

# Divine Forgiveness and Interpersonal Forgiveness: Which Comes First?

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Do people forgive others' transgressions because they have experienced God's forgiveness or do they engage in earthly forgiveness in the service of seeking God's forgiveness? Absent systematic research on divine forgiveness, two longitudinal studies were conducted to investigate the potential direction of effects between interpersonal and divine forgiveness. Study 1 ( $n = 447$ ) found that divine forgiveness predicted interpersonal forgiveness 7 weeks later, but the reverse was not the case. These findings could not be attributed to religiosity which was used as a covariate. Study 2 ( $n = 256$ ) probed a potential boundary condition for these findings by using a longer interval (14 weeks) and examined whether relations between the types of forgiveness reflected socially desirable responding. The same pattern of results was replicated; divine forgiveness predicted later interpersonal forgiveness but not vice versa. Factors known to increase interpersonal forgiveness are identified that may account for the temporal precedence of divine forgiveness.

*Keywords:* divine forgiveness, interpersonal forgiveness, longitudinal, emerging adults

Research on forgiveness is dominated by studies of interpersonal forgiveness, and to a lesser extent, self-forgiveness. Indeed, the *Handbook of Forgiveness*, focused primarily on interpersonal forgiveness, is already in its second edition (Worthington & Wade, 2020). It follows relatively closely on the heels of the first *Handbook of the Psychology of Self-Forgiveness* (Woodyatt et al., 2017). Attesting to the wealth of research supporting the need for these handbooks are impressive meta-analyses of basic research on interpersonal forgiveness (Fehr et al., 2010; Riek & Mania, 2012), applied research on interventions to increase forgiveness (Wade et al., 2014), and a meta-analysis on the physical and mental health correlates of self-forgiveness (Davis et al., 2015).

Notable by its relative absence is a third type of forgiveness as “modern discussions of forgiveness have given little attention to divine forgiveness” (Couenhoven, 2010, p. 166). A recent analysis identified empirical articles relating to this type of forgiveness noting that because the perception/experience of divine forgiveness (forgiveness by a Supreme Being or Higher power) was not the focus of numerous studies, they gave “rise to a scattered body of work that lacks coherence [and] lead to questions about the epistemological status of the inchoate literature” (Fincham, 2023, p. 10). The latter observation was made because there is a robust association between self-reports of religiosity and the perception of divine forgiveness<sup>1</sup> and, without controlling for religiosity, divine forgiveness may simply act as a proxy for religiosity reflecting its effects rather than those of divine forgiveness per se. It has been suggested that a “surplus value” test, showing that divine forgiveness accounts for variance in constructs over and beyond that which

can be attributed to religiosity, be routinely used in future research on divine forgiveness (Fincham, 2023).

Even when interpersonal, self, and divine forgiveness have been recognized, “different types of forgiveness have largely been examined in isolation from each other” (Krause, 2017, p. 129). There are, however, some data to show that interpersonal forgiveness is associated with the perception of greater divine forgiveness in older adults (Krause & Ellison, 2003; Lawler-Row, 2010) and in young adults (e.g., Chen et al., 2019; Fincham & May, 2020; Hirsch et al., 2012). Akl and Mullet (2010) also found that perceived divine forgiveness was related to memories of forgiveness in families in a sample that varied from 18 to 84 years of age.

The concurrent relations documented between divine and interpersonal forgiveness are consistent with the explicit link between them in major faith traditions. For example, in the Christian tradition the Lord's Prayer contains the petition, “And forgive us our debts, as we also have forgiven our debtors” (*New International Version*, Matthew, 6:12). In the Qur'an we see something similar in that, “Those who spend (freely), whether in prosperity or in adversity, who restrain anger, and forgive (the offences of) people—for God loves those who do good.” (Surah, 3:134). In these traditions, God forgives human wrongdoing, serves as a model of how to forgive, and loves those who forgive others' wrongdoings. They portray forgiveness among humans as a moral imperative with God's forgiveness being an aspirational example of what is called for.

