



Does being religious lead to greater self-forgiveness?

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ABSTRACT

Although the existence of an association between religion and self-forgiveness is well documented, the direction of effects and possible causal nature of the relationship is unknown. Two studies were therefore conducted using longitudinal and experimental designs, respectively. Study 1 ($n = 393$) examined the temporal relation between self-forgiveness and two indices of religion, religious activity and forgiveness by God. For both indices of religion, the effect from earlier religion to later self-forgiveness was significant but the reverse was not the case. In Study 2 participants ($n = 91$) were randomly primed with images that depicted an angry God, a benevolent God, or non-religious (abstract art) images before completing a measure of self-forgiveness. Respondents in the angry God condition were least self-forgiving and differed significantly from those in the non-religious (abstract art) condition who were most self-forgiving. These findings point to the need for investigation of mechanisms that might account for a potential causal relation between religion and self-forgiveness.

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Given the value placed on forgiveness in religious belief systems, especially the Abrahamic faiths (see Dorff, 1998, for Judaism; Marty, 1998, for Christianity; Abu-Nimer & Nasser, 2015, for Islam), interest in the association between religion and forgiveness is understandable. In an extensive qualitative review, McCullough, Bono, and Root (2005) noted that three decades of research documented that 'religious involvement is positively related to the disposition to forgive others' (p. 398), a conclusion that has been confirmed in a recent meta-analysis. Davis, Worthington, Hook, and Hill (2013), distinguishing between trait or dispositional forgiveness and state or offense specific forgiveness, showed that religion/spirituality is reliably related to each, though the magnitude of the association differs. For trait forgiveness, the association was $r = .29$ across 64 effect sizes whereas it was almost half the size for state forgiveness, $r = .15$ (50 effect sizes). This difference in the tendency to report generally forgiving others but to show less forgiveness in regard to a specific transgression has been labeled the religion-forgiveness discrepancy (McCullough & Worthington, Jr., 1999). However, this difference is perhaps more apparent than real as it involves a comparison of aggregated and single measure reports. Tsang, McCullough, and Hoyt (2005) showed that aggregating reports across specific transgressions appreciably increased the religion-state forgiveness association.

Although there is a substantial literature on religion and forgiveness of others, less is known about religious

involvement and self-forgiveness. This may appear surprising as it is reasonable to expect that the portrayal of a forgiving deity or higher power in many religious belief systems, and the valuing of forgiveness in every major faith tradition (Lundberg, 2010), is likely to facilitate forgiveness of the self. This idea was embodied in Hall and Fincham's (2005) model of self-forgiveness and received some support as increases in perceived forgiveness by a Higher power were related to increased self-forgiveness over time (Hall & Fincham, 2008). In this work self-forgiveness was conceptualized as a 'set of motivational changes whereby one becomes decreasingly motivated to avoid stimuli associated with the offense (e.g. the victim), decreasingly motivated to retaliate against the self (e.g. punish the self, engage in self-destructive behaviors), and increasingly motivated to act benevolently toward the self' (Hall & Fincham, 2008, p. 175).

More recently, in a random probability sample in the United States ($N = 1,774$), single item measures of self-forgiveness and perceived frequency of forgiveness by God were reliably related (Krause, 2017). Although Hall and Fincham (2005) referred to the literature on self-forgiveness as 'The stepchild of forgiveness research' (p. 621) work in this field has since mushroomed showing that self-forgiveness is related to better mental and physical health (e.g. Davis et al., 2015; Peterson et al., 2017; Toussaint, Webb, & Hirsch, 2017) as well as

relationship health (e.g. Massengale, Choe, & Davis, 2017; Pelucci, Regalia, Paleari, & Fincham, 2017). Indeed, there is now sufficient research on self-forgiveness and religion that Davis et al. (2013) in their meta-analysis were able to document a small, but reliable, association between religion/spirituality and self-forgiveness ($r = .12$ across 23 effect sizes).

The documentation of a relationship between religiosity and self-forgiveness does not, ipso facto, address the direction of effects: does religious involvement lead to greater self-forgiveness or vice versa? Like its parent literature on forgiveness more generally, longitudinal and experimental studies on self-forgiveness that can yield data to address the direction of effects and causal mechanisms are rare. This is particularly the case when it comes to the religion-self-forgiveness association, with two notable exceptions. One study found no relationship between church attendance and a question that asked about self-forgiveness 12 months later. Interestingly, though, an indirect effect was demonstrated whereby attendance predicted later humility which, in turn, predicted self-forgiveness (Krause, 2015). Using a probability sample of English-speaking adults in the US (the 1998 General Social Survey), Escher (2013) found that identifying with a Christian denomination at age 16 was related to more frequent endorsement of the item, 'I have forgiven myself for things that I have done wrong' some 30 years later. In addition, those who had expressed a religious affiliation at age 16 but no longer did so were less likely to forgive themselves. Because reports of earlier religious affiliation were retrospective this was not a longitudinal study per se and these findings could reflect the strong association found between current religious affiliation and responses to the self-forgiveness item.

