



“I Had Let Everyone, Including Myself, Down”: Illuminating the Self-Forgiveness Process Among Female College Students

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Abstract

The self-forgiveness process may be considered emotionally taxing among college students. The current study explored college students' past intrapersonal transgressions ($n = 88$) through two outcomes (able or unable to forgive oneself). Using NVivo 11 Pro software, thematic analyses revealed the most common situational circumstances and internal emotional determinants that were embedded in these contexts. Findings highlight the need to revise the existing self-forgiveness model to include experiences related to intrapersonal transgressions. Clinical implications include relevant intervention strategies to engage in the self-forgiveness process of an intrapersonal transgression among emerging adults. Directions for theory development are discussed.

Self-forgiveness is the psychological process whereby an individual attempts to foster inner-compassion, self-respect, and kindness toward the self in full knowledge of a committed transgression (Enright, 1996). Hall and Fincham (2005) identified two types of transgressions for which self-forgiveness may occur: *interpersonal* transgressions and *intrapersonal* transgressions. Self-forgiveness of an interpersonal transgression takes place when a person is able to forgive him or herself for transgressing against another (Hall

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Table 1

Demographic Information (N = 88) Female College Students in Event A and B

Characteristics	Student	
	N	%
Age (yrs.)		
Mean	19.61	
Range	18–23	
SD	1.14	
GPA		
Mean	3.39	
Range	2.00–4.00	
Gender		
Female	88	100.0
Ethnicity		
White	50	56.8
Black	11	12.5
Latino/Hispanic	17	19.3
Asian/Pacific Islander	5	5.7
Other	1	1.1
Year in college		
First year	22	25.0
Second year	32	36.4
Third year	23	26.1
Fourth year	7	8.0
Religion		
Christian	65	73.9
Jewish	2	2.3
Muslim	1	1.1
Atheist	1	1.1
Agnostic	9	10.2
None	6	6.8

& Fincham, 2005). Equally important but far less studied is self-forgiveness of an intrapersonal transgression, which occurs when the self is *both* the sole victim and transgressor of the offense that is forgiven. Investigating intrapersonal transgressions among college students is imperative because this is a period in which adult coping strategies are developed. Indeed, understanding self-forgiveness of intrapersonal transgressions opens up several research opportunities. For example, a qualitative inquiry can help explore the situational content, the nature of the transgression, and the in-depth emotional experiences identified in prior research on self-forgiveness (Hall & Fincham, 2005). However, we doubt that this

initial effort to present a qualitative inquiry of the self-forgiveness process for men and women can be adequately captured in a single paper. Therefore, we purposefully focused on female college students because previous research shows that rumination is more prevalent among women than men and that it can impede women's problem-solving (Nolen-Hoeksema, 2001; Querstret & Cropley, 2012), as well as engagement in the self-forgiveness process.

A better understanding of intrapersonal transgressions is vital given the documented association between self-forgiveness and mental health outcomes (Davis et al., 2015). Because lack of self-forgiveness is related to later adverse mental health outcomes among college students (Hirsch, Webb, & Jeglic, 2011), including anxiety, depression, suicidal ideation, self-injury, and alcohol abuse (Reetz, Bershad, LeViness, Whitlock, 2016), it is quite possible that engagement in the self-forgiveness process may improve college students' mental health and reduce self-destructive behaviors. Indeed, previous research has shown that self-forgiveness is associated with lower levels of depressive symptoms (Dangel & Webb, 2018; Gençoğlu, Şahin, & Topkaya, 2018), substance abuse (i.e., alcohol; Ianni, Hart, Hibbard, & Carroll, 2010), and anxiety symptoms among college students (Gençoğlu et al., 2018; Maltby, Macaskill, & Day, 2001). Therefore, self-forgiveness may be one process whereby college students can improve their well-being and self-image, thus reducing guilt, regret, and self-blame (Pierro, Pica, Giannini, Higgins, & Kruglanski, 2018).

Self-forgiveness may be particularly salient for student well-being because college offers a unique setting for students' moral development (Mayhew, Rockenbach, Bowman, Seifert, & Wolniak, 2016), that is, to live up to one's standards, sense of self, and the implicit obligation to live being truthful to oneself (Hardy & Carlo, 2005; Hudson & Díaz Pearson, 2018). When students fail to live up to their values and standards, self-forgiveness may decrease guilt and shame and instead facilitate constructive self-criticism and self-improvement (see Dat & Okimoto, 2018). Furthermore, self-forgiveness could help college students to reconcile their moral image and sense of agency. For example, after committing a transgression, students may not only be motivated to keep a positive moral image of themselves (e.g., good person, worthy to be trusted, loyal friend) but also be encouraged to restore their personal agency (e.g., taking responsibility for one's actions, make amends to self/to others, make better choices; Shnabel & Nadler, 2015). However, when unique college factors (e.g., academic expectations, new friendships, dating, procrastination, peer-pressures, and homesickness) interact with college students' vulnerabilities and unhealed wounds, students may succumb to intrapersonal transgressions. For example, in their quest for a more "meaningful" life (Parks, 2011), college students may be exposing themselves to various types of experiences (e.g., falling in love, trusting others, letting go of toxic friendships) which may worsen or enable their ability to forgive themselves for their own transgressions.

Importantly, females may be more susceptible to the potential deleterious consequences of lack of self-forgiveness for a number of reasons. First, female students are more likely to have greater levels of stress and anxiety than college attending men (Abdallah & Gabr, 2014; Wahed & Hassan, 2017). Second, female college students have shown higher scores on shame, guilt, and personal distress than men (Rangandhan, & Todorov, 2010); these states facilitate women getting "caught up" in negative emotions and regrets (Fisher & Exline, 2010) as well as having potential grudges toward the self. Third, women, tend to hold grudges longer than men do (Benenson & Wrangham, 2016), which may make it more difficult for women to "let go" of previous conflicts (e.g., Baumeister, 2010; Benenson et al., 2009).