The link between divine forgiveness and interpersonal forgiveness noted in these faith traditions alerts us to an important conceptual question concerning causation. Do people forgive a transgression by a fellow human being because they have experienced God's forgiveness, or do they engage in earthly forgiveness in the service of seeking God's forgiveness? Notwithstanding theological answers that can be given to this question, it is quite possible that some people perceive that God forgives them because they

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<sup>1</sup> The subject of scientific research is natural phenomena, in the present case the human perception of divine forgiveness. In the interests of parsimony, divine forgiveness is used as shorthand to refer to this perception in the remainder of the paper.

forgive others, whereas other people are forgiving because they perceive that God forgives them. This is an important issue at both theoretical and applied levels. Theoretically, it is possible that those who forgive in order to receive God's forgiveness may not experience the full benefits of offering forgiveness to another as there is some evidence that forgiving out of a sense of perceived need or obligation attenuates the salutary effects of interpersonal forgiveness (Huang & Enright, 2000). At an applied level, knowing which form of forgiveness comes first (interpersonal or divine forgiveness) can inform interventions designed to facilitate interpersonal forgiveness.

So, what is the direction of effect between interpersonal forgiveness and divine forgiveness? Existing research is silent on this issue as virtually all studies are cross-sectional. Two studies have focused on the temporal relation between the perception of divine forgiveness and another type of forgiveness. The first examined the temporal course of self-forgiveness over 7 weeks and showed that changes in perceived forgiveness by a "Higher power" covaried with self-forgiveness over time (Hall & Fincham, 2008). However, the data did not allow examination of the direction of effects. In the second study, Fincham et al. (2020) showed that perceived divine forgiveness was related to self-forgiveness 7 weeks later, controlling for initial levels of self-forgiveness but there was no relationship between initial self-forgiveness and later reports of divine forgiveness. These data are consistent with the view that experiencing divine forgiveness facilitates self-forgiveness. Although self-forgiveness and interpersonal forgiveness tend to be related (e.g., Fincham & May, 2020; Pelucci et al., 2015), we cannot make inferences from these findings about the temporal relation between interpersonal forgiveness and divine forgiveness.

In light of the above observations, there is clearly a need to investigate the temporal relation between divine forgiveness and interpersonal forgiveness. As causes precede effects, two longitudinal studies were conducted to establish the temporal ordering of the two types of forgiveness. Each study comprised a two-variable, two-wave design. The research was conducted with young adults aged 18–29 years as emerging adulthood is a time period in which people experiment with different roles and behavior as they seek to establish their adult identity. Given this fact, it is a developmental phase where people likely change, which makes samples of emerging adults particularly appropriate for the study of change.

### Study 1

Research on divine forgiveness has been hampered by the use of single item measures, usually the question, "I know that God forgives me" (Fetzer Institute, 1999). Although the very nature of the question has been questioned on several substantive grounds (see Fincham, 2023), like many other single-item measures it has been used without any attention given to its psychometric quality. Consequently, a multi-item measure was used in this study.

The purpose of the present study was to investigate the extent to which divine forgiveness predicted later interpersonal forgiveness and vice versa. This was done using a cross-lagged stability design which controls for the stability of each type of forgiveness in examining the temporal relations between them. To adhere to the "surplus value" test noted earlier, religiosity is used as a covariate in analyzing the data.

## Method

### Participants and Procedure

College students ( $n = 447$ ) from courses that met university liberal studies requirements were recruited to participate in the study. They were primarily from human and social sciences where the majority of students are female. Only students who expressed belief in "supernatural agents(s) (e.g., God, Gods, a higher power)" were included in the sample. As regards religious affiliation, 83% of participants identified as Christian, 3.8% as Jewish, 0.7% as Muslim and, 12.5% saw themselves as "Spiritual (I believe supernatural things exist, but I do not follow a specific religion)." Of the 447 participants, 411 (92%) were female, with 301 (67.3%) identifying as Caucasian, 54 (12.1%) as African-American, 67 (14.9%) as Latino, 14 (3.1%) as Asian, 3 as Native American, 4 as Middle Eastern and 4 declined to provide ethnic/racial information. The mean age of participants was 19.81 ( $SD = 1.08$ ) years.

Participants were given the opportunity to complete two online surveys seven weeks apart as one option to earn a small amount of extra credit. The measures reported in this study were part of a larger survey. Before they could start the first survey, participants read a brief description of the study and provided informed consent if they were interested in completing the survey. All materials and procedures were approved by the local Institution Review Board.

## Measures

### Interpersonal Forgiveness

Interpersonal forgiveness was assessed with the Tendency to Forgive Scale (Brown, 2003) which asks participants how they respond when someone transgresses against them. Sample items include "I tend to get over it quickly when someone hurts my feelings," and "I have a tendency to harbor grudges" (reverse coded). Responses to each question on the four-item scale ranged from 1 "completely disagree" to 7 "completely agree." Scores were summed so that higher scores reflected greater forgiveness. Coefficient alpha for this scale was .63 Time 1 and .64 at Time 2.

