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Towards a Psychology of Divine Forgiveness

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The world's longstanding religions emphasize divine forgiveness, yet systematic research on God's forgiveness is notably absent from the scientific literature. Because religious beliefs are a core-motivating feature in many peoples' lives, divine forgiveness requires attention if we are to attain a more complete understanding of human behavior. The goal of this article is to provide a roadmap for future research on divine forgiveness. Toward this end, it provides a review and critique on extant research followed by an analysis of the construct of divine forgiveness. This provides a segue to identifying and discussing several topics for future investigation, which include documenting how divine forgiveness is perceived and experienced, the role of mental representation of God and the role of various dimensions of one's relationship with God in understanding divine forgiveness, and the relations among types of forgiveness (divine, interpersonal and self-forgiveness). Also outlined are numerous approaches to the development of a psychometrically sound measure of divine forgiveness. The article concludes with a brief summary of salient issues.

Keywords: divine forgiveness, interpersonal forgiveness, self-forgiveness

Divine forgiveness (forgiveness by a Supreme Being or higher power) is a foundational concept in many religions and is a source of great comfort for people of faith in everyday life. For many people such religious beliefs are a core-motivating feature of their lives. Consequently, the emphasis on divine forgiveness in the world's longstanding religions (Lundberg, 2010) cannot be ignored if we are to attain a more complete understanding of human behavior.

The purpose of the present article therefore is to provide a road map for future research on divine forgiveness. Toward this end, the first section of the article considers the role of divine forgiveness in the broader context of a flourishing research literature on forgiveness. The second section goes on to offer a critical evaluation of existing research on divine forgiveness. This analysis serves to set the stage for the third section of the article, a conceptual analysis of divine forgiveness that might inform research. This section serves as a useful segue to the penultimate section of the article that sets forth an agenda for research on divine forgiveness. The conclusion provides a brief summary of salient issues.

The Emergence of Research on Forgiveness

Scientific research on forgiveness emerged in the latter part of the 20th century. Only five studies on forgiveness appeared in the literature prior to 1985, a circumstance attributed to its identification with theology (Fitzgibbons, 1986). Nonetheless, the importance of forgiveness as a religious construct for research was 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. (McCullough & Worthington, 1999, p. 1143)

The turn of the century heralded a dramatic change in scientific research on forgiveness and it continues to flourish in the 21st century. The first *Handbook of Forgiveness* was published in 2005 (Worthington, 2005), and a *Handbook of the Psychology of Self-Forgiveness* (Woodyatt, Worthington, Wenzel, & Griffin, 2017) recently emerged. Finally, useful meta-analyses exist of basic research on interpersonal forgiveness (e.g., Fehr, Gelfand, & Nag, 2010) and self-forgiveness (e.g., Davis, Ho, Griffin, Bell, Hook, Van Tongeren, et al., 2015) as well as applied research on forgiveness interventions (Wade, Hoyt, Kidwell, & Worthington, 2014).

Striking by its relative absence is research on divine forgiveness (DF) and "modern discussions of forgiveness have given little attention to divine forgiveness" (Couenhoven, 2010, p. 166). Figure 1 shows the number of articles published on interpersonal forgiveness, self-forgiveness and DF over the past five years. The attention given to DF is meager relative to that on self-forgiveness and interpersonal forgiveness. Moreover, it is the case that "different types of forgiveness have largely been examined in isolation from each other" (Krause, 2017, p. 129).

Research on Divine Forgiveness

This section offers a brief review and critical analysis of research on DF or, more accurately, the perception of such forgiveness.

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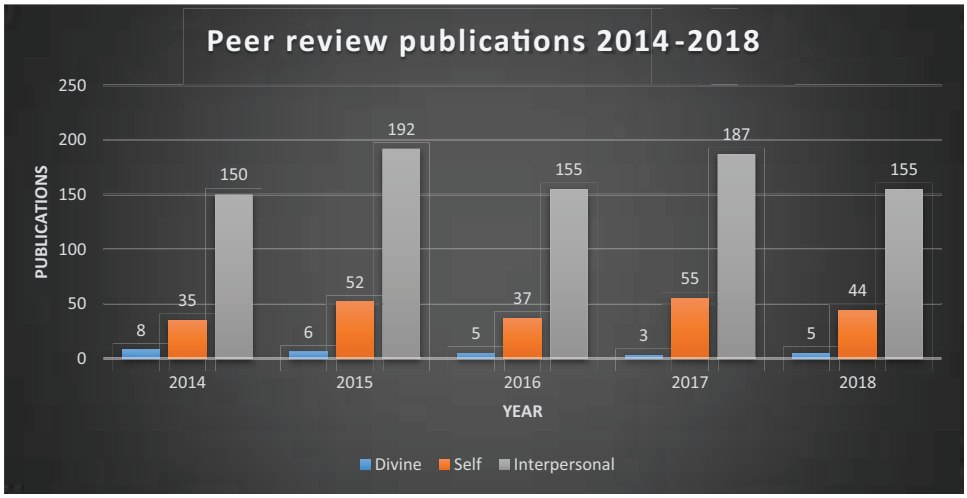

Figure 1. Annual number of articles published on each type of forgiveness over the past five years. See the online article for the color version of this figure.