Because females not only experience self-forgiveness as more effortful than their male counterparts but also display higher levels of guilt and shame than men (Castonguay, Brunet, Ferguson, & Sabiston, 2012; Fisher & Exline, 2006), the present study focuses exclusively on female college students in order to identify the situational contexts of intrapersonal transgressions and their respective emotional sequelae. A qualitative analysis is well-suited to illuminate the in-depth experiences of participants, as well as expand theory on self-forgiveness of intrapersonal transgressions. Finally, this study seeks to identify how the self-forgiveness process may be utilized in the reduction of mental health symptoms among female college students.

Self-Forgiveness of Interpersonal and Intrapersonal Transgressions

Researchers invested in the study of self-forgiveness define the self-forgiveness process as the desire to abandon resentment towards the self in the face of an acknowledged wrongdoing, while simultaneously encouraging self-compassion, self-love, and generosity towards the self (Enright, 1996). Hall and Fincham (2005) conceptualized self-forgiveness as involving three components: (a) diminished motivation to avoid actions related to the wrongdoing, (b) decreased motivation to get even with oneself, and (c) motivation to be benevolent toward the self. We see self-forgiveness as an intrapersonal process whereby one may battle with forgiving oneself whether or not one is forgiven by others (Wohl, DeShea, & Wahkinney, 2008). At the heart of self-forgiveness, there is genuine self-benevolence accompanied by acknowledgement of the transgression (Woodyatt & Wenzel, 2013, 2014) and no attempt to minimize responsibility (Fisher & Exline, 2010; Wenzel, Woodyatt, & Hedrick, 2012).

Although somewhat similar, there are clear distinctions between self-forgiveness of interpersonal transgressions and self-forgiveness of intrapersonal transgressions. On the one hand, in self-forgiveness of interpersonal transgressions, the self is not necessarily the victim. Moreover, reconciliation between transgressor and victim may or may not be one-sided (see Snow, 1993). On the other hand, in self-forgiveness of intrapersonal transgressions, the victim is the self, and reconciliation with the self is unavoidable (e.g., Enright, 1996) given that one cannot hide or avoid oneself indefinitely. In the face of an intrapersonal transgression, the individual is both the perpetrator and victim, and the victim reserves the right to pardon the self, if the offense is deemed forgivable.

For college students, numerous responsibilities (e.g., academics, family, and personal expectations) as well as new stressors (e.g., financial challenges, social conflict or romantic partners, poor sleep habits, substance use), may lead them to avoid facing intrapersonal transgressions (Dexter, Huff, Rudecki, & Abraham, 2018; Lee & Jang, 2015). If the emerging adult is also facing unresolved conflict due to an intrapersonal transgression, mental health challenges, such as anxiety, depression, and associated self-destructive behaviors, may be more difficult to manage. However, the situational contexts in which college students seek to engage or disengage in the self-forgiveness process of an intrapersonal transgression remains unclear.

Self-Forgiveness of Intrapersonal Transgressions Among College Students

Why study self-forgiveness of intrapersonal transgressions among college students? In the United States (U.S.), 17 million people were enrolled as undergraduate students in fall 2015, and the undergraduate enrollment is projected to increase to 19.3 million by 2026 (McFarland et al., 2017). Emerging adults (18

to 25 year olds, Arnett, 2000) experience major developmental changes. During this period, there is relative "freedom" from social rules and expectations, and uncertainty about the future. College students who desire to explore various venues such as romantic relationships, sexual experiences, and job opportunities may be able to do so during this period (Arnett, 2000). In the context of this new "freedom," students are likely to commit behaviors for which they need to forgive themselves.

Thus, college students are at a higher risk of intrapersonal transgressions by the very nature of their developmental stage. For example, they are likely to engage in risky behaviors such as illicit drug consumption (Arria et al., 2017; Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration, 2014), unprotected sex (Kuperberg & Padgett, 2017), dangerous driving (Terry & Terry, 2016), and binge drinking (Walters, Bulmer, Troiano, Obiaka, & Bonhomme, 2018). In addition, among college students, women may be at a higher risk for negative outcomes than men. Poor health behaviors such as eating disorders are more prevalent in females than males (Eisenberg, Nicklett, Roeder, & Kirz, 2011). Furthermore, female college students show higher levels of depressive symptoms than their male peers (Richards & Salamanca Sanabria, 2014; Villatte, Marcotte, & Potvin, 2017). Going to college can be a stressful experience (Castillo & Schwartz, 2013), especially for women who may lack established networks and friendships in a new college setting (Friedlander, Reid, Shupak, & Cribbie, 2007; Hurd, Albright, Wittrup, Negrete, & Billingsley, 2018). Regarding intrapersonal transgressions, women, unlike men, may have greater tendencies to ruminate about wrongdoings and distresses (Johnson & Whisman, 2013; Rood, Roelofs, Bogels, Nolen-Hoeksema, & Schouten, 2009).

Therefore, addressing a transgression against the self may not only entail confronting a single incident, but the cumulative effect of what one has done to oneself repeatedly. Such accumulation involves not only the action, but also the range of *intense* emotions as a byproduct of the transgression. Consequently, understanding the range of emotional experiences across various situational contexts may provide insight into how engagement in the self-forgiveness may reduce symptoms experienced among college students.

Self-Forgiveness of Intrapersonal Transgressions

There are numerous contexts in which a person may harm the self. For example, in a romantic relationship (e.g., infidelity) or amid academic challenges (e.g., losing a scholarship), mental health and well-being challenges arise, such as difficulty avoiding substances, and social struggles (e.g., I failed to stand up for my beliefs; I failed to defend what is right). What is less clear, however, is how these self-inflicted, harmful experiences differ across situational contexts, and what is the range of emotional experiences that accompany such transgressions.

