reactivity coefficient was

regressed on emotional capital, relationship attributions, and forgiveness. Relationship

attributions and forgiveness were also regressed on emotional capital, and the indirect effects of

emotional capital on reactivity were tested. Additionally, participants' average marital

satisfaction across the diary days was regressed on emotional capital and covaried with

reactivity, relationship attributions, and forgiveness to adjust for the associations between those

variables. Because the data in the current study were dyadic, we used multiple group modeling

using the GROUPING function and a dummy coded categorical spouse variable (0 = wife; 1 =

husband) to independently estimate the effects for wives and husbands, and we used the

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[2] This two-step approach (i.e., estimating a reactivity coefficient in Step 1 and then using that reactivity coefficient as an outcome measure in a path analysis conducted in Step 2) was necessary as the outcome variable, reactivity, is a within-person covariation. Unfortunately, it is not possible to conduct a path analysis in which the outcome variable is a within-person covariation in Mplus (for a deeper discussion of indirect path analyses with moderated effects see Hayes, 2013).

CLUSTER function to account for the dependency in the data (i.e., spouses nested within couple).

As we had no theoretical basis to predict differences in the effects for wives and husbands, we constrained the paths of interest for wives and husbands to be equal across groups and conducted a Satorra-Bentler Scaled Chi-square test (Satorra & Bentler, 2001) to determine whether the model fit of the fully constrained model significantly differed from the unconstrained, free model. The chi-square comparison was nonsignificant ($\chi^2(6) = 6.97$, $p = .32$), indicating that the constrained model did not fit the data significantly worse than the free model, and, thus, there were no significant gender differences in any paths of interest. Therefore, we only present the most parsimonious model in which we constrained the effects of interest to be equal across wives and husbands. The unstandardized and standardized coefficients are reported for all results. Given that the paths of interest were constrained to be equal across wives and husbands, the unstandardized coefficients are identical for both groups; however, the standardized coefficients for wives and husbands do vary slightly due to the fact that Mplus uses within-group standardization when reporting these coefficients.

Results

Descriptive Statistics

Means and standard deviations for all variables of interest are presented in Table 1, and all between-person and within-couple correlations are presented in Table 2. In general, newlywed spouses reported relatively benevolent attributions and were highly forgiving of their partner's transgressions. Across the daily diary task, spouses reported engaging in emotional capital experiences on 95% of days and receiving negative behaviors from their partner on

approximately 27% of days. Emotional capital experiences and negative partner behaviors co-occurred on 24.5% of days.

Emotional Capital and Reactivity to Relationship Difficulties

Before testing the predicted indirect effects, we first examined the potential buffering effect of emotional capital. To do this, we conducted a simple path analysis in which the reactivity coefficient and average marital satisfaction were regressed on emotional capital and the covariance between marital satisfaction and the reactivity variable was included ($\chi^2(2) = .35$, $p = .84$; Comparative Fit Index [CFI] = 1.00; root mean square error of approximation; [RMSEA] = .00, 95% CI [0.00, 0.13]). Not surprisingly, we found that greater emotional capital was associated with higher levels of average daily marital satisfaction ($b = 0.31$, $SE = .05$, $p < .001$, 95% CI [0.21, 0.40], wives $\beta = 0.53$, husbands $\beta = 0.49$), and average daily satisfaction was significantly negatively associated with reactivity ($b = -0.08$, $SE = .02$, $p < .001$, 95% CI [-0.12, -0.05], wives $\beta = -0.65$, husbands $\beta = -0.54$). More importantly, and consistent with previous research (Feeney & Lemay, 2012; Walsh et al., 2017), results indicated that spouses who reported accumulating greater emotional capital across the diary days exhibited reduced reactivity to their partners' negative behaviors ($b = -0.07$, $SE = .02$, $p < .001$, 95% CI [-0.11, -0.04], wives $\beta = -0.36$, husbands $\beta = -0.36$). Thus, these results provide additional evidence for the buffering effect of emotional capital.[3]

Examining the Indirect Effects of Emotional Capital on Reactivity

The main goal of the study was to examine the conceptual model shown in Figure 1. Specifically, we expected that spouses who reported accumulating more emotional capital would

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[3] Although this path analysis conceptually replicates prior results, this statistical approach does not directly match the cross-level interaction tested in a multilevel modeling format conducted in prior work; for results of these analyses, please see the Supplementary Materials.