### Divine Forgiveness

Divine forgiveness was assessed with items used in previous studies (e.g., Fincham & May, 2019, 2021). Five items were used ("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 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. A principal components factor analysis using varimax rotation yielded a single factor at Time 1 (eigenvalue = 4.11 accounting for 82.21% of variance) and at Time 2 (eigenvalue = 3.72 accounting for 74.40% of variance) with all items loading above .70 at each time. The total score for the five items was computed at each time point with higher scores indicating greater divine forgiveness. Coefficient alpha was .93 at Time 1 and .90 at Time 2.

**Religiosity**

Two frequently used questions to assess religiosity were asked at Time 1 (see [Pearce et al., 2017](#)). They comprised one assessing the centrality of religion in the participant’s life and one assessing frequency of participation in religious events. The first was, “How important is religion/spirituality in your life?” and was answered on an 8-point scale from “not at all” to “extremely important.” The second question asked, “How often do you attend religious/spiritual services or meetings?” and was answered on an 8-point scale ranging from “never” to “about once a day.” The items were strongly correlated ( $r = .62$ ) and hence they were summed to provide an index of religiosity ( $\alpha = .77$ ).

**Results and Discussion**

[Table 1](#) shows the means, standard deviations, and intercorrelations among the study variables. Structural equation modeling was used to examine a cross-lagged stability model in which each Time 2 variable is simultaneously regressed on each Time 1 variable. This analysis controls for the stability of each construct in examining the temporal relations between them. Significant cross-lagged effects indicate the presence of a relationship beyond that which can be accounted for by the stability of the constructs and the magnitude of their initial association at Time 1. This model is fully saturated (without any degrees of freedom) and therefore model fit is not an issue. Rather the focus is on parameter estimates only.

This analysis showed that the cross-lagged coefficient for the path from Time 1 divine forgiveness to Time 2 interpersonal forgiveness was significant,  $\beta = .09, p = .011$ . However, the cross-lagged coefficient for the path from Time 1 interpersonal forgiveness to Time 2 divine forgiveness was not significant,  $\beta = .04, p = .120$ . But does the finding for divine forgiveness simply reflect an effect for religiosity? To examine this question religiosity was introduced as a covariate in the model. The recomputed model is shown in [Figure 1](#). It can be seen that the pattern of findings obtained for the cross-lagged coefficients did not change as the path from earlier divine forgiveness to later interpersonal forgiveness was significant, whereas that from earlier interpersonal forgiveness to later divine forgiveness was not.

The present findings are consistent with the view that the experience of divine forgiveness leads to greater interpersonal forgiveness and not vice versa. They are similar to those showing that divine

forgiveness predicted later self-forgiveness in a study that used the same temporal lag ([Fincham et al., 2020](#)). Although promising, two considerations mitigate against placing too much faith in the present findings. First, the current replication crisis emphasizes the need for their replication. Second, impression management is a potential issue in self-reports of forgiveness, arguably a valued and socially desirable phenomenon.

**Study 2**

The purpose of this study was not only to replicate the findings of Study 1 but also to examine a potential boundary condition (i.e., decay of the intention-behavior interval, see [Sheeran, 2002](#)) for their occurrence by extending the time interval over which the temporal relation between divine forgiveness and interpersonal forgiveness was studied. In this study, the interval was extended to 14 weeks. In addition, a measure of socially desirable responding was obtained. As in Study 1, two models are analyzed, one without and one with the covariate of impression management. Because religiosity did not impact the findings in Study 1, it was omitted from this study.

**Method**

*Participants and Procedure*

In this study, we again recruited students ( $n = 256$ ) from courses that met university liberal studies requirements to participate in the study. As before, these students were primarily studying human and social sciences where the majority of students are female. Consistent with Study 1, only students who expressed belief in “supernatural agents(s) (e.g., God, Gods, a higher power)” were included in the sample. Participants identified as Christian (87.1%), Jewish (5.9%), Muslim (0.8%), Hindu (0.4%), and Spiritual (5.9%). Of the 256 participants, 236 (92%) were female, with 169 (66.0%) identifying as Caucasian, 39 (15.2%) as African-American, 34 (13.3%) as Latino, 9 (3.5%) as Asian, 3 as “other” and 2 declined to provide ethnic/racial information. The mean age of participants was 20.52 ( $SD = 2.34$ ) years.