Review

A search of the PsycINFO database (accessed August 12, 2019) requiring the following search terms to appear in the abstract, "god" and "forg*" or "divine" and "forg*" yielded 90 peer reviewed items. Excluding nonempirical papers (e.g., case studies, editorials) left 60 articles.

The first empirical article investigated the role of spiritual beliefs in end-of-life decisions among 90 HIV positive persons (Kaldjian, Jekel, & Friedland, 1998). These beliefs included a belief in God's forgiveness. They found that those who believed in God's forgiveness were much more likely to have advance directives (odds ratio = 6.7), whereas those who saw their HIV as punishment (from God or in general) were much less likely to have such directives (odds ratio = .1). The authors therefore conclude that among their predominantly African American, Christian sample "discussions about end-of-life decisions are . . . facilitated by a patient's belief in a forgiving God" (Kaldjian et al., 1998, p. 106).

This initial study is instructive for two reasons. First, the view that forgiveness may relate to health has spurred considerable interest and may be one factor responsible for the renaissance of forgiveness research described earlier. This is no less true of research on DF. Second, DF was not the focus of attention but one of many variables examined. This can result in conceptualizing relevant data in terms other than DF. A second study on HIV illustrates this point.

Ironson et al. (2011) collected data from 101 HIV-positive people and followed the progression of their disease every six months for four years. They conclude, "The major finding of this study was that one's View of God, both positive and negative, predicts disease-progression in HIV" (Ironson et al., 2011, p. 420). However, four of the six items in the Positive View of God scale ask about God's forgiveness (e.g., "I believe God is all forgiving," "My beliefs help me believe God will forgive my shortcomings") with the remaining two items assessing God's mercy. Although mercy and forgiveness are conceptually distinct, they are often used synonymously in everyday life. Thus, these results more accurately pertain to DF. Whether this argument is accepted or not, it illustrates that relevant research on DF may not be labeled as such. When identified, data relating to DF are scattered across diverse literatures and has not given rise to a coherent, cumulative body of work.

In light of the above observations, the current review is not exhaustive. Rather the goal is to illustrate the current state of research and highlight key findings. There are data linking DF to a diverse set of variables, but most fall into the following categories: religion/spirituality, personality, sociodemographics, and various indices of adjustment.

Religion/spirituality. As might be expected, DF correlates with measures of religion (e.g., Bassett, Carrier, Charleson, et al., 2016; Walker & Gorsuch, 2002) and spirituality (e.g., Lyons, Deane, Caputi, & Kelly, 2011). In fact, national surveys show that DF is related not only to being religiously affiliated (Toussaint & Williams, 2008), but also to levels of religiosity (e.g., Escher, 2013; Toussaint & Williams, 2008). There is also evidence to show how prayer that includes asking for God's forgiveness predicts interpersonal forgiveness and relationship healing (Wuthnow, 2000).

Personality traits. In examining the association between forgiveness and the Big Five, Walker, and Gorsuch (2002) included assessment of God's forgiveness. Whereas receiving forgiveness from God was inversely related to neuroticism ($r = -.31$), positive relations were obtained for agreeableness ($r = .28$) and the dutiful aspect of conscientiousness ($r = .24$). DF also predicted optimism in a community sample of African Americans (Mattis et al., 2017).

Sociodemographic variables. In their sample aged 18–55 years, Walker and Gorsuch (2002) found a robust association between age and DF ($r = .48$). This was also the case in national probability samples where older persons, compared with younger persons, reported more DF (e.g., Hayward & Krause, 2013; Toussaint, Williams, Musick, & Everson, 2001). Finally, older people are less likely to see God's forgiveness as conditional (Hayward & Krause, 2013).

Sex differences in feeling forgiven by God exist. Compared with men, women report higher levels of DF (Chou & Liska, 2013; Hayward & Krause, 2013; Toussaint & Williams, 2008). In a Mormon sample, birth order was related to DF with first-borns seeing God as more forgiving (Chou & Liska, 2013). Finally, Mexican Americans and African Americans report higher levels of DF than White Americans (Krause, 2012).

Mental health. Feeling forgiven by God is related to (a) fewer alcohol problems among those at risk of hazardous drinking (Webb & Brewer, 2010a), (b) fewer alcohol dependence symptoms and less negative consequences among undergraduate students (Webb, Hirsch, Conway-Williams, & Brewer, 2013), and (c) a lower likelihood of drinking in the past 90 days among adolescents (Knight et al., 2007). DF also relates both directly to alcohol problems and indirectly through social support among those identified as likely to be hazardous or harmful drinkers (Webb & Brewer, 2010b). However, in a longitudinal study of people with alcohol use disorders seeking outpatient substance abuse treatment, self-forgiveness, but not DF, predicted alcohol-related outcomes over a 6-month period (Webb, Robinson, & Brower, 2009). Nonetheless, baseline measures for alcohol related behavior over the past 90 days were associated with DF. The percent of heavy drinking days and drinks per drinking day were negatively associated with DF whereas percent of days abstinent was positively associated (Webb, Robinson, & Brower, 2011).