make more benevolent relationship attributions and would be more forgiving of their partner's

transgressions, both of which in turn would be associated with reduced reactivity. Results

indicated that the model fit the data well ($\chi^2(8) = 12.38$, $p = .13$; CFI = 0.97; RMSEA = .08, 95%

CI [0.00, 0.16]), and the results from this model are presented in Figure 2 and Tables 3-4. As in

the previous analysis, emotional capital was significantly, negatively associated with reactivity to

partner transgressions. Consistent with predictions, emotional capital was also significantly,

negatively associated with relationship attributions and significantly, positively associated with

forgiveness. In other words, spouses who accumulated more emotional capital across the diary

days were indeed less likely to make stable and blaming attributions for their partner's negative

behaviors and were more likely to forgive partners for their transgressions. Additionally,

forgiveness was significantly associated with reactivity, such that partners who were more

forgiving were also less reactive to their partner's negative behaviors. Notably, the direct effect

of relationship attributions on reactivity and the indirect effect of emotional capital on reactivity

through relationship attributions did not reach conventional levels of significance ($p = .06$ in

both cases); however, the indirect effect of emotional capital on reactivity through forgiveness,

and the *total* indirect effect through both relationship attributions *and* forgiveness were

significant (see Table 4). These results suggest that spouses who accumulated more emotional

capital, were more likely to make benevolent and forgiving interpretations of their partners'

negative behaviors, and *together*, those interpretations partially account for the association

between emotional capital and reactivity to partner's transgression.[4]

Testing Alternative Models

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[4] As presented in the Supplementary Materials, removing average marital satisfaction from the model did not alter
the pattern of results.

Due to the cross-sectional nature of the data collected in the current study, we conducted an additional exploratory analysis to examine a reasonable alternative model testing whether benevolent relationship attributions and/or greater forgiveness may predict greater emotional capital directly and indirectly through reduced reactivity to partner transgressions. In other words, spouses who engage in more benevolent appraisals of their partner's transgressions may be more resilient to such transgressions, and thus may be more inclined to engage in emotional capital experiences. To test these potential associations, emotional capital was regressed on reactivity, relationship attributions, and forgiveness. Reactivity was also regressed on relationship attributions and forgiveness, and the indirect effects of relationship attributions and forgiveness on emotional capital through reactivity were tested. Additionally, in order to account for marital satisfaction, emotional capital was regressed on average daily marital satisfaction, which covaried with reactivity, relationship attributions, and forgiveness. Again, we constrained the paths for wives and husbands to be equal and report the most parsimonious model here.

The alternative model showed good overall model fit ($\chi^2(6) = 5.83$, $p = .44$, CFI = 1.00, RMSEA = .00, 95% CI [0.00, 0.14]), indicating that this model also fit the data well.[5] However, although relationship attributions and forgiveness were significantly associated with reactivity in the expected directions (see Figure 3), neither attributions, forgiveness, nor reactivity were significantly associated with emotional capital, and there were no significant indirect effects in the alternative model (see Table 5). In other words, although spouses who were less blaming and more forgiving exhibited lowered reactivity to their partner's transgressions, these associations did not predict spouses' accumulation of emotional capital within their relationship.

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[5] The proposed and alternative models were not nested models (i.e., the dependent variable differed across models); thus, neither the Satorra-Bentler Scaled Chi-square test nor AIC and BIC statistics could be used to statistically compare the models to determine which model showed better fit.

Discussion

Across the course of any long-term relationship, couples will undoubtedly face many difficulties; however, those difficulties will be interspersed with numerous small shared positive moments together. Although these everyday positive moments may seem inconsequential on the surface, evidence suggests that accumulating these experiences creates emotional capital for the relationship, which has been shown to enhance relationship quality by reducing spouses' reactivity to any negative relationship events that may arise (Feeney & Lemay, 2012; Walsh, et. al., 2017). Indeed, the current work provides additional evidence for this protective effect. Namely, in this study we found that spouses who generally accumulated more emotional capital, or shared more everyday positive moments with their partner on average across a 10-day diary task, showed a weaker association between their partner's daily transgressions and their daily marital satisfaction. Thus, these findings further support the notion that emotional capital may be a vital resource for maintaining relationship quality.   .