As in the first study, students were given the opportunity to participate in two online surveys as one of several options to earn a small amount of extra course credit. This opportunity was offered to a new sample and in this semester the surveys occurred 14 weeks apart. All materials and procedures were approved by the Local Institutional Review Board and informed consent was obtained from each participant before they could complete any survey.

*Measures*

As in Study 1, participants completed a larger online survey which contained the Tendency to Forgive Scale ([Brown, 2003](#)). It also included the items used in Study 1 to assess divine forgiveness. Coefficient alpha for this scale was .92 at Time 1 and .94 at Time 2.

*Impression Management*

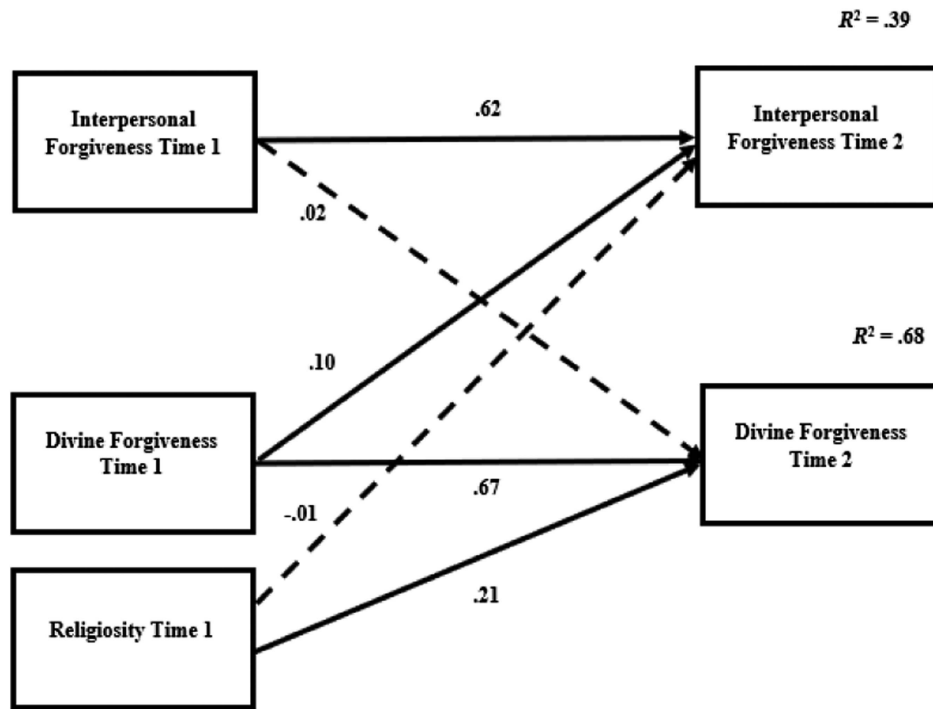
In addition, at Time 1 participants completed the 8-item impression management subscale of the Balanced Inventory of Desirable Responding Short Form ([Hart et al., 2015](#)). This subscale comprises items that capture “a conscious dissimulation of responses to create a

**Table 1**  
*Means, Standard Deviations (SD), and Correlations Among Study 1 Variables*

| Variables                 | 1     | 2     | 3     | 4     | 5     |
|---------------------------|-------|-------|-------|-------|-------|
| 1 Forgiveness (T1)        |       | .62** | -.02  | .03   | .08   |
| 2 Forgiveness (T2)        |       |       | .08   | .13** | .11   |
| 3 Divine forgiveness(T1)  |       |       |       | .81** | .67** |
| 4 Divine forgiveness (T2) |       |       |       |       | .66** |
| 5 Religiosity             |       |       |       |       |       |
| Mean                      | 14.69 | 15.14 | 17.69 | 15.06 | 8.65  |
| SD                        | 4.50  | 8.66  | 4.69  | 4.26  | 3.57  |

\*  $p < .05$ . \*\*  $p < .01$ .

**Figure 1**  
Maximum likelihood Estimation of the Cross-Lagged Stability Model Controlling for Religiosity



Note. Solid lines reflect statistically significant relationships ( $p < .05$ ).

socially desirable image” (Hart et al., 2015, p. 2) and validity data include a substantial correlation with 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 “strongly 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 in the present sample was .70.