In their self-forgiveness model of interpersonal transgressions, Hall and Fincham (2005) identified changes in emotions such as guilt, shame, and empathy as motivational forces in the self-forgiveness process. We suggest that emotions such as disappointment, sadness, remorse, judgement, resentment, guilt, and shame may be experienced with variation in emotional intensity, which may adversely impact the student. For example, the experience of disappointment may be temporary (e.g., I am disappointed that I did not do well on an exam), whereas the experience of shame (e.g., I am a bad person for what I did) has been shown to be problematic because it reinforces more serious forms of ongoing mental health challenges (e.g., depression; Cibich, Woodyatt, & Wenzel, 2016). Examining the range of possible emotional experiences associated with intrapersonal transgressions and the adverse consequences of such

transgressions may help us understand the relationship between self-forgiveness and mental health outcomes (Gençoğlu et al., 2018; Thompson et al., 2005).

We were unable to identify a qualitative study that could inform understanding of intrapersonal transgressions, their respective contextual circumstances, and emotional sequelae that may impact self-forgiveness. Addressing a transgression against the self requires recalling events as well as the cumulative effect of what one has done to oneself. We believe that research on this process should not be limited to quantitative questionnaires. It is imperative to have a description—a narrative form—that can help researchers understand the event as well as the context and subsequent emotions related to an intrapersonal transgression.

The Current Study

The purpose of the present study was to offer a better understanding of the self-forgiveness process of intrapersonal transgressions within the context of in-depth experiences among female college students. Our study had two main goals: (a) to explore the most common intrapersonal transgressions via identification of salient contextual themes and (b) to understand the emotional determinants associated with self-forgiveness of intrapersonal transgressions. We explored the following research question: What are the common situational contexts (i.e., contextual themes) and emotional determinants of self-forgiveness for intrapersonal transgressions that college students face whereby they are able/not able to forgive themselves?

Method

Participants

Recruitment. Participants were college students taking a course in human sciences at a Southeastern university in the United States (i.e., Florida) where faith-based perspectives (namely, Christianity) are prominent. The great majority of students who enrolled to take a course in human sciences were females. Our sample consisted of a total of $n = 88$ female college students. Participants ranged in age from 18 to 23 years old ($M = 19.61$; $SD = 1.14$), and the majority were White (57%), Christian (74%), and students within their first two years of college (61%). Participants reported a mean grade point average of 3.39 ($SD = .340$) and were able to receive extra course credit for their study participation (see Table 1). All procedures were approved by the university's institutional review board.

Procedure

Data collection. Students were recruited from human science course classrooms via instructor announcements and directed to a webpage where they could find a brief description of the study. The description informed potential participants that the study consisted of two parts: an online survey with demographic and quantitative questions and then a subsequent visit to the laboratory to complete a task. Specifically, the qualitative data were part of a bigger research project that included surveys, intrapersonal transgressions narratives, and deity rating measures that followed the data reported here. A total of $n = 97$ students completed the narrative task; however, for the purpose of examining the female emerging adult demographic, only data from emerging adult female participants aged 18–25 (e.g., Arnett, 2000) were

included in the analyses. Therefore, our final sample was $n = 88$. Participants were randomly assigned to one of two types of events: Event A ($n = 40$; Think back to an event or situation where you were hurt or disappointed by something you did to yourself but were able to forgive yourself for what happened) or Event B ($n = 48$; Think back to an event or situation where you were hurt or disappointed by something you did to yourself and are still unable to forgive yourself for what happened). Participants were asked to recall and write down the details involving the event. They were asked to include information regarding what the event or situation was about, any people who were involved, when it occurred, and the emotions, behaviors, and thoughts that occurred during this experience. Finally, participants were told that they could stop the activity at any time, without penalty.

Narrative data. Because we focused on the *experiences* of female college students with the self-forgiveness process of intrapersonal transgressions, we made use of students' hardcopy narratives. This type of data shed light on participants' *individual experiences* as well as identities and how they perceived themselves (Creswell, 2013). College students' self-perception was particularly salient due to the specific situation or context that the stories of ability or inability to forgive oneself offered to the researchers. Moreover, narrative data offered a unique component, that is, it gave the opportunity for participants to refer to experiences in the past, present, and anticipated future (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000), which may include not only a sequential unfolding of events but also insights and/or epiphanies (Creswell, 2013).

Data Analysis

Thematic approach. Thematic analysis is commonly used in qualitative research where prior theoretical assumptions of a given phenomenon are explored in new study contexts, and are based on the in-depth experience of the participants (Vaismoradi, Turunen, & Bondas, 2013). The purpose of a thematic analysis, therefore, is to illuminate participant experiences and systematically group, label, and describe central or common theme(s) that support empirical theory development and further measurement strategy in the quantitative literature (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). In this study, a thematic analysis was employed in order to examine the range of possible situational circumstances and emotional stressors in which intrapersonal transgressions are experienced among college students. Principles of a thematic analysis, including coding procedures of the data narratives (see Strauss & Corbin, 1998), were used to systematically group and categorize common threads of participants' experience into an organizational framework with the potential to expand existing assumptions of self-forgiveness theory to consider intrapersonal transgressions.

We analyzed participant narratives to explore the nature of intrapersonal transgressions, the contexts in which they took place, and the various emotional determinants associated with the transgressions. After transcription took place, the first author organized and integrated initial codes into themes based on the narratives using NVivo 11 Pro for Windows (Richards, 1999a, 1999b).