The primary goal of the study, however, was to extend prior work by conducting the first empirical examination on why having a store of relationship positivity may protect couples from the consequences of relationship difficulties. Drawing from theories suggesting that accumulating small positive moments together may help couples develop a stronger communal orientation and thus should promote more benevolent appraisals of relationship difficulties (Afifi et al., 2016; Kelly, 1983), we expected that relationship attributions and forgiveness tendencies would partially account for the link between emotional capital and reactivity to negative relationship events. Supporting this prediction, we found that compared to spouses who reported less emotional capital, spouses who reported more emotional capital across the diary days were less likely to make dispositional and blaming attributions for their partner's negative behaviors and were more likely to forgive their partner's transgressions. Notably, these results held when

adjusting for spouses' average daily marital satisfaction, which highlights the unique role that discrete positive moments may play in shaping spouses' relationship well-being.

Additionally, supporting the idea that benevolent appraisals for partner transgressions can help couples maintain greater relationship satisfaction when faced with negative relationship experiences, we found that spouses who were more forgiving of their partners' transgressions were less reactive to their partner's daily negative behaviors, as these spouses maintained higher levels of daily relationship satisfaction in the face of those negative behaviors. Moreover, and in line with our main hypothesis, results revealed that emotional capital was indirectly associated with reduced reactivity to a partner's transgressions through increased forgiveness tendencies. Finally, although relationship attributions did not significantly predict reduced reactivity in the current study, we found that emotional capital was also indirectly associated with lower reactivity through the combination of a reduced tendency to make dispositional and blaming attributions and an increased tendency to forgive (i.e., the total indirect effect was significant). Thus, the overall pattern of results not only provides additional evidence that emotional capital can protect relationships from difficulties, but also demonstrates the importance of relationship attributions and, particularly, of forgiveness for this buffering effect.

Given that no relationship is immune to difficulties, the current study has important implications for relationship interventions. Specifically, encouraging couples to invest time and energy into sharing small everyday positive moments together may initiate a cycle of positivity within the relationship. Couples who accumulate emotional capital should be more likely to develop communal orientations in which they feel greater connectedness with their partner and more secure in their relationships (Afifi et al., 2016). The current findings suggest that couples who are connected in this way may be better equipped to overcome relationship difficulties

together, as they are more likely to engage in benevolent appraisals of those difficulties and to forgive their partner for any transgressions. As a result of overcoming relationship difficulties, couples are likely to feel even greater closeness (Afifi et al., 2016), and thus may be inspired to engage in more everyday positive experiences that build emotional capital in the future. In this way, incorporating more shared daily positive moments with one's partner may activate a cascade of events which promote resiliency and thriving through difficult times. Indeed, the current study examined an alternative model in which spouses who engage in more benevolent appraisals of their partner's transgressions may be more resilient to such transgressions, and thus may be more inclined to engage in emotional capital experiences. Although this overall model did exhibit good fit for the data, the link between reactivity and emotional capital was not significant. In light of these mixed results, additional research is needed to specifically test the potential cyclical associations between emotional capital and reactivity to partner transgressions.

How Much Emotional Capital is Enough?

Although the current findings contribute to a growing body of work demonstrating the value of emotional capital for relationship well-being, several lingering questions remain regarding how much emotional capital may be necessary to mitigate the harmful impact of negative relationships events. Theories of emotional capital suggest that that because 'bad is stronger than good', a consistent accumulation of positive moments over time may be required to reap the benefits emotional capital can provide (Baumeister, et al., 2001; Gottman, 1999). Yet, some research indicates that even the limited shared positive moments couples can accrue on a single day might be sufficient for protecting the relationship. Specifically, Feeney and Lemay (2012) found evidence that when spouses shared more positive moments together on a given day, they were less reactive to their partner's transgressions the following day. Thus, particularly

when examining spouses' reactivity to those relatively minor, commonplace difficulties that many couples will face on a day-to-day basis (e.g., criticism from a partner), shorter accumulations of emotional capital may also prove advantageous for spouses' appraisals of and responses to relational difficulties.

When faced with more severe relationship difficulties (e.g., infidelity), however, a larger emotional capital reserve would likely be necessary to protect couples from the harmful consequences of those difficulties. Indeed, given that bad events tend to carry more weight for overall relationship evaluations compared to good events (Baumeister et al., 2001), it is possible that an accumulation of small, shared positive moments may not be as effective in helping couples weather serious problems. Thus, additional research should explore whether some relational difficulties may overwhelm the beneficial effects emotional capital can provide.