**Results and Discussion**

The intercorrelations among the measures, as well as their means and standard deviations, are shown in Table 2. As in Study

**Table 2**  
Means, Standard Deviations (SD), and Correlations Among Study 2 Variables

| Variables                 | 1     | 2     | 3     | 4     | 5     |
|---------------------------|-------|-------|-------|-------|-------|
| 1 Forgiveness (T1)        |       | .58** | .01   | .02   | .15*  |
| 2 Forgiveness (T2)        |       |       | .12   | .04   | .19** |
| 3 Divine forgiveness(T1)  |       |       |       | .83** | .10   |
| 4 Divine forgiveness (T2) |       |       |       |       | .11   |
| 5 Impression management   |       |       |       |       |       |
| Mean                      | 15.74 | 16.18 | 15.03 | 15.05 | 33.60 |
| SD                        | 4.28  | 4.33  | 4.20  | 4.43  | 6.91  |

\*  $p < .05$ . \*\*  $p < .01$ .

1, structural equation modeling was used to analyze a cross-lagged model that controlled for the stability of interpersonal forgiveness and divine forgiveness in exploring the longitudinal relations between them. Again the cross-lagged coefficient for the path from Time 1 divine forgiveness to Time 2 interpersonal forgiveness was significant,  $\beta = .11, p = .023$ , whereas the cross-lagged coefficient for the path from Time 1 interpersonal forgiveness to divine forgiveness at Time 2 was not significant,  $\beta = .02, p = .652$ .

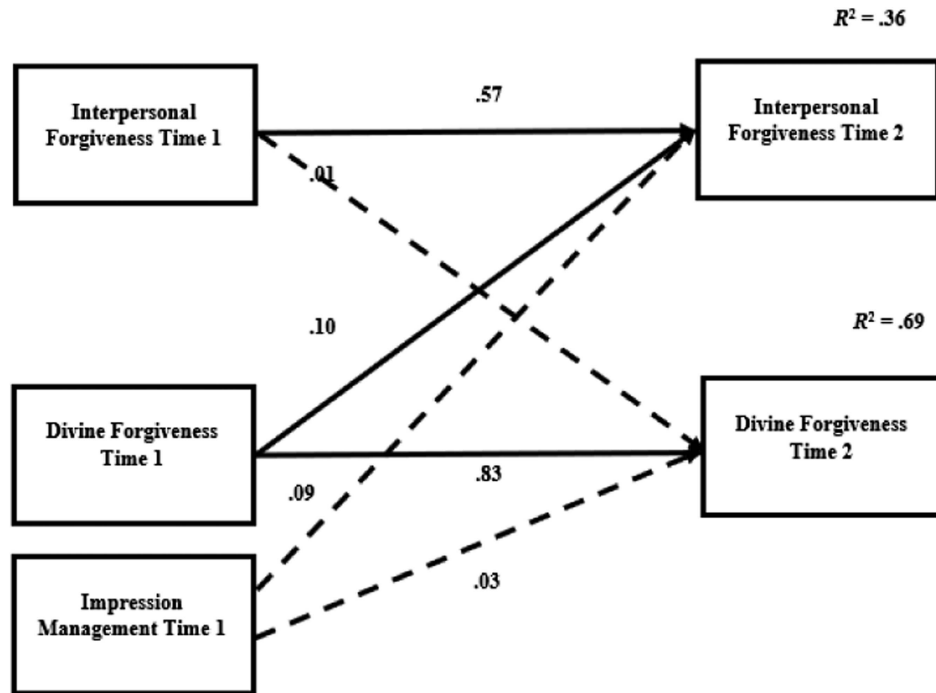
To examine whether socially desirable responding might account for these findings, scores from the impression management subscale of the Balanced Inventory of Desirable Responding Short Form were added as a covariate to the model. The results depicted in Figure 2 show that the pattern of results did not change as the path from earlier divine forgiveness to later interpersonal forgiveness remained significant and that from earlier interpersonal forgiveness to later divine forgiveness remained nonsignificant.

The present study not only replicates the results of the first study but extends them by showing that divine forgiveness predicts later interpersonal forgiveness over a longer time span. Moreover, it rules out another potential artifact that might have accounted for the longitudinal relationship between them, namely, socially desirable responding.

