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Self-forgiveness and well-being: Does divine forgiveness matter?

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ABSTRACT

A reliable association exists between self-forgiveness and well-being. But self-forgiveness and its correlates will not be fully understood without considering forgiveness by God or divine forgiveness, especially in light of the fact that the majority of the population identifies as religious. This study therefore examined the role of divine forgiveness in understanding the association between self-forgiveness and well-being using data collected from 435 young adults. Because well-being is not the absence of distress, this study examined whether self-forgiveness and divine forgiveness relate to psychological well-being and distress in the same way. Self-forgiveness and divine forgiveness were independently related to psychological well-being and distress even with religiosity statistically controlled. Divine forgiveness also moderated the relationship between self-forgiveness and psychological distress in that perceived forgiveness by God was associated with fewer depressive symptoms at lower but not higher levels of self-forgiveness. The implications for future research are outlined.

The study of self-forgiveness has been labelled the, 'Stepchild of forgiveness research' (Hall & Fincham, 2005, p. 621). Although studies of self-forgiveness still lag behind research on forgiveness of others, 60 studies have now investigated well-being correlates of trait self-forgiveness: only one found a null relationship (Kaye-Tzadok & Davidson-Arad, 2016) and none documented a negative relationship (Massengale, Chloe, & Davis, 2017). The lion's share of this research has focused on depressive symptoms (effect size, $r = -.48$; N = 10,874, 36 studies) and life satisfaction/meaning (effect size $r = .43$; N = 9,350, 25 studies), with state anxiety (effect size $r = -30$; N = 5,311, 16 studies) being the third most popular well-being correlate studied (Davis et al., 2015).

Whereas self-forgiveness is now an established, albeit smaller, area of inquiry alongside forgiveness of others, the same cannot be said of a third form of forgiveness, forgiveness by God or divine forgiveness. In fact, 'modern discussions of forgiveness have given little attention to divine forgiveness' (Couenhoven, 2010, p. 166) despite the fact that the world's longstanding religions emphasize divine forgiveness (Lundberg, 2010). This is an important omission as some 68–84% of the world's population profess religious beliefs[1] and even though the U.S. population is becoming more secular the vast majority of the population (79%, Twenge, Sherman, Exline, & Grubbs, 2016) still identify as religious. For many these religious beliefs are a core motivating feature of their lives.

Consequently, we will not understand human behavior without tackling difficult questions at the interface of religion and forgiveness. Yet, as McCullough and Worthington (1999) noted,

> Most of the empirical treatments of forgiveness …. have tended to overlook the deep religious roots of the concept of forgiveness. This oversight is unfortunate, because basic research on forgiveness could probably be enriched considerably by examining the ways that religious traditions, beliefs, and rituals … influence the common, earthly aspect of forgiveness (p. 1143).

With some notable exceptions (e.g. Akl & Mullet, 2010; Krause, 2015, 2017; McConnell & Dixon, 2012; Toussaint & Williams, 2008; Toussaint, Williams, Musick, & Everson, 2001; Uecker, Ellison, Flannell, & Burde, 2016), this advice has not been heeded, a circumstance that limits current knowledge. For instance, those who feel forgiven by God experience less death anxiety (Krause, 2015), are more likely to forgive themselves (Krause, 2017), and are less likely to expect acts of contrition from transgressors (Krause & Ellison, 2003). In a similar vein, among college students feeling forgiven by God was associated with decreased levels of inward anger and suicidal behavior (Hirsch, Webb, & Jeglic, 2012). Finally, the experience of being forgiven by God is associated with use of words signifying positive emotion and gratitude (Abernathy et al., 2016). Despite a number of relevant studies, in most studies forgiveness by God is not the central topic studied. Rather it tends to be an issue that is included

among numerous variables assessed. Perhaps not surprisingly, divine forgiveness is often assessed using a single item (typically, 'I know God forgives me,' see Griffen, Havelock, & Worthington, 2014).

It can be argued that self-forgiveness and its correlates will not be fully understood without considering divine forgiveness given the central role of religious beliefs in the majority of the population. Knowing that one is forgiven by God is likely to facilitate self-forgiveness. Indeed, in the Christian tradition not forgiving oneself in the awareness that '…he had by himself purged our sins…' (Hebrews 1:3) is tantamount to rejecting Christ. Consistent with this viewpoint, three studies provide initial evidence to show that divine forgiveness is indeed related to self-forgiveness (Krause, 2015, 2017; McConnell & Dixon, 2012). However, important aspects of this relationship remain unknown. For example, do divine and self-forgiveness each directly relate to well-being or do they dynamically interact in doing so? It is conceivable that high levels of both types of forgiveness combine to confer the greatest benefit compared to any other combination of the two forms of forgiveness. Further, it is important to distinguish well-being from the mere absence of distress just as health is not simply the absence of illness. Consequently, it is reasonable to ask whether self-forgiveness and divine forgiveness relate to psychological well-being and distress in the same way.