In a similar vein, it is also possible that the benevolent appraisals that emotional capital may inspire are not always beneficial for the relationship. Previous empirical work suggests that for couples reporting more intense relationship problems, making benevolent attributions for and forgiving partner's negative behaviors can be detrimental for longer-term relationship outcomes. More specifically, couples who make benevolent interpretations for major relationships difficulties tend to experience steeper declines in their relationship satisfaction and greater increases in the severity of their relationship problems, (McNulty & Russell, 2010; McNulty, et al., 2008). Thus, additional work is needed to determine whether emotional capital may promote benevolent interpretations to severe transgressions, as well as the long-term effects of those relationship appraisals, or whether emotional capital may be linked to other coping strategies that may be more adaptive in those circumstances.

Strengths and Limitations

The current study had a number of methodological strengths, including the use of daily diary data, which allowed us to capture a snapshot of spouses' typical day-to-day exchanges with their partners. Specifically, we were able to assess couples' accumulation of everyday positive experiences on a daily basis, which allowed us to create a measure of emotional capital that is unlikely to be influenced by retrospective bias and thus, should reflect a reasonably accurate assessment of their positive moments with their partner. One limitation of this study, however, is that all measures were assessed at the same relative time point (i.e., within the first six months of marriage). Consequently, the analyses reported here cannot examine true causal mediation. In light of this limitation, we conducted an additional exploratory analysis to determine the feasibility of a theoretically reasonable alternative path model. Although the alternative model showed good overall model fit, many paths in this model were not significant (i.e., relationship attributions, forgiveness, and reactivity were all not associated with emotional capital). Thus, these results leave lingering questions regarding the viability of these alternate paths and further emphasize the need for additional longitudinal and experimental work to better untangle potential causal links.

A second limitation is that the direct and indirect associations tested in our path model were assessed at the between-person level of analysis. Thus, the findings discussed here do not address intra-individual variations in these relationship processes. For example, although the current findings indicate that spouses who accumulate more emotional capital on average are also generally more likely to engage in benign interpretations of their partner's transgressions, this study was not able to examine whether these spouses are more likely to engage in benevolent and forgiving appraisals of their partner's transgressions on the days when those transgressions

occur (i.e., in the moment). Although we would expect a similar pattern of results, future research is necessary to examine daily appraisals of partners' negative behaviors.

The current study also relied on data collected from a sample of generally happy, newlywed couples. Identifying the factors that can promote greater resilience to relationship problems during the early phases of marriage provides crucial insight into the preventative maintenance efforts that can keep marriages strong before significant declines in marital happiness begin. Nonetheless, because newlyweds are often highly motivated to preserve the relationship and tend to report lower levels of conflict and negativity, additional research is necessary to explore the potential benefits of emotional capital building experiences in samples of more distressed couples. Specifically, research should examine whether these benefits are attenuated in a sample reporting more serious or frequent marital difficulties or whether those small shared positive moments may take on even greater significance for couples after the honeymoon period fades.

Finally, similar to prior work, this study focused on whether emotional capital may buffer couples from the harmful consequences of relational transgressions. Yet, if emotional capital promotes a greater sense of cohesion between partners (e.g., Afifi, et al., 2016), emotional capital may also enhance couples' resilience to stressors encountered outside the relationship (e.g., work stress, financial problems, etc.). Future work should explore whether couples' shared positive moments might be an important resource for limiting stress spillover effects as well.

Conclusions

A major goal of relationship research is to identify relationship experiences and characteristics which help couples achieve and maintain healthy relationships. The current study contributes to a robust and growing literature indicating that spouses who regularly share

positive moments with their partners develop a resource which can protect their relationship from difficulties. Additionally, this study provides an explanation for why those positive experiences can provide such protective effects. Accumulating emotional capital is associated with more optimistic views of the relationship, such that couples with more of this resource are likely to interpret their partner's behaviors in more benevolent and, particularly, in more forgiving ways, which in turn, allows them to maintain stable levels of relationship satisfaction even in the face of their partner's transgressions. Thus, investing in one's relationship by regularly engaging in simple positive moments with a partner can help couples accrue relationship wealth, making relationship challenges less threatening and resulting in richer, more satisfying relationships.

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Table 1

Means and Standard Deviations for All Variables of Interest.

