

No type of forgiveness is an island:

Divine forgiveness, self-forgiveness and interpersonal forgiveness

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Abstract

Different types of forgiveness tend to be studied independently of each other. This study therefore investigated the interplay among divine forgiveness, self-forgiveness, and interpersonal forgiveness. Using two samples of 348 and 449 participants, we examined the relations among the three types of forgiveness and showed that they were positively correlated with each other. Divine forgiveness did not act as a third variable accounting for the relationship between self-forgiveness and interpersonal forgiveness. However, divine forgiveness was shown to play a moderating role in the relationship between the two earthly types of forgiveness. Specifically, controlling for religiosity and impression management, divine forgiveness moderated their relationship in that self-forgiveness and interpersonal forgiveness were more highly related to each other as levels of perceived divine forgiveness increased. The unique features of divine forgiveness that might account for its moderating role in the self-interpersonal forgiveness association are identified and avenues for further research are outlined.

Keywords: divine forgiveness, self-forgiveness, interpersonal forgiveness, impression management

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“To err is human, to forgive, divine” (Alexander Pope, *Essay on Criticism*)

Notwithstanding the emphasis on divine forgiveness in the world’s longstanding religions (Lundberg, 2010), and therefore its relevance for some 5.8 billion people who profess a religious faith (Pew Research Center, 2012), scant attention has been given to this type of forgiveness in the booming research literature on forgiveness. For example, there is a handbook on self-forgiveness (Woodyatt, Worthington, Wenzel, & Griffin, 2017) and the second edition of a handbook on interpersonal forgiveness has already been published (Worthington & Wade, 2020). The well-established nature of research on these two types of forgiveness is further indicated by the existence of meta-analyses on self-forgiveness (e.g., Davis, Ho, Griffin, Bell, Hook, Van Tongeren et al., 2015), interpersonal forgiveness (e.g., Fehr, Gelfand, & Nag, 2010; Riek & Mania, 2012) and applied research on interventions to increase forgiveness of others (Wade, Hoyt, Kidwell, & Worthington, 2014).

Empirical research on divine forgiveness is not altogether absent from the literature. However, a recent analysis of available empirical data on divine forgiveness concludes that it comprises “a scattered body of work that lacks coherence.” (Fincham, in press, p.10). This analysis also notes that divine forgiveness is seldom the central focus of studies that report relevant data which gives rise to “questions about the epistemological status of this inchoate literature” (Fincham, in press, p. 10). This is because studies may simply capture variance that reflects religiosity rather than divine forgiveness, per se. Exacerbating such problems is the almost exclusive reliance on a single item measure of divine forgiveness, usually “I know that God forgives me” (Fetzer Institute, 1999), which has been criticized on numerous grounds (see Fincham, in press), including its failure to capture any emotional or behavioral aspects of forgiveness (Touissant et al., 2012).

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Perhaps the most surprising feature of the literature on forgiveness is that “different types of forgiveness have largely been examined in isolation from each other” (Krause, 2017, p. 129). This is particularly surprising for interpersonal and self-forgiveness as they share a number of similarities. These similarities include that they are both responses to an objective wrong, involve a motivational transformation entailing a change from negative affect, motivations or cognitions, to more positive ones without excusing or minimizing harmful behavior, and each occurs over time. Moreover, both types of forgiveness are central to healing relationships when a transgression occurs. Specifically, when a victim chooses to forgive it often sets the stage for the transgressor to behave in ways to regain the trust of the victim allowing the victim to again feel safe in the relationship. Conversely, the transgressor can reduce his or her own distress through self-forgiveness allowing him/her to attend to finding appropriate ways to repair the relationship (Holmgren, 1998; Woodyatt & Wenzel, 2013). In short, both types of forgiveness have been viewed as prosocial coping strategies to deal with interpersonal transgressions (e.g., Pelucchi, Regalia, Paleari et al., 2017; Strelan, 2020).