Present study

The present study addresses the questions posed above by examining the following hypotheses.

Hypothesis 1. Self-forgiveness will be related to indices of psychological well-being and distress.

Hypothesis 2. Divine forgiveness will be related to indices of psychological well-being and distress.

Hypothesis 3. The associations proposed in the first two hypotheses will occur independently of level of religiosity.

Question. Given the lack of prior data on how self-forgiveness and divine forgiveness jointly relate to well-being and psychological distress, the following question is asked: Do self-forgiveness and divine forgiveness interact in predicting psychological well-being and distress?

Method

Participants

Participants were 345 undergraduate students (325 female) in an introductory family relations course. This class is required for several majors and is an option for meeting liberal studies requirements, so students represent all colleges and majors on campus (Fincham, Cui, Braithwaite, & Pasley, 2008). Participants' mean age was 19.85 years (*SD* = 1.60). About 70% of students identified as Caucasian, 12% as African American, 13% as Latino, and the remainder indicated they were Asian, American Indian, or Middle Eastern. Four participants declined to offer their racial/ethnic identity.

Procedure

As part of a larger study, students were offered multiple options to earn class credit. One of the options was to complete the measures used in this study. IRB approval was obtained prior to any data collection. Those students who chose to participate were sent an email link to an online survey during the first week of the semester that contained the measures used in this study.

Materials

Subjective well-being

The Satisfaction with Life Scale (SWLS, Diener, Emmons, Larson, & Griffen, 1985) is a widely used measure of subjective well-being. It is a short scale comprising short 5-items (e.g. 'In most ways my life is close to ideal,' 'So far I have gotten the important things I want in life') designed to measure global judgments of satisfaction with one's life. Responses to each item are given on a 7-point scale ranging from "Strongly disagree' to 'Strongly Agree.' Items were summed to yield an overall index of well-being.

Depressive symptoms

Depressive symptoms were used as an index of psychological distress using the 10-item Center for Epidemiological Studies Depression Scale (CES-D; Irwin, Haydari, & Oxman, 1999; Radloff, 1977). The CES-D is a widely used measure of depressive symptoms in nonclinical samples. Participants are asked to evaluate how they felt and behaved during the previous week. Sample items include, 'I could not "get going"' and 'I felt hopeful about the future.' Participants responded 0 (rarely) to 3 (most/all of the time) on items, such as feelings of loneliness, hopelessness, and restless sleep. Some items were reverse coded, such that higher responses indicate more depressive symptoms.

Self-forgiveness

Self-forgiveness was assessed using 5 items specifically developed for this study (e.g. 'It is really hard for me to accept myself after I have hurt someone else,' 'When

I treat someone wrongly, I tend to think about it a lot afterwards,' 'Even though it hurts when I let myself down, I quickly feel good about myself again'). These items were chosen from pilot tests that had examined some 20 items. A principal components factor analysis using varimax rotation showed that all five items loaded above .50 on a single factor that accounted for 61.02% of the variance. Responses were given on a 5-point scale that varied from 'Strongly disagree' to 'Strongly Agree.' The average score for the items was computed such that higher scores reflected greater self-forgiveness. Cronbach's alpha was .71 and test-retest reliability of the scale over 7 weeks was .56. In a separate sample (N = 518) this scale correlated .64 with the self-forgiveness subscale of the Heartland Forgiveness Scale (Thompson et al., 2005).

Divine forgiveness

Three items were used to assess God's forgiveness, 'I am certain that God forgives me when I seek his forgiveness,' 'When I do something wrong, God is quick to forgive me.' (both answered on a 4-point scale ranging from "Strongly Disagree to 'Strongly Agree') and 'How often have you felt that God forgives you?' (4-point scale from 'never' to 'many times'). A principal components factor analysis using varimax rotation yielded a single factor that accounted for 76.20% of the variance with all items loading above .70 on the factor. The average score for the three items was computed with higher scores indicating greater divine forgiveness. Coefficient alpha was .75 and test-retest reliability over 7 weeks was .58.