Variables	Possible Scores	M		Between-Person SD		Within-Person SD	
		Wife	Husband	Wife	Husband	Wife	Husband
1. Daily Negative Partner Behaviors	0-4	0.50	0.55	0.49	0.56	0.74	0.74
2. Daily Relationship Satisfaction	1-7	6.18	6.13	0.68	0.74	0.72	0.63
3. Daily Emotional Capital	0-6	3.96	3.76	1.15	1.19	1.23	1.23
4. Relationships Attributions	12-84	39.27	40.54	11.00	8.93	--	--
5. Forgiveness	6-36	27.35	29.02	5.59	4.13	--	--

Note: Within-person standard deviations could only be calculated for daily variables. Mean and between-person standard deviation scores for the daily variables represent average daily experiences across the 10-day diary task, while within-person standard deviation scores represent the average variation within each participant's daily experiences. Higher relationship attributions scores indicate less benevolent (i.e., more stable and blaming) relationship attributions.

Table 2

Correlations for All Variables of Interest.

Variables	1	2	3	4	5
1. Daily Negative Partner Behaviors	**0.63*****	-0.58***	-0.24*	0.30**	-0.09
2. Daily Marital Satisfaction	-0.52***	**0.61*****	0.48***	-0.41***	0.43***
3. Daily Emotional Capital	-0.19	0.53***	**0.61*****	-0.20	0.26*
4. Relationship Attributions	0.30**	-0.43***	-0.32**	**0.20**	-0.18
5. Forgiveness	-0.24*	0.47***	0.28*	-0.30**	**0.23***

Note: Daily variables represent the average score for each participant across all 10 days of the diary task. Husbands' correlations are presented above the diagonal and wives' correlations are presented below the diagonal. Bolded correlations on the diagonal are the within-couple correlations.
*$p < .05$; **$p < .01$; ***$p < .001$

Table 3

Tests of Direct Effects for Proposed Path Model.

Path	Mplus Estimate of Direct Effects						
						95% CI	
	b	Wife *β*	Hus *β*	*SE*	*p*	LL	UL
Emotional Capital → Reactivity	-0.05	-0.25	-0.26	0.02	.003	-0.09	-0.02
Emotional Capital → Relationship Attributions	-2.14	-0.23	-0.28	0.65	.001	-3.41	-0.87
Emotional Capital → Forgiveness	1.05	0.22	0.30	0.37	.005	0.32	1.78
Emotional Capital → General Marital Satisfaction	0.31	0.52	0.50	0.05	<.001	0.21	0.40
Relationship Attributions → Reactivity	0.003	0.15	0.13	0.002	.059	0.00	0.01
Forgiveness → Reactivity	-0.01	-0.30	-0.24	0.004	.002	-0.02	-0.01

Note: Standard error (*SE), p*-value, and confidence intervals (CI) are reported from the unstandardized (*b*) results. Although all paths were constrained to be equal across wives and husbands, the standardized beta coefficients (*β*) are slightly different due to within group standardization in Mplus.

Table 4

Tests of Indirect Effects for Proposed Path Model.

Path	Mplus Estimate of Indirect Effects						
	b	Wife *β*	Hus *β*	*SE*	*p*	95% CI LL	UL
Emotional Capital → Reactivity (Total Indirect)	-0.02	-0.10	-0.11	0.01	.01	-0.04	-0.01
Emotional Capital → Relationship Attributions → Reactivity	-0.01	-0.03	-0.04	0.004	.06	-0.01	0.00
Emotional Capital → Forgiveness → Reactivity	-0.01	-0.07	-0.07	0.01	.05	-0.03	0.00

Note: Standard error (*SE), p*-value, and confidence intervals (CI) are reported from the unstandardized (*b*) results. Although all paths were constrained to be equal across wives and husbands, the standardized beta coefficients (*β*) are slightly different due to within group standardization in Mplus.

Table 5

Tests of Indirect Effects for Alternative Path Model.

