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ORIGINAL PAPER

Divine Forgiveness and Well-being Among Emerging Adults in the USA

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Abstract

Systematic research on divine forgiveness is notably absent from the literature on forgiveness. Two studies therefore explored the relationship between divine forgiveness and well-being, and what might account for any association found. Study 1 ($N = 574$) documented an inverse relationship between divine forgiveness and anxiety and showed that this relationship was mediated by attitude toward God. Study 2 ($N = 430$) replicated and extended the findings of the first study using a different measure of anxiety and documented a positive relationship between divine forgiveness and satisfaction with life. It also showed that both positive and negative evaluations of one's relationship with God mediated these relationships. These results emphasize the need for systematic research on divine forgiveness, and several directions for future research are outlined.

Keywords Anxiety · Life satisfaction · God's forgiveness

Introduction

Both interpersonal forgiveness and self-forgiveness are established fields of empirical inquiry, and each form of forgiveness is related reliably to well-being (see handbooks by Worthington & Wade, 2020, and Woodyatt et al., 2017, respectively). In contrast, forgiveness by God or divine forgiveness has not given rise to a clear body of research, something that is perhaps not surprising given that "modern discussions of forgiveness have given little attention to divine forgiveness" (Couenhoven, 2010, p. 166). This oversight is noteworthy in light of two observations. First, the world's longstanding religions emphasize divine forgiveness (Lundberg, 2010). Second,

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over 84% of the world's population are religiously affiliated, and the majority of these believers identify with one of the three monotheistic Abrahamic faiths, namely Christianity, Islam or Judaism (Pew Research Center, 2012). Although the US population is becoming more secular, it is still the case that most of the population (79%) identify as religious and engage in religious behaviors such as prayer (85%, Twenge et al., 2016). Because these religious beliefs are a central motivating feature for many people, we will not fully understand the role of forgiveness in human behavior without considering issues at the interface of religion and forgiveness.

Unfortunately, we know little about divine forgiveness or forgiveness by God, let alone how it relates to forgiveness in human relationships (see Fincham, 2020). This is not to suggest that data on divine forgiveness are totally absent from the literature as several studies include a measure of divine forgiveness (e.g., Akl & Mullet, 2010; Krause, 2015, 2017; McConnell & Dixon, 2012; Toussaint et al., 2001; Toussaint & Williams, 2008; Uecker et al., 2016). As regards self-forgiveness, several studies provide initial evidence to show that divine forgiveness is related to self-forgiveness (e.g., Fincham & May, in press; Hall & Fincham, 2008; Krause, 2015, 2017; McConnell & Dixon, 2012).

It has also been shown that those who feel forgiven by God experience less death anxiety (Krause, 2015), fewer symptoms of general anxiety as well as symptoms of phobic anxiety (Uecker et al., 2016), and in college students feeling forgiven by God was associated with decreased levels of inward anger and suicidal behavior (Hirsch et al., 2012). Given its comorbidity with depression, it is not surprising that there is also a link between divine forgiveness and fewer symptoms of depression in both older adults (Krause & Ellison, 2003; Lawler-Row, 2010) and college students, where divine forgiveness is associated with fewer symptoms of depression both concurrently and three years later (Chen et al., 2019; Fincham & May, 2019). Finally, the experience of being forgiven by God is associated with use of words signifying positive emotion and gratitude (Abernathy et al., 2016). Despite such relevant data, there is no clear corpus of research on divine forgiveness most likely because in most studies forgiveness by God is not the central topic studied. Rather, a measure of divine forgiveness tends to be included along with numerous other variables that are more central to the study. The measure most often comprises a single item (typically, "I know God forgives me," see Griffen et al., 2014) and has resulted in an inchoate set of findings (Fincham, 2020).

Notwithstanding the lack of an integrated body of research on divine forgiveness, the scattered findings summarized earlier suggest that divine forgiveness is likely to be negatively related to anxiety symptoms. The present study examines this hypothesis and in doing so, investigates why this might be the case. Specifically, what is the mechanism that relates divine forgiveness to well-being, including anxiety? Long ago, Park and Folkman (1997) identified meaning as a critical factor in understanding how people cope with stressful events. In a similar vein, it can be argued that what divine forgiveness means to a person will be important in understanding how divine forgiveness is related to outcomes such as anxiety.