Toussaint and Williams (2008) found that in a probability sample of U.S. adults, feeling forgiven by God was associated with decreased odds of depression for women. Similarly, in adults aged 50 to 92 years, Lawler-Row (2010) found significant associations between an item assessing feeling forgiven by God and depressive symptoms. Feeling forgiven by God also fully mediated the association between measures of religiosity and depression. In older adults, Krause and Ellison (2003) also found that feeling forgiven by God was associated with lower levels of depressed affect and among college students DF was associated with fewer symptoms of depression, both concurrently and three years later (Chen et al., 2019; Fincham & May, 2019a). In two studies, Fincham and May (2019a) found that DF, interpersonal and self-forgiveness all accounted for unique variance in concurrent depressive symptoms. However, both Chen et al. (2019) and Fincham and May (2019a) found that the longitudinal DF-depressive association was no longer significant with interpersonal and self-forgiveness included in the model. Because depression can lead to suicide, it is not surprising that students who experience DF exhibit decreased levels of inward anger and suicidal behavior (Hirsch, Webb, & Jeglic, 2012).

Given the comorbidity of depressive and anxiety symptoms, it comes as no surprise that DF correlates with anxiety. For example, people who feel forgiven by God experience less death anxiety (Krause & Ellison, 2003; Krause, 2015). In a national sample, agreement with the view of God as approving and forgiving was inversely related to social anxiety but unrelated to general anxiety (Flannelly, Galek, Ellison, & Koenig, 2010). However, in a later national survey that asked, "how often have you felt that God forgives you?" responses were related to symptoms of general anxiety as well as to symptoms of phobic anxiety, interpersonal sensitivity, agoraphobia, and obsessive–compulsive disorder (Uecker, Ellison, Flannelly, & Burdette, 2016). In this study, DF also attenuated the positive relationships found between belief in human sinfulness and seven of eight classes of psychiatric symptoms studied (Uecker et al., 2016).

Because health is not simply the absence of distress, it is also worth noting that DF is related positively to indicators of psychological well-being. Among college students, a multiitem measure of DF was related to subjective well-being, independently of religiosity and self-forgiveness (Fincham & May, 2019b). Controlling for sociodemographic factors and religious service attendance, Chen et al. (2019) report a longitudinal association spanning three years between DF and several indicators of psychological well-being (life satisfaction, positive affect, self-esteem, emotional processing, and emotional expression) among young adults. In a national survey of people aged 66 years or older that controlled for numerous religious and demographic variables, DF was related to life satisfaction (Krause & Ellison, 2003), a relationship that is, however, stronger among persons more securely attached to God (Kent, Bradshaw, & Uecker, 2018). Among military veterans experiencing PTSD, feeling forgiven by God is positively associated with quality of life in both the psychological and physical domains (Currier, Drescher, Holland, Lisman, & Foy, 2016). Finally, Lyons et al. (2011) documented a relationship between DF and having a stronger sense of meaning in life. This is important not only in its own right but also because those having a sense of meaning in life have more reason to stay alive and healthy and as a result, they engage more frequently in physical exercise (Brassai, Piko, & Steger, 2015).

Physical health. Although far fewer studies exist on physical health, the earlier reported research on HIV suggests that DF may be related to physical health. A national survey of older adults is consistent with this view in that DF predicted acts of contrition, which, in turn, were related to fewer somatic symptoms (Krause & Ellison, 2003). Among younger people, there is some evidence to suggest that DF is related to college students' perception of their physical health (Bassett, Carrier, Charleson, et al., 2016) but no relationship was found with specific health behaviors (Chen et al., 2019). In an intriguing study of a nationwide probability sample, Krause and Ironson (2017) found that DF was associated with a favorable waist to hip ratio among those showing higher levels of religious commitment whereas those with lower levels of religious commitment had less favorable ratios. Because, as noted earlier, DF predicts having a stronger sense of purpose in life and thereby promotes greater exercise, the role of exercise was examined. Feeling forgiven by God related negatively to daily exercise among those less committed to their faith suggesting that the benefits of DF may dissipate as faith decreases.

In light of the above findings, it is noteworthy that there are also some data suggesting that DF is not salutary for health. Toussaint, Owen, and Cheadle (2012) found that unconditional forgiveness from God (the item, "God forgives me right away for the things I have done: there is nothing I must do first"), but not conditional forgiveness (comprising three items), was positively related to mortality. As they note, this surprising result may reflect several possibilities such as reduced motivation to adhere to religious teachings that often prescribe healthy behaviors or a lower likelihood of seeking forgiveness from others that could reduce social support and the health benefits it confers. Alternatively, those who have engaged in unhealthy behavior may be most motivated to believe in God's unconditional forgiveness.

Critique

One obvious concern about research on DF is that it comprises almost exclusively cross-sectional data, obtained from largely Christian samples in the United States. Additional fundamental concerns arise from the very nature of extant research. Specifically, the impact of DF not being the focus of attention in numerous studies that yield relevant data should not be underestimated. Not only does this give rise to a scattered body of work that lacks coherence, but it also leads to questions about the epistemological status of this inchoate literature.

Religion/spirituality or divine forgiveness? As noted earlier, there is a robust relationship between DF and religion/spirituality more generally. Nonetheless, numerous studies fail to consider this fact, leaving open the possibility that the findings simply may reflect the effect of religiosity/spirituality more generally. Moreover, variability in how the broader construct of religion/spirituality is treated across relevant studies, or whether it is considered at all, makes it hard to compare findings across studies and mitigates against the development of a cumulative, coherent literature. A "surplus value" test is therefore proposed for future research. Specifically, DF should be shown to account for variance in constructs over and beyond that which can be attributed to religion/spirituality.