Path	Mplus Estimate of Indirect Effects						
	b	Wife β	Hus β	*SE*	*p*	95% CI LL	UL
Relationship Attributions → Reactivity → Emotional Capital	-0.001	-0.01	-0.01	0.002	.73	-0.01	0.004
Forgiveness → Reactivity → Emotional Capital	0.003	0.01	0.01	0.10	.74	-0.01	0.02

Note: Standard error (*SE), p*-value, and confidence intervals (CI) are reported from the unstandardized (*b*) results. Direct effects for all paths of interest are presented in Figure 3.
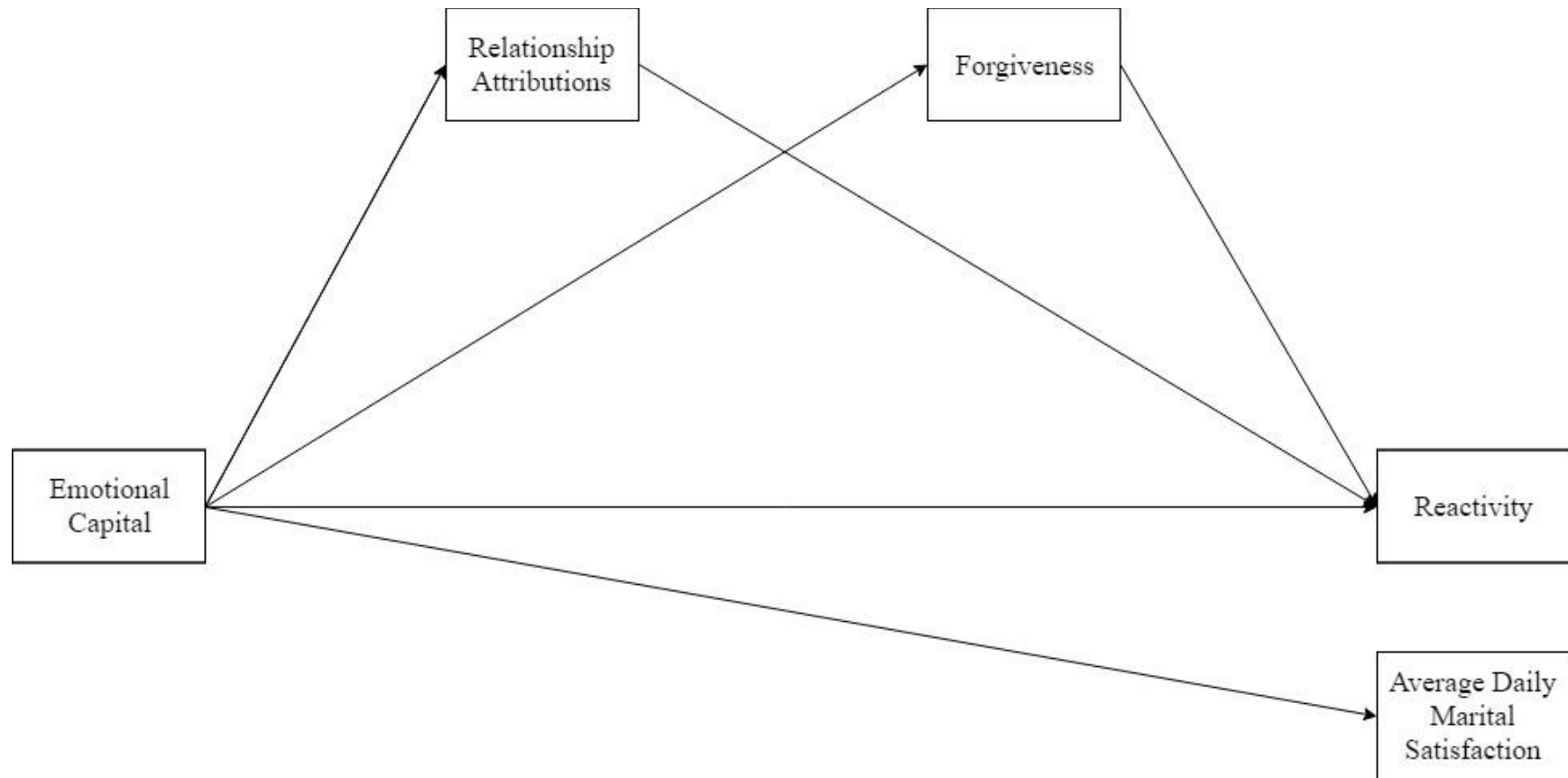
Figure 1. Conceptual model of path analysis in Mplus 7.4 testing the indirect effect of emotional capital on reactivity through relationship attributions and