Numerous studies by Osgood and colleagues (see Osgood et al., 1957) have shown that three primary dimensions underlie meaning, namely evaluation (e.g., good–bad), potency (e.g., strong–weak), and activity (e.g., fast–slow). Because the

evaluative dimension usually accounted for the largest amount of variability among scale items, Osgood and colleagues viewed it as equivalent to a person's attitude, namely a "learned predisposition to respond to [an object] in a consistently favorable or unfavorable manner" (Allport, 1935, p. 818; also see Fazio, 2007). From this perspective, meaning is primarily viewed in terms of evaluation and hence, it is reasonable to infer that an individual's evaluation of his/her relationship with God might serve as a mechanism whereby divine forgiveness impacts his or her well-being.

Study 1

An initial study was conducted to determine the relationship between divine forgiveness and a measure of well-being. Anxiety was chosen for investigation because anxiety is especially relevant to the sample studied, emerging adults (18–25 years old, Arnett, 2000) in college. For example, in a national survey, 21% of undergraduate college students in the USA reported feelings of overwhelming anxiety within the past 12 months (American College Health Association, 2019) and there are data to suggest that up to 39.4% of college students may be at-risk for developing anxiety disorders (Kanuri et al., 2015).

The observations made in the introduction gave rise to two tentative hypotheses.

Hypothesis 1 Divine forgiveness will be negatively related to anxiety symptoms.

Hypothesis 2 Subjective evaluation (meaning) of relationship with God will mediate the association between divine forgiveness and anxiety.

Method

Subjects and Procedure

Participants were recruited from undergraduate courses at a large southeastern university. Most were from human and social sciences where the majority of the students in these departments and colleges are female. They were offered options to earn a small amount of extra credit for their course, one of which was completing an online survey that included the questionnaires reported in this study. Five hundred and seventy-four students chose to participate and signed consent forms approved by the local institutional review board. The demographic characteristics of the sample can be found in Table 1 and are briefly summarized below. The racial identification of the sample was 68.6% Caucasian, 13.9% Latino, 11.1% African-American, 3.7% Asian, 1% Middle Eastern, 0.5% Native American, with 1.0% of participants preferring not to provide a racial identity. The sample was primarily female ($n = 540$) and had a mean age of 20.02 ($SD = 2.01$) years. Reported annual family income was

Table 1 Demographic characteristics of participants in Study 1 and Study 2

	Mean	S.D	Range	N
Study 1				
Age	20.02	2.01	18–25	574
Gender				
Female				540
Male				34
Race/ethnicity				
Caucasian				394
African-American				64
Latino				80
Asian				21
Middle Eastern				6
Native American				3
Declined to answer				6
Family income				
Below $30 k				50
$30 k-below $50 k-				82
$50 k-below 100 k				214
$100 k and above				220
Declined to answer				8
Study 2				
Age	20.04	1.30	18–25	430
Gender				
Female				406
Male				24
Race/ethnicity				
Caucasian				278
African-American				55
Latino				67
Asian				17
Native American				1
Other				10
Declined to answer				2
Religion/spirituality				
Christian				336
Muslim				3
Jewish				18
Spiritual only				71
Other				2

8.7% below 30 k, 14.3% 30 k to below 50 k, 37.3% 50 k to below 100 k, 38.3% 100 k and above, with 1.4% declining to offer financial information.

Measures

Anxiety

A brief version of the Beck Anxiety Inventory (BAI) was used to assess anxiety symptoms (Beck et al., 1988; Osman et al., 1997). The 10-item BAI asked participants to indicate the extent to which various symptoms of anxiety have bothered them during the past month (e.g., "fear of the worst happening") on a scale ranging from 0 (*not at all*) to 3 (*severely it bothered me a lot*). The BAI was scored by summing the coded responses, where higher scores reflected more anxiety. Previous research has found evidence that supports the validity and reliability of the 10-item BAI (Osman et al., 1997). In the current study, Cronbach's alpha was 0.94.

