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The Conditionality of Divine Forgiveness: Assessment and Initial Findings

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Forgiveness can be unconditional or based on fulfilling various conditions. The present research reports the development of a tool to measure these beliefs in relation to divine forgiveness or forgiveness from a Supreme Being/Power (e.g., God, Creator, Deity). Using exploratory and confirmatory factor analysis, three studies investigated whether unconditional and conditional dimensions regarding divine forgiveness would emerge. They were also designed to provide convergent and divergent validity data for the proposed Conditional-Unconditional Divine Forgiveness Scale. Study 1 ($N = 316$) identified two underlying dimensions to views of divine forgiveness. Both unconditional and conditional views correlated with religiosity and reported experiences of divine forgiveness but were unrelated to depressive symptoms, flourishing and impression management, providing evidence of convergent and divergent validity. Study 2 ($N = 477$) provided a confirmatory factor analysis and showed that positive and negative qualities of one's relationship with God interacted in predicting views of divine forgiveness. Study 3 ($n = 321$) provided data on test-retest reliability and demonstrated that conditional and unconditional dimensions predicted seeking divine forgiveness. Together, these studies draw attention to an overlooked type of forgiveness, divine forgiveness, and an aspect of forgiveness that has received scant attention, its conditional-unconditional nature. The implications for future research on forgiveness are outlined.

Keywords: forgiveness, conditional-unconditional forgiveness, divine forgiveness, psychological distress, well-being


There are three different types of forgiveness in the voluminous literature on forgiveness. However, the lion's share of attention focuses on two forms of earthly forgiveness: interpersonal forgiveness and self-forgiveness. But what of the third, heavenly type of forgiveness? Divine forgiveness or forgiveness from a Supreme Being/Power (e.g., God, Creator, Deity, Dream Maker) has received little attention from scholars interested in forgiveness. As noted by Couenhoven (2010), "modern discussions of forgiveness have given little attention to divine forgiveness" (p. 166), a circumstance confirmed by a recent systematic review of research on divine forgiveness. In contrast to over 2,500 empirical studies on interpersonal forgiveness (Worthington & Wade, 2020), an analysis of research on divine forgiveness identified only 60 empirical studies (Fincham, 2022). In most of these studies, divine forgiveness was not the focus of the research but one of many variables examined, and perhaps not surprisingly, the most frequent means used to

assess divine forgiveness was a conceptually and psychometrically questionable single question: "I know that God forgives me" (Fetzer Institute, 1999). This analysis concluded that the research identified on divine forgiveness comprised "a largely atheoretical, fragmented literature characterized by poor, if not entirely inadequate, measurement of the (unspecified) construct investigated" (Fincham, 2022, p. 454).

Besides the obvious psychometric issue identified, the basis for this conclusion rests on two further observations. First, as one might anticipate, divine forgiveness correlates with being religiously affiliated (Toussaint & Williams, 2008), measures of religion (e.g., Bassett et al., 2016; Walker & Gorsuch, 2002), and levels of religiosity (e.g., Escher, 2013; Toussaint & Williams, 2008). Remarkably, many studies fail to consider this association, leaving the possibility that their findings for divine forgiveness may reflect the effect of religiosity/spirituality more generally. Second, researchers have not offered a conceptual analysis of divine forgiveness and how it operates. In light of this circumstance, a theoretical analysis of divine forgiveness was developed that specified its operation, the Seeking and Experiencing Divine Forgiveness Model (Fincham & May, 2023).

Informed by this component analysis model, the present research investigates a decision point in the model in which the person must decide whether or not divine forgiveness is contingent on fulfilling certain preconditions. The faith tradition of an individual can prescribe conditions that need to be met before a person can obtain divine forgiveness. For example, in some branches of Christianity (e.g., Catholicism), absolution from wrongdoing (sin) follows only after auricular confession, as forgiveness can be given only "through the priests" (Brom, 2004). Others may instead emphasize the example of Jesus, who forgave his enemies on the cross without the enemies having to repent or even ask for forgiveness. However, as Auerbach (2005, p. 479) noted: "While the Christian tradition