Psychometrics. Even more fundamental is the measurement of DF. By far, the most frequent means used to assess DF is the use of a single question, usually, "I know that God forgives me" (Fetzer Institute, 1999). Early on, the very nature of the question was identified as a concern that might obscure the relationship between DF and health (Webb, Robinson, Brower, & Zucker, 2006). Echoed by others (e.g., Griffin, Lavelock, & Worthington, 2014), the concern was that the item assesses something cognitive and fails to capture any emotional or behavioral sense of feeling forgiven by God (Toussaint et al., 2012). Finally, because the item includes the word *forgives*, Webb et al. (2006) argue that responses may be distorted by a person's "own history with the term forgiveness and with familial and religious teachings on the concept, as well as common misconceptions about it." (p. 64). Although these authors called for multiitem assessment using definition-related wording, no such measures have emerged for DF.

Use of the same item across studies allows results to be compared but there is the danger that it becomes *the* measure of DF so that the "concept becomes its measure and has no meaning beyond the measure" (Bagozzi, 1982, p. 15). More importantly, single item measures have been viewed unfavorably with Jacoby (1978, p. 93) warning researchers about the "Folly of Single Indicants." Finally, single-item measures "are often used without attention to psychometric quality" (Furr, 2011, p. 10), a viewpoint that describes work on DF. Adequate measurement is foundational to the development of a systematic research literature on DF.

Need for theory. It is evident that the psychometric issues outlined reflect a failure to specify the hypothetical domain of perceived DF that could inform development of possible indicators of the construct. However, the real concern is not simply about psychometrics, it is about theory, specifically the lack of work on conceptualizing DF. Perhaps because of the many theological expositions of DF or because of an implicit assumption that lay people clearly understand what is meant by God's forgiveness, researchers have not offered a conceptual analysis of the construct. The upshot is a largely atheoretical, fragmented literature characterized by poor, if not entirely inadequate, measurement of the (unspecified) construct investigated. Clearly, there is a need to examine the construct of divine forgiveness to advance research.

Divine Forgiveness Reconsidered

Distinguished From Related Constructs

Most people would agree that forgiveness, whether divine or earthly, is unmerited. God's grace is also unmerited, and one might reasonably ask whether, and how, divine forgiveness and God's grace differ. Defined as, "the gift of acceptance given unconditionally to an undeserving person by an unobligated giver" (Emmons, Hill, Barrett, & Kapic, 2017, p 277), grace is a much broader concept than forgiveness. Even though DF may be a reflection of God's grace, it is not synonymous with it. This is because forgiveness arises only in the context of an offense whereas grace is not restricted to such contexts.

Closer to the construct of forgiveness is that of mercy. Mercy, like forgiveness, arises when there is an offense but mercy refers to leniency regarding penalties for the offense where someone, often a third party such as a judge, "out of compassion for the plight of a particular offender, imposes upon that offender a hardship less than his just deserts" (Murphy, 1988, p. 10). Mercy typically takes the form of an overt manifestation whereas forgiveness can occur privately. Forgiveness can also occur prior to or after a penalty or consequence is exacted.

What Is Divine Forgiveness?

Most people are familiar with the adage, "To err is human, to forgive, divine" and have little problem accepting it, including, as Minas (1975) argues, even the nonbeliever. It is tempting to look to philosophers and theologians for assistance in conceptualizing DF. However, the concerns of philosophers and theologians tend to focus on questions of ontology (e.g., about exactly what happens when God forgives). For example, Drabkin (1993) asserts that, "God suffers on our account like a loving parent, and when we repent, God feels joy on our account. This, I am suggesting, is how God forgives us, by rejoicing in our repentance" (p. 235). This position can be criticized on the grounds that it precludes the view that God is impassible and does not experience pain or pleasure because of the actions of another being.

The above criticism highlights the fact that in the context of a God viewed as a perfect being who exists a se, is impassible, omnipercipient, atemporal, and immutable, DF presents a dilemma (Pettigrove, 2008). If such a God can forgive, DF would be sui generis, something quite distinct from existing understandings of forgiveness. From this perspective, DF is perhaps seen best as a metaphor—one that reveals something important about the nature of God. However, as social scientists this is not our subject matter: Our focus is on human behavior. It behooves us as scientists to remain firmly rooted in description, noting that in everyday life God's forgiveness is not viewed as a metaphor but as something quite real, at least for people of faith.

As a practical matter it appears that the many thorny issues raised by philosophers and theologians for the most part do not create problems in the everyday understanding of DF. Religious

texts are replete with references to a God who can be disappointed, saddened, and even angered by human behavior (sin), who desires to forgive us and whose relationship with us can vary prior to and after we are forgiven, when God rejoices in our repentance (Drabkin, 1993). This allows us to make sense of the widespread teaching that we should forgive others just as God forgives us (e.g., Colossians, 3:13) and allows for potential parallels between divine and earthly forgiveness (e.g., emotional change, transformation in motivation).