Given the above observations, it is not surprising to find that self-forgiveness and interpersonal forgiveness are empirically correlated. For example, the widely used Heartland Forgiveness Scale has subscales for self-forgiveness and interpersonal forgiveness that correlate significantly ($r = .31$ to $r = .35$) with each other (Thompson, Snyder, Hoffman et al., 2005). It is possible that such relationships may not only reflect conceptual similarities but also similar underlying mechanisms. For example, victims with greater empathy are more likely to view the transgression from the perpetrator’s perspective and show a greater willingness to forgive, a possibility strongly supported by a robust relationship between empathy and forgiveness (see Fehr et al., 2010). The ability to empathize when directed towards the self is also likely to

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increase self-forgiveness, a viewpoint supported by the documented relationship between self-compassion and self-forgiveness (e.g., Breen, Kashdan, Lenser, & Fincham, 2010).

Thus far, however, no consideration has been given to how divine forgiveness might account for or affect the association between interpersonal forgiveness and self-forgiveness. It is the case that divine forgiveness is associated with both self-forgiveness and interpersonal forgiveness (Fincham & May, 2020; McConnell & Dixon, 2012). Moreover, longitudinal research also suggests that the direction of effects is from divine forgiveness to self-forgiveness and from divine forgiveness to interpersonal forgiveness. Specifically, divine forgiveness predicted later self-forgiveness, controlling for initial levels of self-forgiveness but not vice versa (Fincham, May, & Carlos Chavez, 2020). Similarly, divine forgiveness predicted later interpersonal forgiveness but not vice versa (Fincham & May, 2020). These data are consistent with the view that divine forgiveness gives rise to both self-forgiveness and interpersonal forgiveness. Accordingly, it is theoretically possible that divine forgiveness could account for the relationship between self-forgiveness and interpersonal forgiveness. Therefore, the present study will examine whether divine forgiveness fully accounts for the association between self-forgiveness and interpersonal forgiveness (research question 1).

Even if divine forgiveness does not account for the self-interpersonal forgiveness association, it may still play a role in understanding the association between these two types of forgiveness through moderation (i.e., the relationship between self-forgiveness and interpersonal forgiveness depends upon the strength or amount of divine forgiveness). This is because it can be argued that as the experience of divine forgiveness increases it is likely to facilitate interpersonal forgiveness and self-forgiveness thereby increasing the relationship between the two forms of earthly forgiveness. After all, in the Christian tradition, divine forgiveness and interpersonal

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forgiveness are explicitly linked (e.g., “Forgive as the Lord forgave you,” Colossians, 3:13) and the act of not forgiving oneself in the awareness that ‘. . .he had by himself purged our sins. . .’ (Hebrews 1:3) is equivalent to rejecting Christ. If this line of reasoning is correct, it suggests that divine forgiveness may play a synergistic or moderating role in the association between interpersonal forgiveness and self-forgiveness. This possibility is consistent with Fincham and May’s (2019) finding that divine forgiveness played a moderating role in the association between self-forgiveness and depressive symptoms in that fewer depressive symptoms were related to perceived forgiveness by God at lower but not higher levels of self-forgiveness. Might divine forgiveness play a similar moderating role in the self-interpersonal forgiveness association with higher levels of divine forgiveness increasing the strength of the association? This is the second research question proposed in the present study.

Present study

The current study addresses the questions posed earlier. Because religiosity is associated with all three types of forgiveness with the magnitude of the correlation increasing from self-forgiveness through interpersonal forgiveness to divine forgiveness, an index of religiosity will be used as a control variable. In a similar vein, because all three forms of forgiveness are potentially vulnerable to socially desirable responding, a measure of impression management will also serve as a control variable. Finally, in view of the replication crisis in numerous disciplines, two different samples will be used to ensure that the results can be replicated.

The study tests one hypothesis and examines two questions:

Hypothesis 1. Self-forgiveness, interpersonal forgiveness, and divine forgiveness will be positively correlated with each other.

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Question 1. In the absence of prior data that examines the associations among the three forms of forgiveness the following question is examined: Does divine forgiveness fully account for the association between self-forgiveness and interpersonal forgiveness?

Question 2. Given the lack of prior data on how divine forgiveness might impact the association between self-forgiveness and interpersonal forgiveness, the following question is asked: Does divine forgiveness moderate the association between interpersonal forgiveness and self-forgiveness?

Method

Participants and procedure

Participants were college students in departments offering courses in human and social sciences. The vast majority of students in these departments are female. Two samples were collected, one in each of two consecutive semesters.