The above observations make clear what is needed next in research on religiosity and self-forgiveness. As causes precede effects, longitudinal research is needed to establish temporal ordering. Study 1, therefore, examined religiosity and self-forgiveness at two points in time. Because participation in religion and forgiveness by God have been related to self-forgiveness, both indices of religion were examined. Should religious participation/forgiveness by God predict later self-forgiveness and not vice versa, this would suggest that religious participation influences self-forgiveness. However, even though temporal ordering can provide evidence consistent with the direction of effects, it is weak evidence for inferring causality. Study 2, therefore, uses an experimental design to determine whether manipulation of religious material (images of a deity) impacts self-forgiveness relative to non-religious content (abstract art).

Study 1

This study comprises a two-variable, two-wave design. Because participation in religion and forgiveness by God have been related to self-forgiveness, indices of both, as well as a measure of self-forgiveness, were collected from emerging adults at two points in time separated by an interval of seven weeks. Emerging adulthood is a developmental phase occurring between 18 and 25 years (Arnett, 2015) during which people experiment with different roles and behavior as they seek to establish their adult identity. As such, it is more likely to evidence change and thus a sample of emerging adults was used in the present research.

Method

Participants and procedure

Participants ($n = 393$) were college students recruited from courses that met university liberal studies requirements. Most were from human and social sciences where the majority of the students in these departments and colleges are female. Of the 393 participants, 367 (93%) were female, with 279 (71%) identifying as Caucasian, 44 (11.2%) as African-American, 50 (12.7%) as Latino, 7 (1.8%) as Asian, 2 (.5%) as Native American, 5 (1.3%) as Middle Eastern and 6 declined to provide ethnic/racial information. The mean age of participants was 19.89 ($SD = 1.61$) years.

Two weeks after the start of the semester, students were given the opportunity of participating in two online surveys seven weeks apart as one option to earn a small amount of extra credit. The measures reported in this study were part of this larger survey. Participants were directed to a webpage where they could find a brief description of the study and provide informed consent before continuing with the online survey. All materials and procedures were approved by the local Institution Review Board and participants signed informed consent letters before they participated in the project.

Measures

Religion

Two items assessed religious participation and the centrality of religion in the participant's life, respectively. The first asked about the frequency of participation in religious services using a 4-point scale (1 = 'Never, almost never' to 4 = 'One or more times a week'). The second asked about the importance of religion in the respondent's life, again using a 4-point scale (1 = 'Not important' to 4 = 'Very important'). The two items were strongly correlated at both Time 1 ($r = .78$) and Time 2 ($r = .75$).

and hence they were combined to yield a single index with higher scores reflecting greater religiosity.

Forgiveness by God was assessed using three items. One item asked how often the respondent felt forgiven by God using a 4-point scale ranging from 'never' to 'many times.' Participants also expressed their agreement (1 = 'strongly disagree' to 4 = 'strongly agree') with the statements, 'When I do something wrong, God is quick to forgive me,' and 'I am certain that God forgives me when I seek His forgiveness.' The three items showed strong internal consistency reliability at Time 1 ($\alpha = .81$) and Time 2 ($\alpha = .92$). Higher scores reflected greater perceived forgiveness by God.

Self-forgiveness

Two items assessed self-forgiveness. One item related to self-forgiveness concerning an interpersonal transgression and the second was intrapersonal focusing only on the harm done to the self. The first stated, 'I feel badly at first when I hurt someone else but I am soon able to forgive myself.' Respondents indicated their agreement with the statement on a 5-point scale (1 = 'completely disagree' to 5 = 'completely agree'). The second statement was, 'Even though it hurts when I let myself down, I quickly feel good about myself again.' The two items correlated with each other at Time 1 ($r = .55$) and Time 2 ($r = .48$) and hence they were averaged to yield a single index of self-forgiveness with higher scores reflecting more self-forgiveness. In an independent sample of 270 undergraduate students, this measure correlated .44 with the self-forgiveness subscale of the Heartland Forgiveness Scale (Thompson et al., 2005).