Religiosity

Religiosity was measured with two items. The first item asked about the frequency of attending religious services/meetings and used an 8-point response scale that ranged from "Never' to 'About once a day.' The second item asked, 'How important is religion in your life?' with response options ranging from 'Not important' to 'Very important.' The two items were highly correlated (r = .76) and hence they were combined to yield an index of religiosity.

Results

The inter-correlations among the measures, as well as their means and standard deviations, are shown in Table 1. Hypothesis 1 was supported as self-forgiveness was significantly positively correlated with psychological well-being and negatively correlated with depressive symptoms. Hypothesis 2 was also supported in that divine forgiveness correlated positively with

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

Variable	1	2	3	4	5
1. God's Forgiveness		.02	.21*	−.20*	.53*
2. Self-Forgiveness			.16*	−.37*	−.01…
3. SWLS				−.48*	.16*
4. CES-D					−.15*
5. Religiosity					
Mean	3.29	2.74	24.78	2.82	5.24
Standard Deviation	.79	.69	6.13	3.04	2.01

Note. SWLS = Satisfaction with Life Scale; CES-D = Center for Epidemiological Studies Depression Scale
*p < .01

psychological well-being and negatively with depressive symptoms.

It can be seen, however, that religiosity was significantly related to the two well-being measures and was strongly correlated with divine forgiveness raising the question of whether the two forgiveness measures relate to well-being independently of religiosity. To examine this question, two regression analyses was conducted in which self-forgiveness, divine forgiveness and religiosity were used to predict psychological well-being and depressive symptoms, respectively. The regression for SWLS was significant, $R^2 = .07$, $F(3, 341) = 9.10$, $p < .001$. Self-forgiveness accounted for variance over and beyond that of the two other predictor variables, $\Delta R^2 = .03$, $\beta = .16$, $t = 3.0$, $p < .01$. The same was true for divine forgiveness, $\Delta R^2 = .02$, $\beta = .17$, $t = 2.81$, $p < .01$. Similar results were obtained when the CES-D served as the criterion, $R^2 = .18$, $F(3, 341) = 24.59$, $p < .001$; both self-self-forgiveness, $\Delta R^2 = .09$, $\beta = −.37$, $t = −7.48$, $p < .001$, and divine forgiveness, $\Delta R^2 = .01$, $\beta = −.15$, $t = −2.6$, $p < .05$ were significant predictors.

Although the above findings support Hypothesis 3 by showing that both self and divine forgiveness independently account for variance in subjective well-being and depressive symptoms, the question of their potential interaction in doing so, remains unanswered. This question was addressed by examining whether divine forgiveness moderated the relation between self-forgiveness and each of the well-being indicators. This was done using the Hayes (2017) PROCESS macro, again controlling for religiosity. As regards SWLS, no moderating effect was found. However, the interaction term was significant in regard to the CES-D, $R^2 = .02$, $F(1, 340) = 7.65$, $p < .01$. The Johnson-Neyman test indicated that there was a statistically significant transition point for the moderator such that moderation did not occur for divine forgiveness scores above 4.15 (2.32% of the sample). The interaction effect (see Figure 1) showed that divine forgiveness more strongly moderated the association between depressive symptoms at lower levels of self-forgiveness.
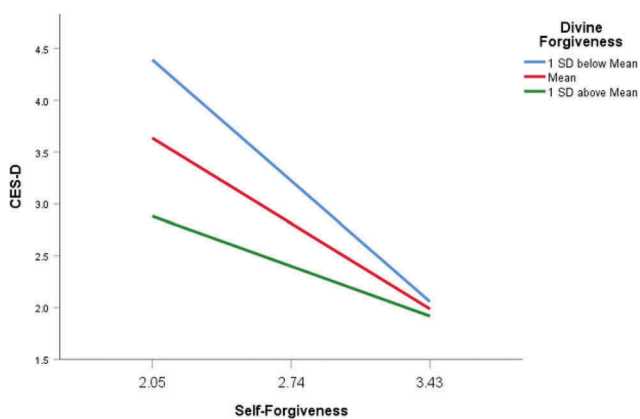
Figure 1. Simple slopes of self-forgiveness in predicting depressive symptoms for 1 SD below the mean, the mean, and 1 SD above the mean of divine forgiveness.