Divine Forgiveness

Using the measure developed by Fincham and May (2019), three items were used to assess God's forgiveness, "I am certain that God forgives me when I seek his forgiveness," "When I do something wrong, God is quick to forgive me." (both were answered on a 4-point scale ranging from "Strongly Disagree to "Strongly Agree") and "How often have you felt that God forgives you?" (4-point scale from "never" to "many times"). A principal components factor analysis using varimax rotation yielded a single factor that accounted for 67.4% of the variance with all items loading above 0.60 on the factor. The average score for the three items was computed with higher scores indicating greater divine forgiveness. Coefficient alpha was 0.74 in this sample, and in an independent sample ($n = 247$), test–retest reliability over 6 weeks was 0.69.

Subjective evaluation (meaning) of relationship with God

To assess sentiment toward God, participants responded to the following item, "*If you believe in God*, please indicate your attitude toward God," indicating their response on a line that labeled "-100 (extremely negative)" at one end, and "100 (extremely positive)" at the other. The midpoint was identified as "0 (neutral)." Responses on the scale were rescored as 0 to 200 with 100 representing the midpoint (neutral).

Table 2 Means, standard deviations and correlations among Study 1 variables

Variable	1	2	3
1. Divine forgiveness		−.09*	.48**
2. Anxiety			−.15**
3. God evaluation			
M	3.30	16.20	170.51
SD	.79	13.28	41.51

$N = 574$. *$p < .05$; **$p < .01$

Results

The inter-correlations among the measures, as well as their means and standard deviations, are shown in Table 2. As hypothesized, divine forgiveness correlated negatively with anxiety symptom scores. As regards the second hypothesis concerning mediation, the Hayes (2017) PROCESS macro for Model 4 was used to examine whether attitude or sentiment toward God mediated the relation between divine forgiveness and anxiety scores, controlling for respondent age, sex, and reported parent income. This showed that there was a significant indirect pathway from divine forgiveness to anxiety through sentiment toward God (95% CI: (− 0.10, − 0.01), and that the direct effect was reduced to non-significance.

Discussion

This study provided initial data to support the hypothesized inverse relationship between divine forgiveness and an indicator of well-being, anxiety symptoms. It also appears that the above association is fully mediated by attitude or sentiment toward God as the direct relation between divine forgiveness and anxiety symptoms was not significant when the mediating variable was examined in the model.

Although promising, these preliminary data are limited by several considerations. First, it is possible that divine forgiveness functioned as a proxy index of religiosity which is known to be related to well-being (Koenig, 2001; Oman & Syme, 2018). Second, the measure of attitude/sentiment toward God was far from optimal as it comprised only a single, bipolar item. Third, even though the measure of divine forgiveness was satisfactory, its psychometric properties could be improved. Notwithstanding these limitations the current study was considered sufficient evidence to support further examination of divine forgiveness and well-being as well as the mechanism that might account for their association. It is quite possible that experiencing divine forgiveness may increase positive sentiment and/or decrease negative sentiment toward God and this could, in turn, impact well-being. Thus, a second study was designed to address the limitations of the first study and extend its findings.

Study 2

The second study provides a conceptual replication of Study 1 in that it uses a different measure of anxiety. It also extends the findings of Study 1 by adopting a more nuanced conceptualization of well-being. Specifically, it is recognized that well-being is not simply the absence of distress (anxiety symptoms), just as health is not the absence of illness. Accordingly, a widely used measure of positive well-being is also included in the study.

Similarly, a more nuanced conceptualization of sentiment toward God was adopted by building on advances in research on close relationships. In this literature, sentiment toward the partner/relationship is conceptualized and measured in terms of separate positive and negative dimensions (see Fincham & Rogge, 2010). This approach addresses the ambiguity inherent to midpoint responses on bipolar scales. Do these responses indicate that both ends of the bipolar scale are relevant or that neither is relevant? Using separate positive and negative dimensions has been shown to yield information that is not captured by bipolar scales in research on close relationships (Mattson et al., 2012; Rogge et al., 2017).

Finally, religiosity will be statistically controlled in examining divine forgiveness-well-being associations. The study therefore tested the following hypotheses.

Hypothesis 1 Divine forgiveness will be related positively to an index of psychological well-being (satisfaction with life) and negatively to an index of distress (anxiety).

Hypothesis 2 Subjective evaluation of one's relationship with God (positive and negative evaluations) will mediate the association between divine forgiveness and indices of psychological well-being and distress independently of level of religiosity.