Results and discussion

The means, standard deviations and correlations among the study variables are shown in Table 1. It can be seen that the two measures pertaining to religion were strongly correlated at Time 1, $r = .61$ and at Time 2, $r = .66$. However, because forgiveness by God and religiosity are conceptually distinct the two indices were analyzed

Table 1. Means, standards deviations and correlations among study variables.

Variable	1	2	3	4	5	6
1. T1 God's Forgiveness		.58	.14	.18	.61	.62
2. T2 God's Forgiveness			.10 _{ns}	.24	.64	.66
3. T1 Self-forgiveness				.43	.17	.14
4. T2 Self-forgiveness					.20	.23
5. T1 Religiosity						.82
6. T2 Religiosity						
Mean	3.09	3.57	2.91	2.93	2.44	2.51
Standard Deviation	.98	1.14	.80	.79	1.07	1.01

Correlations are significant at $p < .01$.

separately. Consistent with prior research self-forgiveness was concurrently related to religious participation (Time 1, $r = .17$, Time 2, $r = .23$, $p < .01$) and forgiveness by God (Time 1, $r = .14$, time 2, $r = .24$, $p < .01$).

Are religious participation/forgiveness by God and self-forgiveness related over time?

Cross-lagged stability models (where each Time 2 variable is simultaneously regressed on each Time 1 variable) allow examination of longitudinal relations between constructs while controlling for their stability. Significant cross-lagged effects reflect the presence of a relationship beyond that which can be accounted for by the stability of the constructs and the magnitude of their association at Time 1. The first such model was computed with religious participation and self-forgiveness. The effect from Time 1 religion to T2 self-forgiveness was significant, $\beta = .13$, $p < .01$, but the effect from Time 1 self-forgiveness to T2 religious activity was not, $\beta = .02$, ns. The analysis conducted for perceived forgiveness by God yielded the same pattern of results. That is, the effect from earlier forgiveness by God to later self-forgiveness was significant, $\beta = .12$, $p < .01$, but the reverse was not the case, $\beta = .03$, ns.

Is the relationship between religious indices and self-forgiveness bidirectional?

To examine possible bidirectional or synchronous effects between the two indices of religion and self-forgiveness, non-recursive models were estimated (see Figure 1). In order to identify a synchronous effects model, several conditions need to be satisfied. The present model satisfies these conditions in that earlier measures of religion and self-forgiveness are presumed to be predetermined variables and thereby uncorrelated with the disturbance terms in both Time 2 equations and both cross-lagged effects are constrained to be zero.

These analyses yielded results that were consistent with those obtained in the cross-lagged stability models. Again in each model, the effect from the religion variables to self-forgiveness was significant but the effect in the opposite direction was not. Taken together, the results obtained in this study provide evidence to suggest that religious involvement and perceived forgiveness by God may influence self-forgiveness. However, the data are correlational and therefore provide weak evidence for such causal inference. It is also the case that the measurement of self-forgiveness is far from optimal as it is comprised of only two items. Nonetheless, the data from Study 1 provide sufficient support to merit further study of a potential causal relationship between religion and self-forgiveness.

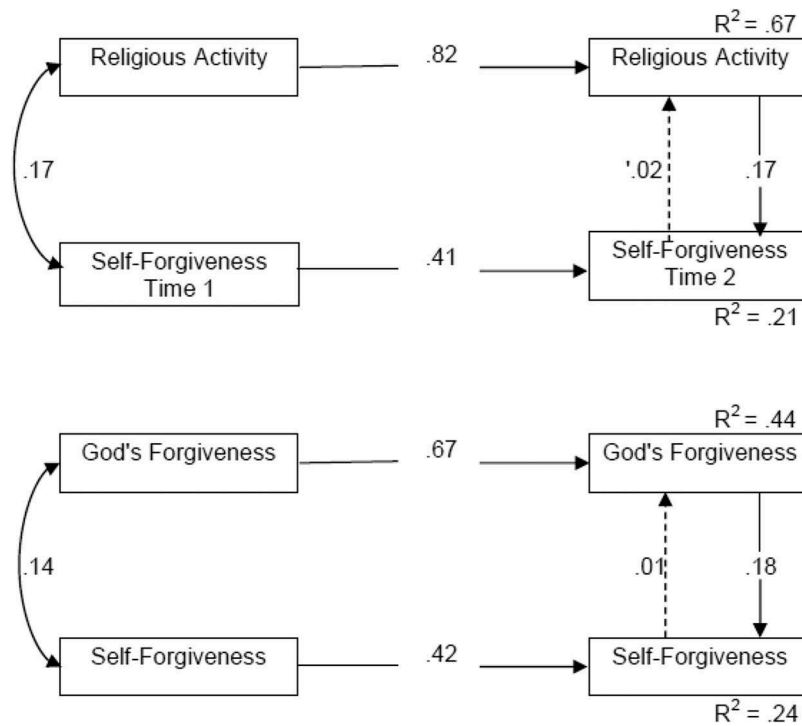


Figure 1. Non-recursive models. $p < .05$ for all coefficients on solid lines.