Sample 1: Of the 348 participants in the first sample, 330 were female, with 236 (67.87%) identifying as Caucasian, 44 (12.6%) as African-American, 44 (12.6%) as Latino, 12 (3.4%) as Asian, 1 (.3%) as Native American, 2 (.6%) as Middle Eastern, 8 (2.3%) as “other” and 1 declined to provide ethnic/racial information. The average age of participants was 20.39 ($SD = 2.45$) years.

Sample 2: This sample comprised 449 participants (416 females) with 291 (64.8%) identifying as Caucasian, 64 (14.3%) as African-American, 61 (13.6%) as Latino, 15 (3.3%) as Asian, 1 (.2%) as Middle Eastern, 1 (.2%) as Native American, 12 (2.7%) as “other” and 4 declined to provide ethnic/racial information. The mean age of participants was 20.29 ($SD = 2.02$) years.

In each course from which participants were recruited, instructors offered students the opportunity of participating in an online survey as one of several options to earn a small amount

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of extra credit. For the first sample, the survey took place near the end of the semester whereas the second sample completed the survey early in the semester. The instruments used in this study were included in larger online surveys. Participants read a brief description of the study and provided informed consent before answering any questions. The data collection was approved by the local Institution Review Board.

Measures

Forgiveness

Self-forgiveness. The Heartland Forgiveness Scale was used to assess self-forgiveness. The subscale assessing self-forgiveness comprises 6 items (e.g., “Although I feel badly at first when I mess up, over time I can give myself some slack,” “I hold grudges against myself for negative things I’ve done”) three of which are reverse scored. Answers are given on a 7-point scale ranging from 1 (Almost always false of me) to 7 (Almost always true of me). Thompson et al. (2005) report 6 studies in their development of the scale which provide a wealth of validity data. In the present study coefficient alpha was .79 for Sample 1 and .76 for Sample 2.

Interpersonal forgiveness. The Heartland Forgiveness Scale was used to assess interpersonal forgiveness. The subscale assessing interpersonal forgiveness also contains 6 items (e.g., “I continue to be hard on others who have hurt me,” “Although others have hurt me in the past, I have eventually been able to see them as good people”), three of which are reverse scored. They are answered on the same 7-point scale described above. In the present study coefficient alpha was .84 for Sample 1 and .80 for Sample 2.

Divine forgiveness. Building on the three item measure used by Fincham & Ross (2019) divine forgiveness was assessed using five items (“How often have you felt that God forgives you?”; “I am certain that God forgives me when I seek His forgiveness”; “Knowing that I am

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forgiven for my sins gives me the strength to face my faults and be a better person”; “How often do you experience situations in which you have the feeling that God is merciful to you?”; “How often do you experience situations in which you have the feeling that God delivers you from a debt?”). Responses were given on a 4-point scale for the first 3 items and on a 5-point scale for the last two items. Principal axis factor analysis estimation with Varimax rotation yielded a single factor accounting for 73.57% and 75.51% of the variance in Sample 1 and Sample 2, respectively. Coefficient alpha was .88 in Sample 1 and .96 in Sample 2.

Religiosity

In Sample 1, two items were used to assess religiosity. They assessed religious participation and prayer/meditation, respectively. The first asked about frequency of participation in religious/spiritual services or meetings and the second asked about the frequency of prayer/meditation. Each was answered on a 8-point scale (1 = “Never” to 8 = “About once a day”). In Sample 2, two items were again used to assess religiosity. They assessed religious participation and the centrality of religion in the participant’s life, respectively. The first question regarding religious participation was the same as the one used in Sample 1. The second asked about the importance of religion in the respondent’s life, using an 8-point scale (1 = “Not at all important” to 8 = “Extremely important”). The two items were strongly correlated in both Sample 1 ($r = .64$) and Sample 2 ($r = .68$) and hence they were combined to yield a single index with higher scores reflecting greater religiosity.