**General Discussion**

Taken together, the two studies provide evidence to suggest that the link between divine forgiveness and interpersonal forgiveness is

**Figure 2**  
*Maximum Likelihood Estimation of the Cross-Lagged Stability Model Controlling for Impression Management*



Note. Solid lines reflect statistically significant relationships ( $p < .05$ ).

one in which divine forgiveness gives rise to later interpersonal forgiveness. Although it can be reasonably argued that some people may forgive transgressions by fellow humans in the expectation that doing so will facilitate God’s forgiveness of their own actions, we did not find any evidence to support this viewpoint. Moreover, the possibility that these findings are an artifact that simply reflects the association between divine forgiveness and religiosity was ruled out (Study 1). In a similar vein, the findings also could not be attributed to socially desirable responding (Study 2).

The present findings are consistent with cross-sectional survey data that show “older adults who believe they are forgiven by God are more likely to forgive others right away than are older people who do not believe God has forgiven them for their own transgressions” (Krause & Ellison, 2003, p. 90). The present results are also consistent with those of the two other studies that have examined the temporal relation between divine forgiveness and another type of forgiveness. As noted earlier, divine forgiveness was shown to predict later self-forgiveness, but the converse was not found (Fincham et al., 2020) and forgiveness by a Higher Power covaried with self-forgiveness over a 7-week period (Hall & Fincham, 2008).

Extant research therefore suggests that the primary type of forgiveness is divine forgiveness as it may facilitate both interpersonal forgiveness as well as self-forgiveness. The novel findings in Study 1 and Study 2 point to an important irony in that divine forgiveness has received minimal attention in the research literature relative to the other two types of forgiveness, particularly interpersonal forgiveness. Yet divine forgiveness is a foundational concept in many religions and no doubt a source of great comfort in everyday

life for the 5.8 billion people who profess a religious faith (Pew Research Center, 2012). This irony is further emphasized by McCullough and Worthington’s (1999) long ignored insight that “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). Each of the three major monotheistic religions followed by the majority of those professing a religious faith emphasizes divine forgiveness. In the Hebrew Bible, the prophet Daniel (9:9) notes, “The Lord our God is merciful and forgiving, even though we have rebelled against him.” In the Quran we read, “O my servants who have transgressed against their souls! Despair not of the Mercy of God: for God forgives all sins: for he is Oft-forgiving, Most Merciful.” (Sura, 39:53). Christians are instructed to “Forgive as the Lord forgave you” (New International Version, 1978/2011, Colossians, 3:13).

Our findings, which suggest that divine forgiveness is primary, are consistent with the view of divine forgiveness in these faith traditions, especially Christianity where the believer is exhorted to forgive just as s/he has been forgiven. And herein lies the key to understanding our findings. It can be argued that experiencing forgiveness from a sacred Higher power no doubt induces intense humility which is relevant as it has been argued that interpersonal “forgiveness is the natural response to empathy and humility” (Worthington, 1998, p. 64). This viewpoint is supported by data that show a robust association between humility and interpersonal forgiveness (e.g., Fehr et al., 2010; Powers et al., 2007; Krause, 2018). In addition, it can be argued that divine forgiveness is also likely to result in considerable gratitude which has also been shown to be associated with greater forgiveness (e.g., Neto, 2007; Rye et al.,

2012). It is reasonable to suggest that humility and gratitude experienced in response to divine forgiveness are likely to be more intense than when they follow forgiveness by a fellow human. One reason is because God's forgiveness has implications not only for one's temporal life but also one's eternal life. Such observations point to the need for research on the experience of divine forgiveness, a topic that has not yet been addressed in the scientific literature.

Notwithstanding the novel findings, there are several limitations to the research reported that point to the need for caution when interpreting the findings. First, and most obvious, is that the samples comprised primarily females who identified as Christian and therefore the current findings need to be replicated using a more diverse sample in terms of gender, religion, age, race, and socioeconomic status. Second, the measure of interpersonal forgiveness used is one that asks about general forgiveness tendencies. It is therefore important to determine whether divine forgiveness facilitates forgiveness of specific events (i.e., situational forgiveness). Finally, the effect sizes obtained were relatively small and it will be important to reexamine the relations found by including a measurement model in future research on the temporal relation between divine and interpersonal forgiveness (see Selig & Little, 2012).

Despite the above limitations, the present studies make a valuable contribution as they are the first to provide longitudinal data on the relationship between divine forgiveness and interpersonal forgiveness. They point to a neglected area of research, namely, the interplay between different types of forgiveness. In doing so, they also highlight the importance of research on divine forgiveness and suggest that the understanding of interpersonal forgiveness will remain incomplete without research on divine forgiveness. In a similar vein, understanding the impact of divine forgiveness on behavior is integral to gaining a more complete picture of human functioning.

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