Study 2

To address the shortcomings of Study 1, Study 2 uses an experimental design. As priming has been a valuable means of addressing religion's causal effect on outcomes (see Shariff, Willard, Andersen, & Norenzayan, 2016) respondents were randomly exposed to either images involving religious content or non-religious content (abstract art) which they rated for artistic merit. Following this task, participants completed a measure of self-forgiveness. Because Shariff et al. (2016) have shown that the impact of religious priming can vary for religious believers and non-believers, the data were analyzed with and without religiosity as a covariate.

In light of research indicating that differential outcomes, both anti-social (stealing, cheating) and pro-social (charity donations, altruism), occur based on whether punitive or forgiving deity representations are activated (see DeBono, Shariff, Poole, & Muraven, 2017; Shariff & Norenzayan, 2007, 2011) two types of religious content were used. It was hypothesized that images of a benevolent God may activate the construct of divine forgiveness and facilitate self-forgiveness whereas images of an angry God may activate the construct of punishment and hinder self-forgiveness.

Participants and procedure

Participants were undergraduate students recruited from courses that met university liberal studies requirements. The participants ($n = 91$) whose mean age was 19.49 ($SD = 1.18$ years, range 18–22) were predominantly female (86%). Sixty participants (65.9%) self-identified as Caucasian, 9 (9.9%), as African-American, 12 (13.2%) as Latino, 1 (1.1%), as Asian, 4 (4.4%) as 'other,' and 5 (5.5%) declined to provide information on racial/ethnic identity. Participants came to the laboratory where they provided informed consent before proceeding with data collection. After collecting basic demographic information, they were randomly assigned to one of three conditions in which they were told that we were collecting pilot data regarding the artistic quality of pictures. In each condition, there were four images that depicted an angry God, a benevolent God or comprised abstract, impressionistic paintings. The images are the same ones used by Johnson (2018) in her work on identifying God representations. Participants rated each image on a 4-point scale (1 = 'Not artistic' to 4 = 'Very artistic'). Following this task, participants completed a paper and pencil measure of self-forgiveness.

Measure

Self-forgiveness

The measure of self-forgiveness was modeled on the Transgression Narrative Test of Forgiveness (Berry, Worthington, Parrott, O'Connor, & Wade, 2001) in which short scenarios are used to describe transgressions and respondents indicate after each scenario how likely they are to forgive the perpetrator. Six scenarios involving self-harm in various domains (academic, social, substance use, career development) were presented. An example scenario read as follows: 'You are taking a very challenging English class that you must pass in order to graduate. You are at home sick on the day the teacher hands out the study guide for the final exam. You know that you should probably ask your teacher or classmates what you have missed from class, but you do not do so. You find the exam extremely difficult and receive a failing grade. As a consequence, you will not be able to graduate on time as planned. Imagine yourself in such a situation and mark how likely you are to forgive yourself for not having asked what you missed on the day you were absent.' After each scenario, respondents indicated how they would respond regarding self-forgiveness on a 5-point scale (1 = 'definitely not forgive' to 5 = 'definitely forgive'). Across the six scenarios coefficient, alpha was .76.

Religion

The two items from Study 1 that assessed religious participation and the centrality of religion in the participant's life were again used. In this study, the two items showed the same high correlation ($r = .75$) found at each of the two time points in Study 1. Hence, they were combined to yield a single index with higher scores reflecting greater religiosity.

Results and discussion

A one-way ANOVA displayed an effect for priming condition on self-forgiveness, $F(2, 88) = 4.29, p < .02$, partial $\eta^2 = .089$. Tukey post-hoc tests (for means, see Table 2) showed that respondents in the angry God condition were least self-forgiving and differed significantly from those in the control condition, who were most self-forgiving. To determine whether religiosity may have influenced findings an ANCOVA was run using religiosity as a covariate. Again, the only effect found was the main effect for priming condition on self-forgiveness, $F(2, 86) = 4.95, p < .01$, partial $\eta^2 = .108$.