Impression management

Participants completed the 8-item impression management subscale of the Balanced Inventory of Desirable Responding Short Form (Hart, Ritchie, Hepper, & Gebauer, 2015). This subscale comprises items that capture “a conscious dissimulation of responses to create a socially desirable image” (Hart et al., 2015, p. 2) and validity data include a substantial correlation with

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the longer Marlowe-Crowne Social Desirability Scale ($r = .53$). Example items include “I never cover up my mistakes” and “I sometimes tell lies if I have to” (reverse scored). Responses were provided on a 7-point scale ranging from “strongly disagree” to strong agree” with the midpoint labelled “neither agree nor disagree.” The scores on each item were summed so that higher scores represented greater impression management. Coefficient alpha was .66 in Sample 1 and .67 in Sample 2.

Results

Descriptive statistics (means and standard deviations) and correlations among the variables studied are shown in Table 1 for Sample 1 and in Table 2 for Sample 2. These data provide support for Hypothesis 1 as the tables show that all three types of forgiveness were positively and significantly correlated with each other. In both samples, the highest correlation was between self-forgiveness and interpersonal forgiveness.

To examine the first question, whether divine forgiveness might account for the association between self-forgiveness and interpersonal forgiveness, partial correlations were computed. In each sample, the association between self-forgiveness and interpersonal forgiveness was computed controlling for divine forgiveness. Although the magnitude of the correlations decreased, they remained strong and statistically significant in both Sample 1, $r(345) = .39$, and Sample 2, $r(446) = .37$, $p = .001$. We also addressed this question by examining whether divine forgiveness mediated the relation between interpersonal forgiveness and self-forgiveness controlling for religiosity using model 4 of the PROCESS macro (Hayes, 2017). It did not as the indirect effect between self-forgiveness and interpersonal forgiveness was not significant in either sample 1 (.02, 95% C.I. -.005, .042) or sample 2 (.11, 95% C.I. -.007, .031).

The second question posed asked whether divine forgiveness might serve to moderate the association between self-forgiveness and interpersonal forgiveness. This was done with the

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Hayes (2017) PROCESS macro (Model 1), using religiosity and impression management as control variables. In both samples the interaction term was significant, Sample 1, $t = 2.26$, $p = .024$, 95% CI [.002, .034]: Sample 2, $t = 2.75$, $p = .006$, 95% CI [.007, .044]. For Sample 1, 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 below 9.49 (8.62% of the sample). In Sample 2, the transition point for the moderator was a divine forgiveness score of 8.00 showing that moderation did not occur for scores below this level (11.80% of the sample). The interaction effects for Sample 1 and Sample 2 are shown in Figures 1 and 2, respectively.

Discussion

In the absence of prior data that examines the associations among self-forgiveness, interpersonal forgiveness, and divine forgiveness, the present research examined several issues regarding the potential interplay among the three types of forgiveness. As hypothesized, there were significant positive correlations among the types of forgiveness. Consistent with the arguments made in the introduction outlining the similarities between them, self-forgiveness and interpersonal forgiveness showed the highest correlation in both samples. Because each of these two types of forgiveness has been found to be related to divine forgiveness, both concurrently and longitudinally (e.g., Fincham et al., 2020; Fincham & May, 2020; McConnell, & Dixon, 2012), we examined the possibility that divine forgiveness fully accounts for the association between self-forgiveness and interpersonal forgiveness. No evidence was found to support this viewpoint. Finally, we investigated whether divine forgiveness might impact the association between self-forgiveness and interpersonal forgiveness. Specifically, we tested whether divine forgiveness moderated the association between interpersonal forgiveness and self-forgiveness. It did as a statistically significant interaction was found between divine forgiveness and

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interpersonal forgiveness in predicting self-forgiveness. In both samples the interaction showed that higher levels of perceived divine forgiveness were associated with a stronger relationship between interpersonal forgiveness and self-forgiveness.

The above findings suggest that even though divine forgiveness does not fully account for the association between self-forgiveness and interpersonal forgiveness, it nonetheless has important implications for their association. This is not surprising given earlier data showing that divine forgiveness is related to the two types of earthly forgiveness. This finding is important because it suggests that an accurate understanding of the relation between the two earthly forms of forgiveness, forgiving others and forgiving the self, will not emerge without considering divine forgiveness. But showing that divine forgiveness moderates the interpersonal-self-forgiveness association prompts a simple question. Why does this occur?