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depicts God as a model of absolute mercy and forgiveness, Judaism uses the same verses to teach its believers the limits of forgiveness.” Judaism has strict rules about what must be done to receive forgiveness in which *t’shuva* (a construct often translated as “repentance,” but which is closer to meaning “to return”) is central. Maimonides describes *t’shuva* as a three-stage process involving (a) acknowledging the reality of the wrongdoing, apology, and making amends, (b) rejecting the behavior for ourselves, and (c) resolving to live differently in the future (Ridberg, 2016). Divine forgiveness requires repentance, which can be achieved when you “Take with you words and return to God” (Hosea, 14:3). Similarly, in Islam, *Tawba* (repentance) is a demanding process similar to the Jewish process of *t’shuva* and is considered a necessary condition for *Ghufrān*—forgiveness by God (Encyclopedia of Islam). As it is stated in the Koran: “As for those who commit sins, and then repent afterwards and believe—your Lord, thereafter, is Forgiving and Merciful” (Quran 7:153). Clearly, the faith tradition of an individual can prescribe conditions that need to be met before a person can obtain divine forgiveness.

Within the three above monotheistic religions, a mixture of views can be found, some of which may be quite similar to those of one of the other religions. Although religion may provide one source for views of divine forgiveness, there are many others (e.g., family, friends, community, culture), likely resulting in a plethora of views regarding its nature, including whether it is unconditional and if conditional, the nature of the preconditions that need to be met before the person perceives that God forgives him or her. The importance of views on the perceived conditionality of divine forgiveness is emphasized by the fact that they may impact the likelihood of seeking such forgiveness.

How a person perceives the conditionality of divine forgiveness likely depends on how they view and relate to the deity. Several scholars suggest that representations of God reflect everyday social-cognitive processes and that people think about God’s agency and attributes in ways similar to those used to think about human agency and attributes (e.g., Barrett, 2004; Gervais, 2013). A body of research has emerged that consistently shows two broad conceptions of God (Sharp et al., 2021), one of a kindly/benevolent God (e.g., “loving,” “merciful”) and a wrathful/authoritarian God (e.g., “critical,” “punishing,” “stern”). It is reasonable to argue that for those who conceive of God in negative terms (i.e., as wrathful or authoritarian), divine forgiveness is likely perceived as difficult to obtain and dependent on satisfying various (possibly harsh) preconditions. By contrast, those with a more positive view of God may be likely to view divine forgiveness in terms of grace or “the gift of acceptance given unconditionally to an undeserving person by an unobligated giver” (Emmons et al., 2017, p. 277) and therefore as unconditional, occurring independently of their behavior or attitudes.

Because individuals can hold each view to varying degrees, the issue is not quite as clear-cut as portrayed above. This is further emphasized by the fact that relationships with others, including supernatural beings, can be ambivalent, reflecting both positive and negative dimensions. It is, therefore, quite possible that the relative balance between the positive and negative may predict the perception of both conditional and unconditional views of divine forgiveness. It is also possible that positive and negative dimensions interact dynamically in predicting conditional and unconditional views of divine forgiveness.

Although a conceptual distinction can be drawn between unconditional and conditional divine forgiveness, it remains to be seen whether such a distinction can be empirically documented. Research on earthly forms of forgiveness has paid scant attention to the distinction between conditional and unconditional interpersonal forgiveness (Prieto-Ursúa et al., 2018), and there is no research on them in the context of intimate relationships. Faldetta (2022) discussed the conditionality of forgiveness in workplace settings but does not offer any empirical data. However, Prieto-Ursúa et al. (2018) were able to identify unconditional and conditional dimensions of interpersonal forgiveness using exploratory and confirmatory factor analyses. Moreover, these dimensions correlated with general measures of interpersonal forgiveness and were unrelated to a measure of social desirability.

In the absence of prior research, it is an open question as to whether similar unconditional and conditional dimensions can be documented in relation to divine forgiveness. An initial, preliminary study, therefore, examines this issue. A second study then examines how positive and negative views of one’s relation to the divine relate to unconditional and conditional dimensions of divine forgiveness. Finally, the relation between the perceived conditionality of divine forgiveness and the likelihood of seeking such forgiveness is examined.

Study 1

The purpose of the first study is to document unconditional and conditional dimensions of divine forgiveness using exploratory factor analysis. In doing so, their association with reports of divine forgiveness and religiosity will be examined to establish convergent validity. As regards discriminant validity, it can be argued that unconditional and conditional dimensions of divine forgiveness will not be related to established correlates of divine forgiveness, such as depression (Fincham & May, 2022; Krause & Ellison, 2003; Lawler-Row, 2010), and indicators of well-being such as life satisfaction and meaning in life (e.g., Chen et al., 2019; Krause & Ellison, 2003; Lyons et al., 2011). This is because, unlike the experience of divine forgiveness, these dimensions are simply markers on the path to experiencing divine forgiveness. For example, believing that auricular confession is necessary for divine forgiveness simply indicates what is to be done to receive such forgiveness. Additional evidence of discriminant validity will be obtained by examining the association between unconditional and conditional dimensions of divine forgiveness and impression management.