Coding procedures. The first author began coding procedures through an inductive, open coding process (Charmaz, 2006; Patton, 2015) in which each transcription from Event A was read entirely to gain an overall impression of the narratives and to remain close to data by coding based on the language and word choice of the participant (e.g., *in-vivo*; Charmaz, 2006). In-vivo codes were then organized and integrated into overall themes with subsequent sub-themes, which were compared against each other by their salient features via the constant comparative method (Creswell, 1998). The constant comparative method allows for a further level of analysis by comparing similarities and differences

among themes and subthemes in order to integrate, interpret, and produce an overall explanatory theory of the data (Charmaz, 2006; Creswell, 1998). The same procedure was repeated for Event B. Further, each narrative was re-read throughout the analytic process in order to evaluate the researchers' developing assumptions regarding original themes and to identify additional salient features as well as exceptions to the data via the process of memo writing (Fassinger, 2005). The process of memo-writing (e.g., journaling) throughout coding allowed monitoring for potential experimenter bias and ensure an accurate interpretation of the data. In addition, to monitor for bias, the second author cross-checked 50% of the coded narratives alongside the main themes and subthemes identified.

Data saturation. The process of reaching data saturation involves ongoing monitoring of overall categories, concepts, and themes that are prevalent in the narrative. As the analytic process continues, data saturation has been reached when no new categories, themes, or concepts are present (Fusch & Ness, 2015). Data saturation has been reached when information to replicate the study is sufficient (O'Reilly & Parker, 2013), and no new information is present that requires additional analytic coding (Guest, Bunce, & Johnson, 2006).

Trustworthiness. The establishment of trustworthiness in qualitative research is analogous to the assurance of both the quality and rigor of the data, as well as a method to establish the credibility of the researcher to conduct such an analysis (Fassinger, 2005; Shenton, 2004). The first author, a Latina citizen of Peru and doctoral student in human development and family science was responsible for designing this study. She took advanced doctoral-level qualitative research methods and has research experience investigating self-forgiveness among college students, deity priming and situational self-forgiveness, and first-hand experience working with the coauthor and developer of the self-forgiveness theoretical framework. Combined with the second author's established knowledge of qualitative analysis, we think the overall skillset of each author constitutes a strength of the current investigation.

Based on the guiding principles outlined in Creswell (1998) to assure rigor and credibility of findings, the first and third authors recruited the second author, a White doctoral student with a background in qualitative methodology and counseling psychology, to re-examine codes, challenge assumptions of the thematic process, and complete the analytic coding procedure in tandem with the first author. The first and third authors verified that the second author had no prior knowledge of the study aims and procedures, and that information regarding the original analysis of the codes were withheld until later in the verification process. Finally, the first and second authors continued to engage in a final interpretation of the data by challenging written reflections and interpretations made to the final project narrative.

Results

Themes Based on Situational Contexts and Emotional Determinants

Analysis of participant narratives yielded main themes identified under Event A and B respectively. The most salient intrapersonal transgressions themes in Event A—college students who were able to forgive themselves—included (1) academic performance, (2) sports competition, (3) trouble with friendships and roommates, (4) alcohol involvement, (5) cheating on romantic partner, (6) hooking up, and (7) self-harm. The subsequent emotional determinants for Event A included (a) self-disappointment, (b) frustration/anger, (c) guilt, (d) regret, (e) self-hatred, and (f) dehumanization. These themes were embedded in situational contexts in which emotional determinants were expressed based on variation in level of

psychological distress, ranging from situations that were stressful but manageable (e.g., academic performance) to psychologically distressing and continuous to the present day (e.g., hooking up).

On the other hand, some of the most salient themes in Event B—college students who were not able to forgive themselves—included (1) academic performance, (2) alcohol involvement, (3) hooking up, (4) lying, (5) toxic personal relations, and (6) self-harm. The subsequent emotional determinants for Event B included (a) self-disappointment, (b) anger/being mad at oneself, (c) regret, (d) sadness, (e) guilt, and (f) shame.

Themes for Events Where Self-Forgiveness Occurred (Event A)

The narratives were further defined by the type as well as severity of the intrapersonal transgression, whereby participants described parallel internal emotional experiences that influenced psychological processes. For example, narratives involving academic performance were colored by emotional descriptions characteristic of the experience with self-disappointment in poor decision-making. As participant (#20) stated after skipping class, "I had had an A in the class and then had a C and [there was] nothing I could do about it." The emotional experience of self-disappointment was further characterized by experiences with failed performances relating to sports competitions and poor decision-making relating to social interactions. Among these themes, participants described a spectrum of emotional experiences that had varying levels of impact on the current psychological process of the participant. Thus, as the perceived intensity of the intrapersonal transgression increased, so did the emotional determinants that were used to describe them (e.g., self-disappointment versus the act of dehumanizing one's own personhood).

Academic performance/sports competition. Participants described minimal levels of emotional distress when reflecting on previous intrapersonal transgressions that aligned with academic or sports-related performance. For example, participant (#41) recalled failing a class: "I really did try my best in the class.... I was upset, but I didn't let it linger because I knew I had another semester ahead of me and didn't want to carry this baggage with me." This participant was able to coach herself through a moment of disappointment without letting the experience continue on to the present day. Similarly, another participant (#32) described an ability to move on from self-disappointment after an academic failure: "I didn't put in as much effort as I could into studying for it. I was really disappointed in myself for not trying harder, but I was able to forgive myself and I said I wouldn't do that again." Finally, one participant (#5) described feelings of disappointment with frustration and anger: "I was so positive I got an A. I was disappointed when I looked at my grade and was worried I won't get an A in the class anymore" Although these situations were difficult for participants to experience, performance-related events did not pose as much psychological difficulty for these participants after the time of the described event.