The pattern of means obtained provided limited support for the earlier stated hypothesis. Specifically, no evidence was found to suggest that primes

Table 2. The effect of different primes on self-forgiveness.

Prime	Mean	Standard deviation	<i>N</i>
Angry God	12.58 _a	3.64	31
Benevolent God	13.52 _{a b}	4.49	27
Control (abstract art)	15.42 _b	3.77	33

Means without a common subscript differ significantly from each other according to Tukey post-hoc tests.

depicting a benevolent God facilitated self-forgiveness but primes of an angry God did impede self-forgiveness, at least relative to a control condition that did not use religious primes.

General discussion

Although emerging research has documented a small, but reliable, association between religion/spirituality and self-forgiveness (Davis et al., 2013), little is known about this relationship beyond the fact that it exists. Noting also that the data on this association came almost exclusively from cross-sectional research, the present studies set out to change this circumstance. Using a longitudinal design, the first study showed that earlier religious participation, as well as forgiveness by God, predicted later self-forgiveness whereas the converse was not the case. This pattern of findings also emerged when bidirectional relations were examined between the two religion indices and self-forgiveness in non-recursive models. These findings provide some evidence to suggest that religion may influence self-forgiveness.

To investigate a possible causal relation between religion and self-forgiveness a second study was conducted using an experimental design. In this study, an attempt was made to prime different conceptions of God, as angry and as benevolent, and examine the impact on self-forgiveness relative to a non-religious prime. Those primed with pictures of an angry God were less self-forgiving than those who received non-religious (abstract art) primes. The angry God priming condition did not, however, differ significantly from the benevolent God priming condition in regard to self-forgiveness responses. Indeed, self-forgiveness was lower in both religious priming conditions but only significantly so for angry God primes. Why might this be so? One possibility is that manipulating awareness of God might have amplified the wrong described and it is well established in forgiveness research that the magnitude of a transgression makes it harder to forgive. Alternatively, awareness of God could have led to a stronger affective response, especially in the angry God condition. This is important because negative affect is inversely related to self-forgiveness (Graham, Morse, O'Donnell, & Steger, 2017). Because the perceived magnitude of the wrong and affect

were not measured in the study it is not possible to assess their potential role in accounting for the findings. In any event, the pattern of findings held even when an index of religiosity was used as a covariate in the analysis.

Although intriguing, the present findings need to be interpreted in the light of several limitations. The measure of self-forgiveness used in Study 1 comprised only two items and hence it, like many measures used in the literature reviewed earlier, can be questioned from a psychometric perspective. Notwithstanding this concern, it is worth noting that in their meta-analysis of the association between self-forgiveness and psychological well-being, Davis et al. (2015, p. 332) showed that 'Assessing self-forgiveness with a single-item measure did not lead to a different correlation than assessing self-forgiveness with a multi-item state or trait measure.' A further issue regarding measurement is more conceptual and concerns acceptance of responsibility for harm caused. Since Hall and Fincham (2005) noted that failure to experience felt responsibility for a wrong can give rise to pseudo-self-forgiveness there has been an increasing emphasis on understanding responsibility as a potential dimension of self-forgiveness (see Woodyatt, Wenzel, & de Vel-Palumbo, 2017). Because responsibility and acknowledgment of the wrongdoing were not assessed in the present studies, it is possible that the current findings reflect pseudo-self-forgiveness, genuine self-forgiveness, or some admixture of the two. A second measurement issue concerns the assessment of religiosity. The two item measure used in both studies is far from optimal. Future research using more refined measures are likely to show exactly what aspects of religiosity are related to self-forgiveness and what aspects of religiosity account for the religion-self-forgiveness association.

A final issue that bears mention is the nature of the samples used in each study as they were predominantly Christian and female. It will, therefore, be important to replicate the findings with samples reflecting other religious belief systems, particularly those that extend beyond the Abrahamic faiths (e.g. Hinduism, Buddhism). Equally important is to examine whether the present findings hold equally for males and females. Finally, future research should include young adults who are not enrolled in college, or as Halperin (2001) described 'the forgotten half.' It will also be important to study participants in different developmental periods, especially older samples, in the future research.

Notwithstanding the limitations noted above, the present studies are among the first to address the issue of direction of effects in examining the association between religion and self-forgiveness. They provide some evidence to suggest that a causal relationship exists between

religiosity and self-forgiveness in which religion influences self-forgiveness rather than vice versa. In doing so, they lay the foundation for future investigation of the mechanism that might account for the apparent causal relation between religion and self-forgiveness.

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