Method

Participants and Procedure

Participants ($N = 316$; 25 males, 291 females) were undergraduate students from a university in the southeastern United States recruited from a course that satisfied a university-wide liberal studies requirement. The racial/ethnic composition of the sample was as follows: 35 African American (11.1%), 48 Latino/Hispanic (15.2%), 204 White/Caucasian/European American (64.6%), 12 Asian (3.8%), 10 biracial (3.2%), three American Indian/Alaska Native (.9%), three Native Hawaiian/Pacific Islander (.9%), and one Afro-Caribbean (.3%).

Participation in the study required completing an online survey that was part of a larger study to examine students' mental, physical, spiritual, and relational well-being. The survey was one of the options offered to earn a small amount of extra credit. The local institutional review board approved the study, and all participants gave informed consent before any data were collected. Only respondents who indicated that they believed in "a supernatural agent(s) (e.g. God, Gods, a higher power)" were included in the present sample.

Measures

Divine Forgiveness. Divine forgiveness was assessed using the measure developed by Fincham and May (2022, Fincham & May, 2024). It comprised five items ("How often have you felt that God forgives you?"; "I am certain that God forgives me when I seek His forgiveness"; "Knowing that I am 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 three items and on a 5-point scale for the last two items. Coefficient α in the present sample was .90. Higher scores reflected greater perceived forgiveness by God.

Beliefs About the Conditionality of Divine Forgiveness. In the absence of prior measures designed to assess conditional and unconditional divine forgiveness, the author adapted, where possible, items from measures used to assess beliefs about the conditionality and unconditionality of interpersonal forgiveness (e.g., Mukashema & Mullet, 2013; Prieto-Ursúa et al., 2018). Thus, for example, the item "A person does not have to change for the better before I can forgive them" became "I don't have to change for the better to be forgiven by God." Similarly, the item "An offender would not deserve forgiveness if they do not try to make up for their offense" was used to generate "I need to make amends for what I did wrong before I can receive God's forgiveness." Because of the profound differences between divine forgiveness and interpersonal forgiveness (see Auerbach, 2005; Fincham, 2022), it was impossible to adapt all items in the manner illustrated above. This resulted in using six items in a new scale, the Conditional-Unconditional Divine Forgiveness Scale. Three were designed to assess conditional divine forgiveness ("I need to make amends for what I did wrong before I can receive God's forgiveness," "In order to receive God's forgiveness, I must promise that I will not make the same mistake again," "God will forgive me only if I truly regret what I did wrong"), and the remaining three items attempted to capture unconditional forgiveness ("God forgives my offenses unconditionally, there is nothing I need to do," "When I hurt someone, I don't need to do or say anything to receive God's forgiveness," "I don't have to change for the better to be forgiven by God").

Depressive Symptoms. The depression subscale of the widely used Depression, Anxiety, and Stress Scales-21 (Lovibond & Lovibond, 1995) was used to assess depressive symptoms. The items in the depression subscale measure dysphoric mood states, including self-depreciation, lack of interest/involvement, hopelessness, and anhedonia. Respondents were asked to indicate how much each item applied to them over the past week (e.g., "I found it difficult to work up the initiative to do things," "I felt down-hearted

and blue"). They indicated their response on a 4-point scale (0 = did not apply to me at all, 3 = applied to me very much, or most of the time). Cronbach's α in the present study was .91.

Flourishing. The eight-item Flourishing Scale (Diener et al., 2010) was used to measure aspects of human functioning ranging from positive relationships to feelings of competence and to having meaning and purpose in life. Items (e.g., "I am engaged and interested in my daily activities") were rated on a 7-point scale ranging from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 7 (*strongly agree*). A summed score was calculated with higher scores indicating higher levels of flourishing (Cronbach's α = .96 in the present sample).

Impression Management. Participants completed the eight-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 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 labeled "neither agree nor disagree." The scores on each item were summed so that higher scores represented greater impression management. Coefficient α was .60 in the present sample.