Alcohol involvement and trouble with friendships. Participants also described social situations in which poor decision-making and the influence of peer relationships led to the act of an intrapersonal transgression. Participants described interactions with substance use and intrapersonal transgressions as occurring simultaneously with important friendships and the subsequent emotional consequences characterized by sadness, regret, and guilt. For example, participant (#19) stated, "We were drinking a lot and we got up on stage and danced ... how embarrassing I also made out with a random guy, which I never do. I just felt guilty that night because that's not who I am." Similarly, participant (#33) stated, "I broke up with my ex and was so hurt by what I saw ... that I decided to lash out. I drank a lot.... I also found a rebound hoping it would help but that didn't work." When alcohol was

involved, these participants described a lasting impact with these events; they knew they were not supposed to be drinking, and alcohol influence made them behave in a way they would not normally have done. However, these college students were able to comment on the ability to self-forgive despite the circumstances; their awareness that alcohol brought about feelings of “inhibition” contributed to their self-forgiveness process.

Hooking Up/Cheating on Romantic Partner

Participants also described intimate situations in which poor choices and reckless impulses contributed to their engaging in intrapersonal and interpersonal transgressions. Participants admitted that they did not make the best choices. For example, participant (#11) remembered that “We were ready for our first official date. He lived in [neighboring town] so I went and visited him which was a huge mistake. We had a great weekend. We had a fantastic first kiss, great [sex] at his place” Additionally, participants expressed elevated sadness, guilt, and shame for betraying not only their hearts but also hurting their romantic partner for their actions. For example, participant (#25) described experiences with harsh self-criticism and a felt a sense of unworthiness:

I cheated on my first love and he found out about it I hated myself... for what it did to my boyfriend. I cried a lot and mentally punished myself, thinking of myself as a disgusting careless human being.

Despite the intensity of their events, participants who cheated on their romantic partners were able to acknowledge that what they did was perceived as morally wrong.

Self-harm. Three participants in Event A also described intrapersonal transgressions whereby they were so frustrated, upset, regretful, and sad about a personal experience that they engaged in self-harm (e.g., cutting; binge-drinking) as an extreme attempt to cope with their situation. These resulting behaviors demonstrated a level of psychological distress accompanied by serious cognitive and affective reactions for these participants. One example involved the act of a student cutting herself after the situation occurred. For example, participant (#35) stated the following:

I had discovered something about my boyfriend that was very upsetting to me at the time. I downed a bunch of rum and broke many glass things. I then used the glass to cut myself. I was heartbroken and betrayed. My boyfriend would not open up or speak to me about it so I did all I could to get his attention. I was scared when he raised his voice at me, but also didn't care. I thought I was going to die that night. I wanted to die that night.

In addition, this participant went on to describe experiences with dehumanization, in a desperate act to get people's attention, this participant harmed herself: “I then used the glass to cut myself. I was heartbroken and betrayed. My boyfriend would not open up or speak to me about it so I did all I could to get his attention.” Similarly, participant (#26) described more intense psychological distress through the combined action of self-harm and the emotional experience of feelings of worthlessness:

I used to cut myself. Nobody was involved, but me. It occurred a few times, but this incident was last semester. I felt worthless and had a lot going on with an ex and feeling unwanted that I felt like the physical pain would take away all of the other negative feelings I had. It hurt, but seemed like a fix of my situation in the moment it was happening.

Compared to the participant experiences described above, narratives related to self-harm were colored with more extreme experiences with psychological distress, and it was at this level that participants described needing more time to pass in order for self-forgiveness to occur.

Themes for Events Where Self-Forgiveness Did Not Occur (Event B)

Similar to Event A, narratives from Event B were further defined by the type as well as severity of the intrapersonal transgression (participants described concurrent internal emotional experiences that influenced psychological processes). For example, narratives based on the theme of intrapersonal transgressions involving alcohol were highlighted by emotional descriptions entailing anger and being mad at oneself for poor decision-making. As participant (#71) stated after letting her drunk roommate drive her back home, "They had a lot to drink ... but I was more sober than them ... We made it home safely, but I still feel angry at myself for allowing her to drive. I put my life and others' lives in danger." The emotional experience of anger and being mad at oneself was further characterized by experiences with failed academic performance and poor decision-making related to social interactions as well as romantic relationships. Among these themes, participants described a spectrum of emotional experience that had varying levels of impact on their current psychological experience. Thus, as the perceived intensity of the intrapersonal transgression increased (e.g., alcohol involvement, academic performance versus self-harm), so did the emotional determinants that were used to describe them (e.g., anger and being mad at oneself vs. shame).

Alcohol involvement. Participants described social situations in which alcohol was involved and the poor decision-making that led to the act of an intrapersonal transgression. Participants described the interactions and influence of alcohol consumption in intrapersonal transgressions as occurring simultaneously with "hooking up," and the subsequent emotional consequences characterized by anger and being mad at oneself, guilt, regret, self-disappointment, and shame. For example, participant (#75) stated the following:

I imagined a situation where I made the decision to drink and the emotions that led to. I ended up kissing a boy that I was with and was recently upset after the fact because I do not drink and don't intend to until I'm 21.

This participant described an event whereby she felt out of character and was able to comment on poor decision-making that led to two types of transgressions: an intrapersonal transgression (i.e., alcohol consumption while being under 21 years old) and an interpersonal transgression (i.e., "kidding" the guy she was with). Moreover, this participant was still unable to forgive herself for what happened:

Because of my actions, that led to me being out of character in kidding the boy. I felt really disappointed and guilty. I felt ashamed and unworthy. I was really upset with myself and wish I hadn't done it. Although I know I'm forgiven I still think about it from time to time and those feelings come back.

Based on the intensity of the emotions involved in the recalled event (i.e., shame, sense of feeling unworthy) and the language she used to convey that those negative feelings were still present in her mind, we can infer that the harsh sentiment she still felt toward herself for what happened was shown by belittling herself.