Unique features of divine forgiveness. Although such parallels are a potentially useful starting point, there is the need to recognize that DF and earthly forgiveness are not mirror images of each other. Human forgiveness and DF are not the same. For one thing, it is the case that only God can forgive sin. Second, God's forgiveness has implications for both one's temporal and eternal life. Thus, consideration of eschatological beliefs might be especially important for understanding DF fully. Third, God's forgiveness is widely viewed as perfect. At a minimum, it is suggested that this means DF nullifies the wrongdoing (something that does not occur in earthly forgiveness) though not its consequences, thereby creating the potential for real change in the person forgiven (in earthly forgiveness change occurs primarily in the forgiver). It also entails the complete removal of negativity (unforgiveness) toward the wrongdoer (something that is difficult for humans to attain where even those who claim they have forgiven completely still exhibit some level of unforgiveness, see Wade & Worthington, 2003). Finally, DF restores the wrongdoer's relationship with God in that the act of DF necessarily involves reconciliation (earthly forgiveness is distinguished from reconciliation, which is viewed as a dyadic process that can occur with or without forgiveness).

In proposing these unique features of DF, it is important to again note that no claim is made about the ontological status of God's forgiveness. This is not the business of science. Instead our subject matter is the individual's perception and experience of DF, albeit one that may vary as a function of how God is viewed. Notwithstanding nuances that may arise given different mental representations of God, it is tempting to offer a conclusive definition of DF.

In this regard it is instructive to recall the evolution of systematic research on interpersonal forgiveness. Because forgiveness is a complex construct, considerable effort was expended initially on defining forgiveness and for several years debate about the nature of forgiveness permeated the field. Although sometimes frustrating, this debate was healthy and prevented premature closure in conceptualizing forgiveness and its measurement. By 2005, however, definitional controversy abated (Worthington, Witvliet, Pietrini, & Miller, 2007), with broad acceptance of the idea that forgiveness entails a freely chosen motivational change in which the desire to seek revenge and/or to avoid contact with the transgressor is overcome.

Preliminary, working definition. Notwithstanding this cautionary note, a preliminary working definition of DF is needed. Recognizing that the contribution of any such definition may result more from its heuristic value in stimulating debate than in anything substantive, the following preliminary working definition is offered. DF is perceived absolution for a transgression or sin from a Supreme Being or Higher Power that is manifest in the individual's cognition, affect, and/or behavior. DF can occur in relation to one's sinful nature or in relation to individual transgressions/sins, though the topography of its manifestation may differ in each case (e.g., reduced shame may dominate the former and reduced guilt the latter). Although cognitive, affective, and behavioral manifestations of DF can be pervasive in the individual's life, they are especially likely to be evident in his or her relationship with the Supreme Being or Higher Power (e.g., increased gratitude, reconciliation).

Notice that this conceptualization is different from a generalized belief that God forgives but is not independent of the individual's beliefs about or mental representation of God. Because beliefs differ both within and across faith traditions, empirical evaluation of DF is likely to yield important boundary conditions for its manifestations. Already there is some evidence of variability among theology graduate students, as only 50% of those studied saw reconciliation as a necessary component of God's forgiveness whereas 33% saw it as necessary for interpersonal forgiveness (Kim & Enright, 2014). These contrasting figures raise the issue of how DF and other forms of forgiveness are related, a topic that is examined in the next section that maps an agenda for future research.

An Agenda for Future Research on Divine Forgiveness

In this section, several avenues for future research are set forth. Given that research on DF has proceeded directly to addressing substantive issues, the first topic addressed is one of basic description. The second section elaborates on a prior observation by examining mental representation of God and the perception of DF. The third section draws from the literatures pertaining to forgiveness in close relationships and relational spirituality to examine their implications for understanding DF. As previously noted, different types of forgiveness tend to be examined in isolation from each other (Krause, 2015), and thus the fourth section addresses the relations among divine, interpersonal and self-forgiveness. Finally, the steps needed to develop adequate assessments of divine forgiveness are briefly outlined.

Describing the phenomenon. The mandate of the scientist is to identify and study phenomena in the natural world. Observation and description are foundational to this task and usually precede attempts to explain a phenomenon. This phase has been forgone in research on DF resulting in a lack of answers to fundamental questions. For example, when and how do people determine that they have been forgiven by God? Nor do we know what processes lead people to the conclusion that they have been forgiven by God. And once DF occurs, how is it manifest in affect, cognition, and behavior? In short, we know very little about how DF is perceived and experienced.

Addressing such fundamental issues leads to important areas of inquiry. One obvious question that arises is: How does the perception of DF develop in humans and in what ways does it change over the life span? Addressing this question opens a novel line of inquiry as developmental issues have not yet been addressed in the literature on DF. A second consequence of addressing basic description of DF is that it will lead to the documentation of individual differences in the perception and experience of DF. The very existence of individual differences begs the question of what gives rise to them. To what extent do they reflect something about the individual (intrapersonal factors), their relationships (interper-

sonal factors), their faith belief system (religious factors), and the broader culture in which they live (cultural factors)?

Rather than continuing to identify how basic description gives rise to specific lines of inquiry, a general observation is offered on how it shifts research attention. As seen in the earlier review most attention has focused on DF as an independent variable, specifically its effects on well-being. Focusing on the description of DF draws attention to the circumstances under which it occurs. What gives rise to or predicts DF? This provides a valuable corrective to a field that has largely overlooked DF as a dependent variable.

Mental representation of God. As noted earlier, how one conceives of God is likely to influence perceived DF. Several scholars believe that representations of God reflect every day social–cognitive processes and therefore people think about God's agency and attributes in ways similar to those used to think about human agency and attributes (e.g., Gervais, 2013). The view that God is represented as a person-like agent suggests that research on human forgiveness may be helpful in building a systematic literature on DF.