Religiosity. Two items assessed religious participation and the centrality of religion in the participant's life, respectively. The first asked about the frequency of participation in religious services ("How often do you attend religious/spiritual services or meetings") and was answered on an 8-point scale (0 = *never*, 3 = *about once a month*, 7 = *about once a day*). The second asked about the importance of religion in the respondent's life ("How important is religion/spirituality in your life") again answered on an 8-point scale (1 = *not at all* to 8 = *extremely important*). The two items were strongly correlated ($r = .60$), and hence, they were combined to yield a single index with higher scores reflecting greater religiosity.

Results and Discussion

An exploratory factor analysis was conducted to examine whether beliefs in unconditional and conditional divine forgiveness could be identified. The six items assessing beliefs about divine forgiveness were subject to principal axis factoring with varimax rotation. Both the Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin measure of sampling adequacy (.66) and Bartlett's test of sphericity ($p < .001$) indicated that the correlation matrix was appropriate for factor analysis.

The analysis yielded two factors with eigenvalues greater than one, accounting for 54.34% of the variance. The three items that assessed conditional divine forgiveness beliefs defined the first factor and accounted for 29.73% of the variance. All items loaded greater than .75 on the first factor, with loadings on the second factor all below .03. The second factor comprised the three unconditional divine forgiveness belief items. It accounted for 24.61% of the variance, with all loadings greater than .60 on the second factor and loadings below .04 on the first factor. Coefficient α for the conditional belief items was .82, and for the unconditional items, it was .73.

Having empirically documented two views on the conditionality of divine forgiveness, the next step was to examine data that might speak to their convergent and divergent validity. Table 1

Table 1
Means, Standard Deviations, and Correlations Among Study 1 Variables

Variable	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
1. Depressive symptoms	—	-.51**	-.22**	-.08	-.31**	.06	.05
2. Flourishing		—	.22**	.00	.28**	.07	-.01
3. Divine forgiveness			—	.64**	.13	.32**	.21**
4. Religiosity				—	.16**	.18**	.22**
5. Impression management					—	.08	-.08
6. Conditional divine forgiveness						—	.03
7. Unconditional divine forgiveness							—
<i>M</i>	4.83	44.07	3.17	7.53	33.31	4.22	3.40
<i>SD</i>	4.56	9.76	0.80	3.59	4.85	2.22	2.01

Note. $n = 316$.

** $p < .01$.

presents the product-moment correlations among the study variables and descriptive statistics. As expected, there was evidence of convergent validity in that the perception of divine forgiveness correlated positively with beliefs about the conditional nature of divine forgiveness and the unconditional nature of divine forgiveness. Moreover, as anticipated, religiosity was positively correlated with divine forgiveness, the view that divine forgiveness is conditional, and the view that it is unconditional. Consistent with previous research, divine forgiveness correlated positively with flourishing and negatively with depressive symptoms. To ensure that the relationships found for divine forgiveness were not due to religiosity, partial correlations were computed, with religiosity as the control variable. The perception of divine forgiveness was still significantly and inversely associated with depressive symptoms ($r = -.22, p < .001$) and positively related to flourishing ($r = .29, p < .001$). By contrast, Table 1 shows that the views of divine forgiveness as conditional or unconditional did not correlate significantly with depressive symptoms or flourishing, providing some evidence of discriminant validity. Further data supporting discriminant validity came from the lack of a significant association between either view on the conditionality of divine forgiveness and impression management.

In sum, this study provides initial evidence on a critical decision point in a recent model of the psychological processes that occur in the perception of divine forgiveness (Fincham & May, 2023). However, whether the two views on the conditionality of divine forgiveness will be supported in a confirmatory context remains to be determined.

Study 2

The purpose of this study was twofold. The first was to determine whether a confirmatory factor analysis would support the views of unconditional and conditional divine forgiveness uncovered in Study 1. The second goal was to examine how a person's view of God related to each of the two proposed dimensions relating to the perceived conditionality of divine forgiveness. This was done by investigating how positive and negative views of God relate to divine forgiveness's perceived conditionality. More specifically, the following question was addressed: Do positive and negative views interact dynamically in predicting conditional and unconditional dimensions of divine forgiveness?