Academic performance. Participants described medium levels of emotional distress when reflecting on previous intrapersonal transgressions that aligned with academic-related performance. For

example, participant (#50) recalled doing poorly at school: “I did not do as well academically I was embarrassed to admit to myself that I needed to do better My mom cried and my dad simply showed disappointment.” This participant had to face that she had failed according to her expectations of herself, as well as according to expectations held by her family relating to her doing well at school. Even though she came to terms with the fact that she would need to work harder and that college was not what she expected it to be, she still faced the difficult situation of having disappointed her family members and herself. This family disappointment may have contributed to being unable to forgive herself for what happened and experiencing negative emotions toward herself (i.e., letting oneself down).

Hooking up/toxic personal relations. Participants also described intimate, very personal situations in which poor choices (e.g., casual sex, unhealthy romantic relations) contributed to their engaging in intrapersonal transgressions. Participants acknowledged that they had made poor choices with their body and time and regretted what happened. For example, participant (#79) recalled a one-night stand she later regretted: “I haven’t had sex with that many people so for me to give this mean, hot guy sex without making him wait or try harder and put in effort it made me feel very bad about myself.” The participant’s original feelings of disappointment shifted as she became aware and acknowledged what went wrong: “I was very sad and disappointed with myself I literally slept with this guy after only meeting him once. I’ve learned that instant gratification sometimes results in future damages to oneself.” Further, this participant was able to grow from this experience by reflecting on her actions. Similarly, participant (#47) stated that

I let myself get completely lost in a toxic relationship with a boy. He had a lot of emotional problems and I thought I could help him despite how much I was suffering. During the time, I didn’t think I was so bad, even when my friend tried to tell me when things were still going. I wouldn’t go to class because I had to make sure he was ok.

This participant further shared the negative mental health outcome of these toxic relations:

I dropped my whole life for him and when things ended, I went into a mild depression for a few months. Looking back, [to] what was happening, and I let myself lose who I am and that is why it’s still hard to forgive myself.

Additionally, these participants experienced elevated distress reflected on feeling self-disappointment, regret, shame, and sadness when realizing that they disrespected themselves and felt that they had “lost themselves” in unhealthy relations. These emotions may further be represented in their inability to forgive themselves for what happened to the extent that one participant had to face psychological distress (i.e., experiences with depression).

Lying. Participants also described medium levels of emotional distress when narrating transgressions that involved lying to another person and alcohol involvement, particularly in the case of cheating on a romantic partner. For example, participant (#49) recalled lying to her boyfriend:

We were drinking a lot and the last thing I remember was taking pictures at 11 with my best friend then waking up next to [him] in bed. The first thing I asked him was did we have sex and he said yeah. I remember feeling panicked and warned and freaking out and all [he] said was don’t worry I’m not going to tell your boyfriend.

Even though the participant considered this experience to be of an intrapersonal transgression nature, it can also be seen from an interpersonal transgression context whereby the boyfriend got hurt by the

participants' actions. Feelings of guilt, self-disappointment, and sadness were further demonstrated by the participant's regret toward her actions as well as the secrecy involved surrounding her cheating on her boyfriend:

Then I eventually told my boyfriend the half-truth. I spent the night there in [the guy's] bed but nothing happened. He was so upset with me and asked if I wanted to be in a relationship anymore. I cried and felt awful because I'm not someone who cheats on their boyfriend. For now only a group of us know but it's always awkward whenever we hang out and my boyfriend texts me.

These experiences were not unique to participant (#49); in fact, participants who engaged in lying ended up also hurting another person (i.e., interpersonal transgression) besides themselves. In addition, according to participants, all narratives that had alcohol involvement led to negative outcomes (i.e., dangerous driving, deep remorse, hooking up). In fact, in the majority of these transgressions, alcohol was present in Event B narratives and contributed to some sort of sexual encounter (e.g., hooking up, intercourse, and rape), which participants later regretted. Lying was strongly related to the inability to forgive oneself for what happened.

Self-harm. Four participants in Event B described intrapersonal transgressions whereby they engaged in self-harm (e.g., binge-eating, eating disorder, use of pills, and sport injuries). They felt angry at themselves, ashamed, and disappointed about their actions that were further exacerbated by feeling anxious, depressed, and hopeless. One extreme example involved an eating disorder and the negative emotions related to relapse. For example, participant #63 stated the following:

The event I was imagining took place around this time last year, in [year]. I was working towards recovering from an eating disorder (for the second time) and went back to my old habits in secret. I felt ashamed and disappointed in myself for not having the power or self-control to stop. I felt guilty for breaking promises made to my parents, boyfriend, and myself. My entire body felt weak and exhausted and so did my mind. I was anxious, stressed, and paranoid all the time. Slowly over time things got better, but I can't forget the event.

Likewise, participant (#82) shared a similar experience with her relationship with food:

After graduating high school, I began to worry about my weight and figure more. I started going to the gym every day and ate minimum food. At the time, I was a vegetarian as well. After losing almost 15 pounds in two months, I was at my lowest weight since middle school. I began to binge eat and forced myself to throw up at times. I would eat endless amounts of food until I was completely sick to my stomach and very upset with myself for doing so. I eventually gained all my weight back and more and became even more depressed.

These resulting behaviors demonstrated a level of psychological distress accompanied by serious cognitive and affective reactions for these participants. It is important to notice that these participants were aware of the health implications of their actions. For example, the expression "breaking promises" to others and to themselves as well as feeling upset with themselves can further explain feeling powerless toward their eating behaviors and the inability to get better. Moreover, when compared to other narratives from Event B, self-harm was colored with more extreme experiences with psychological distress, and it was at this level of experience that participants described that they "can't forget the event," thus potentially contributing to the inability to forgive themselves.