It can be argued that the perception of being forgiven by God can have profound effects, some of which may be related to the processes related to divine forgiveness. How so? First, it is the case that asking for God's forgiveness can by itself generate factors that facilitate earthly forgiveness. Simply admitting one's wrong (sin) and repenting or changing one's mind about the wrongful behavior is humbling, and humility has been shown to be related to earthly forgiveness (e.g., Krause, 2018). Such humility is likely amplified when the penitent experiences God's forgiveness in the knowledge that what s/he likely considers the most potent entity in the universe has taken the time to grant him/her forgiveness. Humility is also likely accompanied by gratitude, another factor that has been associated with earthly forgiveness (e.g., Neto, 2007). Having been the perpetrator of a wrongdoing who needed to be forgiven is also likely to facilitate empathy. Subsequently, when the victim of a wrongdoing, s/he is likely to show greater empathy with the perpetrator (whether another person or the self) having been him or herself in

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need of divine forgiveness (i.e., in the role of the wrongdoer). Presumably, the more a person experiences divine forgiveness, the greater the experience of humility, gratitude, and empathy. In turn, this is likely to facilitate greater levels of self-forgiveness and interpersonal forgiveness and thereby increase the association between them.

It will be noted that when it comes to divine forgiveness the person is in the role of the transgressor and is the recipient of forgiveness. This raises the question of whether there is anything unique about divine forgiveness or whether the number of times a person has been forgiven by another person for a transgression might not play a similar moderating role to that found for divine forgiveness. Although this question will ultimately be answered empirically, in the interim it is reasonable to argue that there is something unique about divine forgiveness. Specifically, divine forgiveness, unlike its earthly counterparts, has eschatological implications. Thus, the stakes are necessarily much higher for the individual compared to earthly forgiveness. As a consequence, it can be hypothesized that in divine forgiveness the earlier identified mechanisms that facilitate earthly forgiveness are particularly intense and that their instigation by being forgiven by another person pales in comparison. Finally, divine forgiveness is often sought with the implicit or explicit realization that a change in behavior will follow. For some, it can thus be a transformative experience that results, *inter alia*, in the person being more forgiving towards others and the self.

Notwithstanding the novel nature of the present findings, they should be interpreted cautiously in light of several limitations. First, the vast majority of the participants in both samples were female and therefore the current findings need to be replicated in a male sample. Second, the present findings need to be replicated using a more diverse sample in terms of socioeconomic status, race, and age. Third, like so much of the literature on forgiveness, the

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present research relies on the use of self-report. The need to employ alternative research methods in future research on forgiveness is apparent. Finally, the measures of forgiveness used in the present research all assessed overall tendencies. It will be important to determine whether divine forgiveness moderates the relationship between self-forgiveness and interpersonal forgiveness when they pertain to specific events.

The above limitations should, however, be considered in the context of the numerous strengths of the research. Unlike many prior studies on divine forgiveness, the present research examined whether religiosity might account for findings pertaining to this type of forgiveness and showed that it did not. In a similar vein, an attempt was made to rule out another artifact that might account for the results, namely, socially desirable responding. This variable has seldom been controlled in prior research on self-forgiveness and interpersonal forgiveness which may be an important oversight as impression management was significantly related to both types of earthly forgiveness in the samples studied. Using impression management as a control variable, the present research showed that it did not account for the results obtained. Finally, and importantly, the present research is responsive to the replication crisis in psychology (e.g., Lilienfeld, 2017; Shrout & Rodgers, 2018) in that it reports consistent results across two independent samples.

In sum, the present findings constitute a novel contribution in that they are the first to examine the interplay among divine forgiveness, self-forgiveness, and interpersonal forgiveness using multi-item assessments of each. In doing so, they also provide much needed data on the relationship between self-forgiveness and interpersonal forgiveness, an issue that has received limited attention as these two types of forgiveness tend to be examined independently of each other. The present findings also point to the importance of divine forgiveness in understanding

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the relationship between these two forms of forgiveness. Finally, this research is consistent with a growing body of evidence that suggests our understanding of self-forgiveness and interpersonal forgiveness will remain incomplete without including divine forgiveness in their investigation.

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Table 1. Means, standard deviations (SD) and correlations among Sample 1 (n = 348) variables.