forgiveness. Not pictured is the covariance of marital satisfaction with relationship attributions, forgiveness, and reactivity.
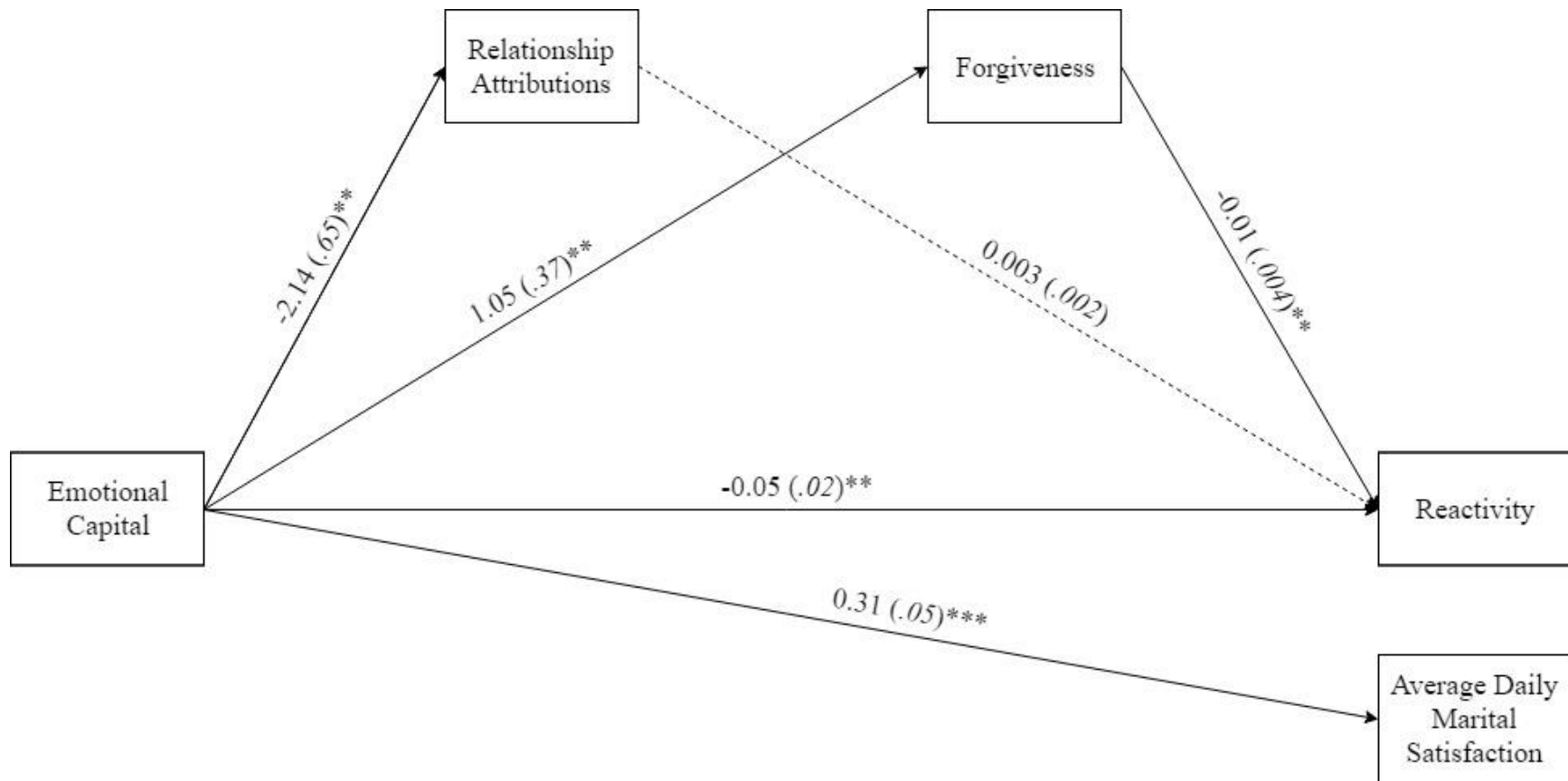
Figure 2. Unstandardized beta coefficients (and standard errors) for the proposed path model testing the indirect effects of emotional capital on reactivity through relationship attributions and forgiveness. All paths of interest were constrained to be equal across wives and husbands. Solid lines indicate significant associations; dashed lines indicate nonsignificant associations. The total indirect effect through relationship attributions and forgiveness was significant (see Table 4).