Discussion

The present study examined the self-forgiveness process in female college students using narrative data. Through the narratives collected, we gained insights on the pressing situations female college students may experience while trying to navigate their academic life. The results showed that participants' experiences with previous intrapersonal transgressions occurred over a range of situational contexts (e.g., from academic performance to self-harm) and was accompanied by emotional experiences that varied in intensity (e.g., self-disappointment versus shame). After obtaining details regarding transgression context and emotional responses in two different scenario events (A = able to forgive one's self, B = unable to forgive oneself), commonalities as well as themes specific to the events were identified. Qualitative analysis revealed that female college students differed in the range of psychological experience (from stressed to distressed) based on the intrapersonal transgression they faced (e.g., academic performance, self-harm). In turn, participants reflected on the direct impact of experienced transgressions on symptoms of mental health (e.g., periods of depression).

Furthermore, findings illustrated the range of intrapersonal transgressions based on various social contexts coupled with a corresponding intensity of emotional experience that impacted participants' well-being. To our knowledge, no previous qualitative research had been conducted on self-forgiveness of intrapersonal transgressions. As a novel contribution to the literature, this research builds upon extant knowledge regarding self-forgiveness by identifying salient contextual themes and the resultant emotional experiences that college students encounter with intrapersonal transgressions, including self-disappointment and regret.

We highlight four core differences between women who were able to forgive themselves for an intrapersonal transgression and women who were unable to forgive themselves. First, only half of the participants who were able to forgive themselves acknowledged their wrongdoing while three fourths of participants who were still unable to forgive themselves acknowledged (i.e., accepted responsibility) their committed transgression. It is possible that college women who struggle with self-forgiveness are more cognizant of the wrongdoing and take on the "burdens" associated with their transgression, which may hinder the self-forgiveness process. Second, female college students reporting an event where they were able to forgive the self (Event A), focused on stressful feelings and displayed relatively greater self-disappointment (33.33%) and equal anger/frustration than participants unable to forgive the self (Event B; 30%). However, participants reporting on Event B focused on the negativity of their feelings and risked displaying higher levels of distress than women who were able to forgive themselves. For example, guilt and regret, although mentioned in Event A, did not occur as often as emotional experiences occurred in Event B. Indeed, a third of participants (33%) who were not able to forgive themselves mentioned distressing emotions of guilt and regret in their narratives. Third, shame was only present in Event B narratives that portrayed severe circumstances, ranging from academic suspension to recovering from an eating disorder. Fourth, some female college students who were able to forgive themselves for what happened mentioned a self-transformative process because of the transgression they experienced. These participants made concerted efforts to abandon previous patterns and change for the better. On the other hand, about a fifth (20%) of participants in Event B rather shared a "take-home message" (i.e., lesson learned) from their wrongdoing. It is possible that self-forgiveness brings more compassion toward the self whereby the person undergoes a metamorphosis and gives a new meaning to his/her entire experience.

It is necessary to mention that previously established emotional determinants of self-forgiveness such as guilt and shame (Hall & Fincham, 2005, 2008) were found in our qualitative data. Interestingly, we also found that self-disappointment and regret are additional emotional determinants of self-forgiveness and were seen in the events described by students. Self-disappointment and regret may also exist on a spectrum of emotional intensity that could adversely impact the emerging adult. For example, when applied to self-forgiveness of intrapersonal transgressions, an individual may not easily feel—"off the hook"—with negative emotions and can feel both guilt and shame as well as self-disappointment (Davis et al., 2015; Dillon, 2001). Even though interpersonal judgment plays a key role in shame, the same may not be true for self-disappointment (Berkovski, 2015). Our results suggest that the experience of self-disappointment may act as a barrier to intrapersonal self-forgiveness and may entail the disapproval of oneself but not necessarily of others. Similar to self-disappointment, regret can also be present among emerging adults dealing with an intrapersonal transgression. For example, college students undergoing high levels of regret—"the subjective experience of recognizing that one has made a mistake and that a better alternative could have been selected" (Sweis, Thomas, & Redish, 2018, p. 1)—tend to idealize an alternative scenario and their perceived control of the situation (Davis, Lehman, Wortman, Silver, & Thompson, 1995; Fisher & Exline, 2010). Experiencing regret is particularly important among college students who may struggle with self-forgiveness of intrapersonal transgressions and whose regret may stem from their self-defeating thoughts and behaviors about themselves based on the transgression.

An interesting finding in our study is that female college students grappled with differentiating *interpersonal* from *intrapersonal* transgressions. About 28% of the participants from Event A described an interpersonal transgression rather than an intrapersonal transgression, whereas the corresponding figure for Event B was 52%. In other words, participants described their intrapersonal transgression within the context of an interpersonal transgression, suggesting that they are intertwined: every interpersonal transgression involves an intrapersonal transgression.

Implications for Future Research

For practitioners and educators, the findings highlight several avenues for future intervention research. Although there are some interventions that have been quite successful in promoting self-forgiveness of interpersonal transgressions (e.g., Hall & Fincham, 2008; Ranganathan & Todorov, 2010), to date, there are no empirically validated interventions that we have found designed specifically for self-forgiveness of intrapersonal transgressions. This type of intervention is a much needed area of development and research due to the impact that a lack of self-forgiveness has on mental health (Hirsch et al., 2011; Kim, Thibodeau, & Jorgensen, 2011; Maltby et al., 2001; Peterson et al., 2017). Given the adverse consequences of the inability to forgive the self, our findings contribute to identifying the need for, and implementation of, self-forgiveness interventions among college students.