Research on the mental representation of God (also referred to as God image and God concept) began in the 1960s. Subsequently, measures have proliferated yielding differing numbers of dimensions (see Sharp, Davis, George, et al., 2019). However, from early on (e.g., Spilka, Armatas, & Nussbaum, 1964) to contemporary research (e.g., Johnson, Okun, & Cohen, 2015), what emerges consistently are two broad conceptions, one of a kindly or benevolent God (e.g., "forgiving," "loving," "merciful") and a wrathful or authoritarian God (e.g., "critical," "punishing," "stern"). For those who see God primarily as the latter, experiencing God's forgiveness is likely to be relatively rare whereas those who primarily view God as benevolent are likely to experience greater levels of DF.

The fact that mental representation of God is likely to influence experiences of God's forgiveness is not only important in its own right but also because it poses a challenge. Are responses to questions about DF informative or do they simply serve as a proxy variable for a positive mental representation of God? In fact, forgiveness is often an attribute included in assessing benevolent representation of God (e.g., Johnson et al., 2015). Such content overlap is likely to yield a spurious association between mental representation of God and DF. The use of mercy as another attribute to assess a benevolent God representation exacerbates the problem in light of the earlier observation that respondents are unlikely to distinguish between the two.

The content overlap in measures just described gives rise to a conundrum. If an attribute is an essential feature of a benevolent God then its removal from the assessment will mean that one is no longer assessing a benevolent God representation. Given the need for more theoretical rigor in the 73 God representation measures reviewed by Sharp et al. (2019), it is reasonable to argue that the construct of a benevolent God is not so clearly defined that removal of the attributes of forgiveness and mercy will preclude adequate assessment. In any event, the potential problem of spuriousness needs attention in future research. However, this simply brings us back to the problem of DF serving as a proxy for benevolent God representation. To address this issue, the surplus value test was proposed earlier. Specifically, to be useful, DF must account for variance in theoretically relevant correlates over and beyond that of a benevolent representation of God.

A problem that has plagued research on mental representation of God is also instructive. Specifically, there is conflation in these measures of experiential and doctrinal representations of God. This is instructive because it seems likely that available data on DF will reflect the same problem. If responses to inquiries about DF reflect both doctrinal and experiential components, this might account for the finding that the associations documented for DF tend to be lower than for self and other forgiveness (e.g., Fincham & May, 2019a). Consistent with this view is Chen et al.'s (2019) finding that more than 50% of their large sample of young adults endorsed the highest response option for DF (always/almost always), whereas the corresponding figure for self and other forgiveness was much lower (about 25%). Such high levels of endorsement may create ceiling effects that also attenuate associations with potential correlates.

In summary, mental representations of God likely shape responses to questions about DF. Although seemingly straightforward, empirical evaluation of this claim poses numerous challenges. These challenges include avoidance of spurious association, an artifact that can arise from content overlap in the assessment of the two constructs and the conflation of the doctrinal and experiential in responses to the assessment of both mental representations of God and of DF.

Nature of the relationship with God. Like mental representations of God, the nature of the person's relationship with God likely has implications for DF. Relational frameworks are being increasingly applied in the psychology of religion and spirituality and have given rise to a literature on "relational spirituality" (see Davis, Granqvist, & Sharp, 2018). Given the nascent state of this literature, it is not surprising that numerous conceptualizations of relational spirituality exist. In the present context, the focus is on the following perspective, "a direct, personal relationship with G-d," (Desrosiers, Kelley, & Miller, 2011, p. 39). Because people may experience God as a close friend, a partner, or even a parent, it is quite likely that their relationship with God will reflect their experiences in such relationships. Thus, even though this (vertical) relationship with God is not the same as the (horizontal) relationship between humans, it is nonetheless likely to reflect many of the same processes found in interpersonal relationships. Given this perspective, a useful starting point is to examine forgiveness in human relationships.

Research on interpersonal forgiveness shows that the likelihood of forgiveness varies as a function of the relationship between transgressor and victim. Forgiveness is more likely in relationships to the extent that they are close, committed, and high in relationship satisfaction and secure attachment (see Fehr et al., 2010). This observation suggests several obvious hypotheses for future research on DF: The perception of DF will be greater to the extent that the perceiver feels close to God, is committed to the relationship with God, securely attached to God, and satisfied with the relationship. The groundwork for some of these hypotheses already exists.

To illustrate, a number of studies show how a relationship with God functions psychologically in the same way as human attachments (see Granqvist & Kirkpatrick, 2016). Indeed, a body of research has emerged that supports a correspondence hypothesis whereby internal working models of God correspond with those held of the self and other humans. Support also exists for a compensatory hypothesis whereby those with insecure attachment histories, in contexts requiring regulation of distress, can form a

secure attachment with God. The obvious next step is to investigate the association between attachment to God and DF, the boundary conditions for this association, and the mechanisms that give rise to it.

The step outlined above also applies to the other relational processes identified, namely, closeness, commitment, and satisfaction. However, for some people anger characterizes the way in which they relate to God. This will not only likely influence their perception of DF but can also lead to the thorny issue of forgiving God. Because Exline (in press) has recently discussed anger toward God and DF in detail, there is no need to do so here. The relational processes described do not exhaust potential paths for future research as the implications of relational spirituality for earthly forgiveness also point to other issues relevant to DF. Specifically, Davis et al. (2009) present a model of relational spirituality and forgiveness of a transgressor. However, their perspective differs slightly in that the interest is in how the victim's spirituality affects the experience and response to the transgression.