Model fit: $\chi^2(8) = 12.38$, $p = .13$; CFI = 0.97; RMSEA = .08, 95% CI [0.00, 0.16]
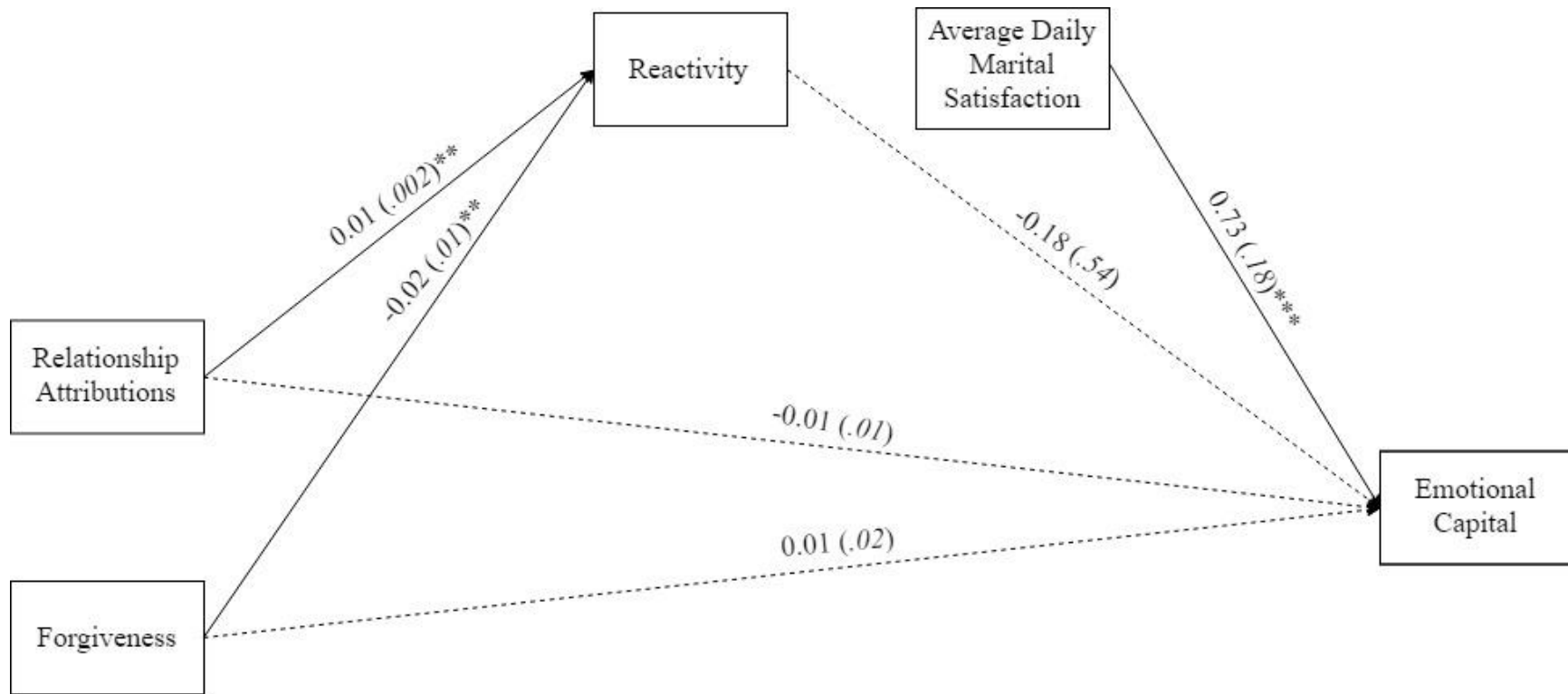
** $p < .01$; *** $p < .001$

Figure 3. Unstandardized beta coefficients (and standard errors) for an alternative path model testing the indirect effects of relationship attributions and forgiveness on emotional capital through reactivity. Not pictured is the covariance of marital satisfaction with relationship attributions, forgiveness, and reactivity All paths of interest were constrained to be equal across wives and husbands. Solid lines indicate significant associations; dashed lines indicate nonsignificant associations. The indirect effects through reactivity were both not significant (see Table 5).

Model fit: $\chi^2(6) = 5.83$, $p = .44$, CFI = 1.00, RMSEA = .00, 95% CI [0.00, 0.14]

$**\ p < .01; ***\ p < .001$