CES-D = Center for Epidemiological Studies Depression Scale

Discussion

First generation research has clearly documented a relationship between well-being and self-forgiveness but has not yet explored the boundary conditions of this relationship. The present study therefore attempted to do so by identifying a form of forgiveness that has received limited attention, divine forgiveness, and examined whether the association between well-being and self-forgiveness remained when God's forgiveness was considered. In the process of investigating self-forgiveness in this broader context, the association between self-forgiveness and well-being was replicated; self-forgiveness was inversely related to depressive symptoms and directly related to satisfaction with life. Moreover, these associations remained even when divine forgiveness and religiosity were considered. The fact that self-forgiveness accounted for variance in both indicators of well-being over and beyond that of divine forgiveness and religiosity suggests the existence of a robust relationship.

The clear, seemingly simple relationship between well-being and self-forgiveness, however, did not hold when divine forgiveness was considered as a moderating variable of this relationship. That is, perceived forgiveness by God moderated the association between self-forgiveness and depressive symptoms. At lower levels of self-forgiveness, higher levels of perceived forgiveness by God mattered as they were associated with fewer depressive symptoms. But as self-forgiveness increased, the moderating effect of divine forgiveness decreased until it disappeared altogether at the highest levels of self-forgiveness.

Interestingly, no such moderating effect occurred when satisfaction with life was examined. The discrepancy

in finding a moderating effect across the two indices of well-being provides empirical support for the decision to consider them as conceptually distinct and not simply as opposite ends of a unidimensional construct of well-being. Further evidence to support this decision comes from examining the correlation between the two well-being indices which showed that that they shared less than 25% of their variance. Why moderation would occur for depressive symptoms but not satisfaction with life is not clear. However, one factor that seems relevant is the strength of the relationship between self-forgiveness and the two indicators. The association between self-forgiveness and depressive symptoms was more than twice the size of that with satisfaction with life.

The present study also builds on a scattered literature that contains data on forgiveness by God. Early on, Toussaint et al. (2001) and Krause and Ellison (2003) reported data to show that forgiveness of others and forgiveness by God were both related to psychological well-being but that the association for interpersonal forgiveness tended to be stronger than for divine forgiveness. This difference held for both measures of depressive symptoms and life satisfaction. In extending this work to self-forgiveness, we obtained similar results in that both forms of forgiveness related to the well-being indicators but the tendency for the self-forgiveness relation to be stronger was limited to depressive symptoms only as the magnitude of the regression coefficients was virtually identical for life satisfaction.

A recent observation that 'different types of forgiveness have largely been examined in isolation from each other' (Krause, 2015, p. 129) emphasizes the importance of the present finding that forgiveness by God and self-forgiveness can interact when it comes to understanding the correlates of forgiveness. This echoes findings showing that forgiveness of marriage partners is better understand when self-forgiveness is also considered (e.g. Pelucci, Paleari, Regalia, & Fincham, 2015; Pelucci, Regalia, Paleari, & Fincham, 2017). An obvious next step therefore is to explore how forgiveness of others, self-forgiveness, and forgiveness by God operate in concert with each other. Doing so would have the added advantage of mainstreaming the study of divine forgiveness which appears to have replaced self-forgiveness as the step-child of forgiveness research.

A strength of the present study is that it moved beyond the use of a single item to measure divine forgiveness and in doing so utilized a measure that was more psychometrically sound than a multi-item measure used previously which showed unacceptable levels of internal consistency (see Bufford, McMinn, Moody, & Geczy-Haskins, 2017, Study 2). Nonetheless, the assessment of forgiveness by God was limited as it

primarily reflected cognitive beliefs thereby omitting potential emotional elements of feeling forgiven (Touissant, Owen, & Cheadle, 2012) as well as other possible dimensions of divine forgiveness (e.g. the phenomenology of divine forgiveness, agency in obtaining God's forgiveness, beliefs about what is forgivable and so on). Clearly, an important next step for future research is to develop more comprehensive, psychometrically sound measures of divine forgiveness.

It is also important to bear in mind two further limitations of this study when interpreting its findings. First, the sample was restricted to emerging adults and was predominantly female which raises the question of whether similar findings would emerge among older persons and males. Second, whether the associations found occur in clinically depressed persons is unknown as the participants in the present study showed relatively low numbers of depressive symptoms.

Notwithstanding the limitations noted above, this study pointed to the need to further explore boundary conditions of the documented well-being-self-forgiveness association. In doing so, it identified a third form of forgiveness that likely has important implications not only for self-forgiveness but also interpersonal forgiveness. When the role of religious beliefs is taken seriously it could hardly be otherwise as the three forms of forgiveness are inextricably interwoven in the world's dominant religious belief systems.

Note

1. This estimate will increase by 2050 as the proportion of those identifying as 'unaffiliated' shrinks. See http://www.pewforum.org/2015/04/02/religious-projections-2010-2050/

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