Method

Subjects and Procedure

A new sample of participants was recruited from college students at a large southeastern university who were taking courses that met university liberal studies requirements. Most were from human and social sciences where the majority of the students in these departments and colleges are female. Students who indicated that they did not believe in God ($n = 70$, 13.9%) were not included in the study reported here. Of the 433 remaining participants, three did not complete the questions in this study leaving a sample of 430 participants. Four hundred and six participants were female, with 278 (64.7%) identifying as Caucasian, 55 (12.8%) as African-American, 67 (15.6%) as Latino, 17 (3.9%) as Asian, 1 (0.2%) as Native American, 10 (2.3%) as 'other" and 2 (0.4%) declined to provide ethnic/racial information. The mean age of participants was 20.04 ($SD = 1.30$) years.

Students were given the opportunity to participate in an online survey as one option to earn a small amount of extra credit. The measures reported in this study were part of this larger survey on student well-being. Participants were directed to a webpage where they could find a brief description of the study and provide informed consent before continuing with the online survey. All materials and procedures were approved by the local institution review board, and participants signed informed consent letters before they participated in the project.

Measures

Subjective Well-being

The Satisfaction with Life Scale (SWLS, Diener et al., 1985) is a widely used measure of subjective well-being. It is a short scale comprising 5-items (e.g., "In most ways my life is close to ideal," "So far I have gotten the important things I want in life") designed to measure global judgments of satisfaction with one's life. Responses to each item are given on a 7-point scale ranging from "Strongly disagree" to "Strongly Agree." Items were summed to yield an overall index of well-being. In the present sample, coefficient alpha was 0.91.

Anxiety

The Depression Anxiety Stress Scale-21 (DASS-21; Henry & Crawford, 2005) is a self-report questionnaire that assesses emotional distress by measuring symptoms of depression (e.g., "I felt downhearted and blue), anxiety (e.g., "I was aware of dryness in my mouth," and stress (e.g., "I found it difficult to relax") over the past week. Participants were asked to rate how much each statement applied to them in the past week on a scale of 0 (*did not apply to me at all*) to 3 (*applied to me very much, or most of the time*). In the present study, we used the anxiety subscale which yielded a coefficient alpha of 0.90.

Divine Forgiveness

In an attempt to improve the internal consistency of the measure, five items were used to assess God's forgiveness, "How often have you felt that God forgives you?" (4-point scale from "never" to "many times"), "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" (both answered on a 4-point scale ranging from "Strongly Disagree" to "Strongly Agree"), "How often do you experience situations in which you have the feeling …..that God is merciful to you" and "…that God delivers you from a debt" (both answered on a 5-point scale ranging from "never" to "very often"). A principal components factor analysis using varimax rotation yielded a single factor that accounted for 71% of the variance with all items loading above 0.75 on the factor. The scores for the items were summed with higher scores indicating greater divine forgiveness. Coefficient alpha was 0.89.

Subjective Evaluation (Meaning) of Relationship with God

Positive and negative sentiment was assessed by adapting the Positive–Negative Relationship Quality Scale (Rogge et al., 2017) so that the relationship assessed was that with God. This scale was developed using Item Response Theory to identify the adjectives that provided the most information about sentiment toward a relationship. Thus, respondents indicate the extent to which 4 positive adjectives and 4 negative adjectives characterize the relationship rated. Building on attitude research on ambivalence, a question stem is used that specifically focuses on positive sentiment ("Considering only the positive qualities of your relationship with God and IGNORING the negative ones, evaluate your relationship with God on the following qualities: enjoyable, pleasant, strong, alive with 6 response options each of which is labeled ranging from "not at all true" to "completely true"). Following a page of filler items, a question stem focusing on negative sentiment is introduced ("Considering only the negative qualities of your relationship with God and IGNORING the positive ones, evaluate your relationship with God on the following qualities: bad, miserable, empty, lifeless, again with 6 labeled response options from "not at all true" to "completely true"). Although the referent in the question is the "relationship," there is no evidence to show that any difference occurs when the referent is the other party in the relationship (Fincham & Linfield, 1997). In the present sample, coefficient alpha was 0.88 and 0.97 for negative and positive sentiment, respectively.