Nonetheless, their work is relevant in the present context because it incorporates study of responses to transgressions viewed as desecrations, or violations of the scared. It is also relevant because they studied how one feature of a person's relationship with God (anger toward God) influences forgiveness. They showed that both factors make interpersonal forgiveness more difficult (Davis et al., 2014). It is reasonable to argue that these factors will also make it harder to experience DF. The issue of desecration merits further consideration. For some people, particularly those high in religiosity, perpetrating a transgression against another person may also be seen as an offense against God. This would follow when the perpetrator is mindful of his or her belief that the victim is made in God's image (cf. Genesis, 1:27). For such persons the link between divine and interpersonal forgiveness is likely to be particularly strong so that forgiveness of the transgression involves not only the victim but also God. This observation highlights again the importance of DF for advancing understanding of other forms of forgiveness.

Relations among types of forgiveness. In suggesting scientific research on forgiveness as a starting point for mapping the domain of DF, it behooves us to acknowledge that numerous definitions of forgiveness exist in the scientific literature. Nonetheless, it is widely accepted that forgiveness involves a freely chosen motivational change in which the desire to avoid contact with the transgressor or seek revenge is overcome. This decrease in unforgiveness (involving resentment-based motivation, cognition, and emotion) toward the transgressor has been the operational definition of forgiveness in much of the research literature. Although reduced unforgiveness removes negativity, it does not provide the approach motivation necessary for relationship repair. This is important because from an evolutionary perspective the main function of interpersonal forgiveness is to help "individuals preserve their valuable relationships" (McCullough, 2008, p. 116). Consequently, benevolence toward the transgressor is needed to provide a motivational foundation for restoring bonds following a transgression.

Is interpersonal forgiveness linked to DF? In major faith traditions, there is an explicit link between the two. For example, in Christianity the fifth petition of the Lord's Prayer reads, "And forgive us our debts, as we also have forgiven our debtors" (Matthew, 6:12). In a similar vein in the Qur'an we read, "Those who spend (freely), whether in prosperity or in adversity, who restrain anger, and forgive (the offenses of) people—for God loves those who do good." (Surah, 3:134). In both traditions, God forgives human wrongdoing, serves as a model of how to forgive, loves those who forgive others' wrongdoings, and portrays forgiveness among humans as a moral imperative. From this perspective, one might expect DF and interpersonal forgiveness to be related at the empirical level.

Several studies document a positive association between interpersonal forgiveness and DF (e.g., Chen et al., 2019; Hirsch et al., 2012; Krause & Ellison, 2003; Lawler-Row, 2010). Although most are limited by the use of single item measures of each construct, multiitem measures yield similar results. For example, Fincham and May (2019a) document a positive correlation between DF and both the Tendency to Forgive Scale (Study 1) and interpersonal forgiveness measured by the Heartland Forgiveness Scale (Study 2). Although different correlates exist for the dimensions of unforgiveness and benevolence, only Akl and Mullet (2010) have examined multiple dimensions of interpersonal forgiveness in relation to DF. They examined dispositional forgiveness (forgivingness) in terms of three dimensions; resentful forgiveness (unforgiveness), sensitivity to circumstances (where "the offender is strongly expected to demonstrate repentance and contrition," Akl & Mullet, 2010, p. 188), and unconditional forgiveness. Using an analogous three-dimensional measure of DF, they found positive correlations between resentment and unconditional forgivingness and the corresponding dimensions of DF. The lack of findings for sensitivity to circumstances may reflect the fact that DF was operationalized in terms of a third party who interceded on behalf of the offender.

One obvious implication is the need for future research to investigate the divine–earthly forgiveness association using multiple dimensions for each type of forgiveness. Equally important is the need to examine DF in relation to earthly forgiveness that is manifested at the level of a trait, state, and specific interpersonal relationships (e.g., romantic partner, friend, neighbor, stranger). The linking of the two forms of forgiveness in faith traditions also raises other important questions. Specifically, how does viewing DF as a model of forgiveness affect earthly forgiveness? For example, it could lead to greater unconditional forgiveness overall or specifically only for those who view DF as unconditional. On the other hand, the notion of repentance associated with DF could lead to greater conditional forgiveness. In addition, the extent to which DF is both valued and viewed as contingent on interpersonal forgiveness needs investigation. Does viewing DF in this way result in victims of transgressions prematurely forgiving perpetrators without holding them fully accountable, which could in turn lead to repeated victimization? In addition, does viewing DF in this way affect the benefits of interpersonal forgiveness? After all, forgiving out of a sense of obligation attenuates salutary effects of interpersonal forgiveness (Huang & Enright, 2000). Further, do some people perceive that God forgives them because they forgive others whereas other people are forgiving because God forgives them? If so, what are the implications of such perceptions? In any event, we need data on the temporal ordering of the two types of forgiveness and how their temporal order might affect their operation.