	1	2	3	4	5
1 Forgiveness		.44*	.28*	.16*	.28*
2 Self-forgiveness			.24*	.09	.28*
3 Divine forgiveness				.67*	.08
4 Religiosity					.10
5 Impression management					
Mean	26.65	28.07	14.97	7.78	32.85
SD	4.29	6.60	3.83	3.52	6.46

* $p < .01$ (two tailed)

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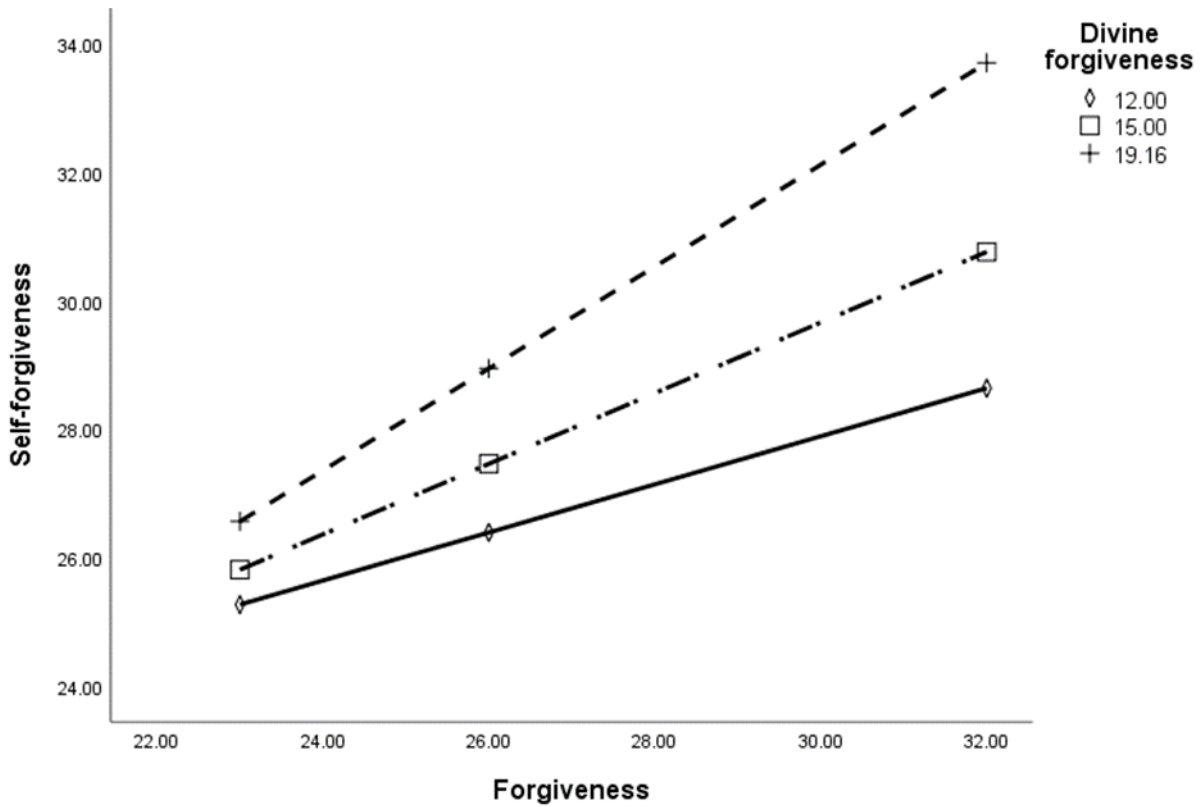
Table 2. Means, standard deviations (SD) and correlations among Sample 1 (n = 449) variables.

	1	2	3	4	5
1 Forgiveness		.40**	.17**	.12*	.20**
2 Self-forgiveness			.21**	.12*	.24**
3 Divine forgiveness				.70**	.09
4 Religiosity					.09
5 Impression management					
Mean	30.21	28.64	14.66	8.21	33.18
SD	6.01	5.96	4.57	3.80	6.77

* $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$ (two tailed)

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Figure 1. Simple slopes of forgiveness predicting self-forgiveness for low (16th percentile) moderate (50th percentile) and high levels (84th percentile) of divine forgiveness



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Figure 2. Simple slopes of forgiveness predicting self-forgiveness for low (16th percentile) moderate (50th percentile) and high levels (84th percentile) of divine forgiveness