Religiosity

Religiosity was measured with two items. The first item asked about the frequency of attending religious services/meetings and used an 8-point response scale that ranged from "Never" to "About once a day." The second item asked, "How committed are you to your current religious beliefs?" with response options ranging from "Not very committed" to "Extremely committed". The two items were highly correlated ($r = 0.58$), and hence, they were combined to yield an index of religiosity with higher scores indicating greater religiosity.

Table 3 Means, standard deviations and correlations among Study 2 variables

Variable	1	2	3	4	5	6
1. Divine forgiveness		−.08 +	.22*	.73*	− .31*	.61*
2. Anxiety			−.35*	−.14*	.22*	−.01
3. SWLS				.27*	−.20	.13*
4. Positive God relationship					−.38*	.62*
5. Negative God relationship						−.21*
6. Religiosity						
M	15.07	4.29	24.31	17.26	5.97	7.75
SD	4.07	4.28	6.32	5.88	3.12	3.20

$N = 430$. SWLS = satisfaction with Life Scale. + $p < .06$; * $p < .01$

Results

The inter-correlations among the measures, as well as their means and standard deviations, are shown in Table 3. As hypothesized, divine forgiveness correlated positively with the index of well-being (SWLS) and negatively with the index of distress (anxiety symptoms) though the latter relationship was only marginally significant ($p < 0.06$). As might be expected, the two indices of well-being were moderately and inversely correlated. Finally, consistent with research on close relationships, positive and negative subjective evaluations of one's relationship with God were also moderately and negatively correlated. Thus, neither the well-being indices nor the two evaluation indices were orthogonal to each other but rather reflected moderately related constructs.

Again, the Hayes (2017) PROCESS macro for Model 4 was used to examine the second hypothesis concerning mediation. This was done by specifying a parallel multiple mediator model. This examined whether each of the two sentiment dimensions mediated the relation between divine forgiveness and well-being in the presence of the other, while controlling for religiosity, age, and sex. For anxiety symptoms, the overall indirect effect was significant, − 0.14, 95% CI [− 0.24 − 0.05]. The indirect effect through negative sentiment, − 0.06, 95% CI [− 0.10, − 0.02], was significant, and the indirect effect through positive sentiment was marginally significant, − 0.08, 90% CI [− 0.16, − 0.01]. Moreover, the strengths of the two indirect effects did not significantly differ from each other ($p > 0.05$) and, as in Study 1, the direct effect between divine forgiveness and anxiety was not significant, suggesting full mediation.

The analysis regarding divine forgiveness and the SWLS showed similar results in that the overall indirect effect was significant, 0.26, 95% CI [0.12, 0.39], and both the indirect path between divine forgiveness and SWLS via positive sentiment, 0.21, 95% CI [0.07, 0.34], and via negative sentiment, 0.05, 95% CI [0.01, 0.12] were significant. Again, no significant difference emerged in the size of the two indirect effects ($p > 0.05$). Finally, the direct relation between divine forgiveness and SWLS was not significant, suggesting full mediation.

Discussion

Using a psychometrically stronger measure of divine forgiveness, and more nuanced conceptualizations of sentiment and well-being, this study replicated and extended the findings obtained in Study 1 for the distress-based measure of well-being. Specifically, the association between divine forgiveness and a different measure of anxiety to that used in Study 1 was mediated by subjective evaluation of the relationship with God. The mediation occurred for negative subjective evaluations of the relationship, and even though the mediation effect for positive subjective evaluations was only marginally significant, the strength of the two mediation effects did not differ from each other. Importantly, this finding does not simply reflect level of religiosity as it occurred when an index of

religiosity was statistically controlled. As regards the measure of positive well-being examined, satisfaction with life, similar results emerged. Both positive and negative evaluations mediated the relation between divine forgiveness and the Satisfaction with Life scale. Again, this occurred when religiosity was statistically controlled.

General Discussion

Noting the existence of only scattered studies that include an assessment of divine forgiveness, the present research had two main goals. The first was to replicate prior findings that suggest divine forgiveness is related to well-being (e.g., Hirsch et al., 2012; Lawler-Row, 2010) and the second was to examine a possible mechanism that might account for any association found. Study 1 showed that divine forgiveness was indeed related to a measure of well-being, a finding that was replicated in Study 2, which used both a positive (life satisfaction) and a negative indicator (anxiety) of well-being.