Unlike interpersonal forgiveness, religious texts rarely, if ever, address the issue of self-forgiveness. However, 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. In light of this perspective, it is reasonable to argue that experiencing DF is likely to facilitate self-forgiveness. This idea was embodied in Hall and Fincham's (2005) model of self-forgiveness and received some support as increases in perceived forgiveness by a Higher Power were associated with increased self-forgiveness over time (Hall & Fincham, 2008). Additional data demonstrate a reliable association between DF and self-forgiveness (e.g., Bassett et al., 2016; Krause, 2015, 2017; Krause & Ellison, 2003; Lyons et al., 2011; McConnell & Dixon, 2012). In the only study to investigate temporal ordering, Fincham, May, and Carlos Chavez (2020) found that forgiveness by God predicted self-forgiveness seven weeks later but not vice versa, suggesting that perceived forgiveness by God may influence self-forgiveness.

Notwithstanding the seemingly straightforward nature of the DF–self-forgiveness association, research needs to identify the conditions under which DF may facilitate self-forgiveness. It is easy to imagine people who may believe that God forgives them but who may not be able to forgive themselves. In this regard, it is helpful to distinguish forgiving the self for the hurt that results from a particular act from forgiving the self for the hurt that results from recognizing any character flaw underlying the act (for "being the type of person who acts like this"). Does the latter make self-forgiveness more difficult in the face of DF? Alternatively, is there something about DF that makes a difference? For example, it is possible that believing one has been forgiven by God may only be sufficient in the context of adequate levels of self-esteem to allow self-forgiveness. Perhaps it is necessary not only to believe that one is the recipient of God's forgiveness but also to experience this forgiveness at an emotional level to forgive the self. As with interpersonal forgiveness, it will be important to investigate DF in relation to self-forgiveness conceived as both a disposition and a state.

Finally, what happens when interpersonal, self, and DF are examined simultaneously in studying correlates documented individually for each type of forgiveness? One such correlate is depressive symptoms. Two studies are illustrative of this type of research. Both show that each type of forgiveness accounted for variance in concurrent depressive symptoms over and beyond the other two types, with the magnitude of the self-forgiveness-depressive symptoms association being the largest in both studies (Fincham & May, 2019a). Although all three types of forgiveness correlated significantly with depression symptoms 10 weeks later, in a multivariate context that controlled for initial levels of depressive symptoms and religiosity, only self-forgiveness and interpersonal forgiveness accounted for unique variance in later depressive symptoms.

In summary, examining each type of forgiveness in isolation is likely to yield an incomplete and potentially misleading picture of its operation and importance for understanding human behavior. Future research should therefore examine them together to determine their unique contribution to the relationship between forgiveness and important covariates like well-being. This needs to occur for both concurrent and temporal correlates of forgiveness as it cannot be assumed that these correlates will be the same. Whether current or temporal, understanding the relations among the different forms of forgiveness requires adequate assessment of DF.

Assessment of divine forgiveness. It is a truism, but one worth reiterating, that advances in research often reflect developments in research technologies. Because advances in understanding necessarily reflect what we measure, and how we measure it, the development of psychometrically sound measures of DF is essential.

A first step is to document the features of DF in major faith traditions. Prototype analysis has proved valuable in identifying central features of earthly forgiveness (Kearns & Fincham, 2004) and might be useful for doing the same with DF. Without prejudging the outcome of such work, it is worth noting that this approach has yielded striking similarities in the representation of the divine across Christian and Hindu belief systems (Fincham, May, & Kamble, 2019; May & Fincham, 2018), suggesting that DF may be perceived similarly across religions.

One approach to developing a measure is to use the characteristics identified in the above exercise to develop scale items. A second approach would be to examine existing measures of interpersonal and self-forgiveness and adapt the items, where possible, to refer to DF. Such items could be supplemented by others reflecting unique features of DF. A third approach might be to devise items after mapping the domain of DF.

The approaches outlined do not exhaust the possibilities for developing items for assessing DF, but whatever approach is used it is strongly recommended that item response theory (IRT) be employed in scale development. IRT indicates exactly how much information an item will provide for assessing the construct of interest. As a result, IRT offers a powerful technique for evaluating precision of measurement and in doing so can provide short, efficient measures.

Finally, the development of psychometrically sound self-report measures of DF is but a first step. Such measures reflect only one side of dual processing models (explicit, conscious cognitive processes). Also needed are implicit measures that assess automatic, unconscious processes. In addition, it will be important to move out of people's heads and develop assessments that reflect matters of the heart (emotion) as well as observed, overt behavior. The importance of these forms of assessment are matched by the difficulty of their development.

Conclusion

It should be apparent that the time has arrived for systematic scientific study of DF. The conceptual case for doing so was identified early on in the forgiveness literature, and scattered, albeit inchoate, empirical studies highlight its importance for not only understanding earthly forgiveness but human health and behavior more generally. Continuing to study DF in the manner documented earlier will lead the field to collapse under its own weight. In turning to embrace the study of DF numerous challenges need to be met.

Perhaps the most obvious challenge is the need to develop conceptually grounded measures of DF that are psychometrically sound. The need for theory development in meeting this challenge is apparent. Theory development, however, carries its own challenge as the earlier conceptual analysis of DF suggests. Many thorny theological and philosophical issues arise, and it behooves

the behavioral scientist to remember the subject of study is a descriptive analysis of human experiences of DF. As this experience is likely to reflect every day cognitive, emotional, and behavioral processes it was suggested that the literature on interpersonal forgiveness provides a useful starting point. The extent to which we will need to supplement this starting point to capture unique aspects of DF remains to be determined.

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