For example, campus counseling centers may come into contact with students' previous intrapersonal transgressions when assessing for risk. Clinical professionals may benefit from assessing for the presence of a previous intrapersonal or interpersonal transgression during their initial counseling session with a student. Moreover, campus counseling centers may apply direct assessment of students' degree of hurt and compare it with the type of transgression experienced and appropriately identify treatment plans relevant to the exploration of the self-forgiveness process. Future research is needed to examine how the

self-forgiveness process may ease the severity of associated mental health symptoms and to explore how counseling may facilitate self-forgiveness for students experiencing current psychological challenges associated with a previous transgression.

Future research on self-forgiveness of intrapersonal transgressions may focus on conducting in-depth interviews or focus groups with college students to gain a better understanding of the contextual and temporal circumstances of a student's intrapersonal transgression. This research could further awareness of the extent to which self-forgiveness or the lack thereof may be impacting student academic achievement and overall mental health. This could illuminate the similarities and differences between college students who are able to forgive themselves versus those who are faced with barriers to the self-forgiveness process.

Finally, future self-forgiveness research could focus on group differences based on ethnicity (i.e., White, African American, Hispanic, Asian, Native American) to further understand and examine group variation as well as communalities across ethnic groups. Although the majority of our sample (74%) identified themselves as Christian, future research on self-forgiveness of intrapersonal transgressions could also examine group differences based on Christian religious affiliations (e.g., Catholic, Baptist, Lutheran, Pentecostal, Mormon, to name a few), non-Christian religious affiliations (e.g., Buddhism, Hinduism, Islam, Judaism) as well as nonreligious affiliations. Including quantitative measurements of religiosity could further support the experiences, contexts, and emotional determinants from the qualitative inquiry.

Limitations and Strengths

The present study should be considered in light of its limitations and strengths. First, the sample was restricted to college students who were predominately White and Christian. Although our sample was quite diverse (57% White; 13% Black; 19% Latino/Hispanic; 6% Asian/Pacific Islander; 1% other) the distribution of each ethnic group across our event conditions was very skewed making it impossible to examine group differences based on ethnicity or even to make inferences of the self-forgiveness process based on participants' ethnicity. These considerations along with the fact that we studied only females at a single college means that the findings cannot be generalized to the entire college population in the U.S. Second, because this study was cross-sectional, it is inadvisable to draw any causal inferences from these data.

Despite these limitations, the study has several strengths. First, it used qualitative methods of analysis to better understand the self-forgiveness process of intrapersonal transgressions among female college students. Second, no studies have previously examined self-forgiveness of intrapersonal transgressions using recalled narratives. Third, even though it was not the purpose of our study to explore whether the narratives supported the theoretical literature on self-forgiveness (see Hall & Fincham, 2005), based on Event A, 50% of participants acknowledged they had committed a transgression while 75% of participants from Event B acknowledged they had committed a transgression. This finding is in line with Hall and Fincham's (2005) theoretical model of self-forgiveness of interpersonal transgressions, whereby the individual acknowledges the transgression and takes responsibility for the offense. Indeed, to genuinely engage in self-forgiveness, there must be acknowledgement of one's actions and acceptance of the consequences of the transgression (Wenzel et al., 2012; Woodyatt & Wenzel, 2014; Woodyatt, Wenzel, & de Vel-Palumbo, 2017). Such acknowledgement may indicate that even though the majority of

participants still struggle to forgive themselves, they have taken the first step (i.e., acknowledgment of transgression) toward self-forgiveness. Finally, our study offers a new venue for research among emerging adults in regards to the nature of intrapersonal transgressions colleges students may currently face and expands future research on the self-forgiveness process.

Conclusion

Self-forgiveness may be particularly challenging for college students. It is likely that they may not be aware of the need to go through a process of self-forgiveness of intrapersonal transgressions due to the off putting nature of the phrase "self-forgiveness of intrapersonal transgression" may imply (e.g., vulnerability, non-acceptance of the self-inflicted transgression, unable to admit one's self-sabotage). It is possible that college students may prefer "less loaded" words such as "let it go," "move on," and "forget about it" when referring to self-forgiveness. However, approaching an intrapersonal transgression from a "let it go" mentality may temporarily minimize one's pain and be camouflaged as pseudo self-forgiveness. Nonetheless, the future expense of dealing with unfinished businesses may have cumulative effects among college students, which could be reflected in academic performance, overall health and behaviors, and relationships with others (Davis et al., 2015; Wohl, Pychyl, & Bennett, 2010). In addition, it is possible that other factors relevant to self-forgiveness of intrapersonal transgressions, including religiosity (e.g., was the individual affiliated to a particular religious group?), and cultural norms especially those internalized by the transgressor, and personality-level factors (e.g., anxiety, perfectionism, and neuroticism) could have influenced participant responses. Although relevant, it is speculative to believe that these factors are more central to self-forgiveness of intrapersonal transgression than the situational contexts discussed in our study.

In self-forgiveness of intrapersonal transgressions, the self is the sole perpetrator and victim of a transgression, which can bring to light one's own self-provoked suffering. Forgiving oneself demands readiness to face vulnerabilities as well as a great deal of inner strength, courage, compassion, and self-respect without minimizing one's moral obligations (Holmgren, 1998; Woodyatt, Wenzel, & Vel-Palumbo, 2017). For a college student, accepting his or her own self-inflicted transgression can facilitate regret, guilt, and shame, as well as feelings of sadness, self-disappointment, anger, frustration, and nostalgia (van Tilburg, Bruder, Wildschut, Sedikides, & Göritz, 2018; Zeelenberg, 2018). The conceptualization of self-forgiveness may be applied differently among college students and is likely to vary based on type of transgression (i.e., intrapersonal vs. interpersonal). This study represents an initial step toward understanding some of the barriers and gateways college students face in response to transgressions against the self. The variety of contextual situations and subsequent emotions that college students face suggest that there is not a uniform response to transgressions against the self (Peterson et al., 2017; Wohl et al., 2008).

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