The second goal was to examine a potential mechanism that might explain the relationship between divine forgiveness and well-being. It was argued that the meaning an individual attaches to their relationship with God will likely account for the association found between divine forgiveness and well-being. Building on Osgood et al.'s (1957) work on the analysis of meaning which showed that evaluative inferences accounted for the lion's share of variance in the three dimensions underlying a concept's meaning (evaluation, activity, and potency), Study 1 examined whether a bipolar evaluation of one's relationship with God played a mediating (explanatory) role for the association of divine forgiveness and anxiety. Consistent with our theoretical argument, it did do so. This is important theoretically as it suggests that the experience of divine forgiveness is a distal predictor of well-being and that a more proximal predictor is the valence of one's relationship with God. Notwithstanding this positive finding, the limitations of a single item measure led to a second study that adopted a bi-dimensional approach to assessing evaluations of relationships.

In Study 2, divine forgiveness correlated strongly with religiosity emphasizing the need to statistically control religiosity when investigating the association between divine forgiveness and well-being. This was done in examining the mediational role played by the perceived valence of one's relation to God. Specifically, both positive and negative evaluations of one's relationship with God mediated the relation between divine forgiveness and satisfaction with life, and the strength of the two mediational pathways did not differ. When anxiety was used as a measure of well-being, however, the negative dimension of one's relationship with God clearly played a mediating role whereas that involving the positive dimension did not meet the conventional criterion for statistical significance but was marginal. However, the size of the indirect effects involving negative and positive sentiment did not differ. Too often this direct comparison is overlooked leading to the erroneous inference that there is a difference between two associations when one is significant and the other is not.

A strength of the present research is that the association between divine forgiveness and anxiety was shown to be independent of the specific measures used to assess each construct. This is important in a field where there have been few demonstrations of this association. An additional strength of the research is that it moved beyond the use of a single item to assess divine forgiveness. The present use of a psychometrically sound multi-item measure was an improvement over a previous study that also used a multi-item measure of divine forgiveness, but one that showed an unacceptable level of internal consistency (see Bufford et al., 2017, Study 2). Nonetheless, the assessment of divine forgiveness was limited as it mainly measured cognitive beliefs and did not assess potential emotional elements of feeling forgiven (Touissant et al., 2012) as well as other possible dimensions of divine forgiveness (e.g., the phenomenology of divine forgiveness, agency in obtaining God's forgiveness, beliefs about what is forgivable and so on). Clearly, an important next step for future research is to develop more comprehensive, psychometrically sound measures of divine forgiveness.

Limitations

Several further limitations bear consideration when interpreting the findings of the present research. First, the sample was predominantly female and limited to emerging adults raising the question of whether the same findings would be obtained among older persons and males. Second, whether the associations found occur in persons who experience clinical levels of anxiety is unknown as the participants in the present studies had relatively few anxiety symptoms. Third, the data are limited to self-report collected at a single point in time emphasizing the need for other forms of data and longitudinal research that can address more directly causal relations. Fourth, both studies used convenience samples and because they used different selection criteria (Study 2 excluded those who did not believe in God whereas Study 1 did not), and control variables, they cannot be compared directly. Finally, given the value placed on religious beliefs in many people's lives, it will also be important to control for socially desirable responding in future studies.

Conclusion

Notwithstanding the above limitations, the present studies point to an important area of inquiry in need of systematic research. Not only is understanding divine forgiveness important in its own right, but also because it is likely to enrich our understanding of both interpersonal forgiveness and self-forgiveness. This is an especially important need given that "different types of forgiveness have largely been examined in isolation from each other" (Krause, 2015, p. 129). The three forms of forgiveness are inextricably interwoven in the world's dominant religious belief systems emphasizing the need to take seriously religious beliefs if we are to understand forgiveness.

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Data Availability The raw data, analysis code, and materials used in this study are not openly available but are available upon request to the corresponding author.

Declarations

Conflict of interest The authors have no conflict of interests.

Ethical Approval Both studies reported herein received ethical approval from the Florida State University Institutional Review Board.

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