Method

Participants and Procedure

Participants ($N = 477$; 51 males, 426 females) were undergraduate students from a university in the southeastern United States who had been recruited from a course that satisfied a university-wide liberal studies requirement. The racial/ethnic composition of the sample was as follows: 76 Latino/Hispanic (15.9%), 51 African American (10.7%), 307 White/Caucasian/European American (64.4%), three American Indian/Alaska Native (.6%), 24 Asian/Pacific Islander (5.0%), four Middle Eastern (.8%), 10 other (2.1%), and two (.4%) participants declined to share their racial/ethnic identification.

Participants completed an online survey that was part of a larger study to examine the mental, physical, spiritual, and relational well-being of students. The survey was one of the options offered to earn a small amount of extra credit. The study was approved by the local institutional review board, and all participants gave informed consent before any data were collected. Only respondents who indicated that they believed in "a supernatural agent(s) (e.g. God, Gods, a higher power)" were included in the present sample.

Measures

Beliefs About the Conditionality of Divine Forgiveness. Beliefs about the conditionality of divine forgiveness were assessed using the Conditional-Unconditional Divine Forgiveness Scale employed in Study 1.

View of Relationship With the Divine. The traditional conception of relationship quality as a unidimensional bipolar construct with positive and negative endpoints has begun to give way to a bidimensional conceptualization comprising separate positive and negative dimensions (see Fincham & Rogge, 2010; Rogge et al., 2017). Rogge et al. (2017) used item response theory to develop a psychometrically sound measure to assess a relationship's positive and negative subjective evaluations. Specifically, they instructed respondents to rate items representing the three dimensions of the semantic differential (evaluation, potency, activity) in the following way: "considering only the negative qualities of your relationship, and ignoring the positive ones, evaluate your relationship on the following qualities." Following some unrelated intervening items, analogous instructions were used for positive items on a separate page.

In the present study, this approach was modified to make the referent of the ratings God. Rogge et al. (2017) developed four-item and eight-item versions to assess each dimension. The four-item negative (miserable, bad, empty, lifeless) and positive (enjoyable, pleasant, strong, alive) version was used in the present study. As anticipated, a principal axis factor analysis with varimax rotation yielded two clear factors, accounting for 83.14% of the variance. The first comprised positive items, accounting for 45.95%, and the second comprised negative items, accounting for 37.19% of the variance. For both dimensions, items loaded more than .80 on their primary factor and less than .30 on the secondary factor. All negative items were summed up so that higher scores indicated higher negativity ($\alpha = .92$). Positive items were similarly summed so that higher scores reflected greater positivity ($\alpha = .97$).

Religiosity. Religiosity was assessed using the same two items used in Study 1. In the present study, the two items correlated .67. They were summed so that higher scores reflected greater religiosity.

Results and Discussion

Table 2 presents the product-moment correlations among the study variables and descriptive statistics. Contrary to expectation, the more one perceived their relationship with God as positive, the greater the view that divine forgiveness was conditional. The relationship for unconditional divine forgiveness was not statistically significant. Moreover, contrary to expectation, the more one viewed their relationship with God as negative, the more they viewed divine forgiveness as unconditional. A statistically significant relationship did not emerge for conditional divine forgiveness. As previously noted, however, it is important to show that correlates of anything to do with divine forgiveness should be shown to exist independently of religiosity. With religiosity controlled, positively viewed relationships with the divine were related to both conditional, $r = .19$, $p < .001$, and unconditional, $r = .10$, $p = .023$, views of divine forgiveness. No statistically significant partial correlations emerged for the negative relationship dimension. Interestingly, scores for the view that divine forgiveness is unconditional were significantly lower than those for viewing divine forgiveness as conditional, $t(476) = 4.45$, $p < .001$, Cohen’s $d = .20$; 95% CI [.34, .87].

A confirmatory factor analysis of the items used to assess the conditionality of divine forgiveness was conducted using structural equation modeling. In the model, the three unconditional items reflected a latent variable, and the three conditional items reflected a different latent variable. The two latent variables were allowed to covary. The data showed a good fit to the model $\chi^2(8) = 13.71$,

$p = .089$, CFI = .99, RMSEA = .035, 90% CI [.001, .062]. Standardized factor loadings varied between .64 and .86. The correlation between the two latent factors was .08. Cronbach’s α was acceptable for both positive (.81) and negative (.75) dimensions. Thus, views of God’s forgiveness as unconditional and conditional were measured adequately.

It, therefore, remains to examine how positive and negative views of one’s relationship with God are related to the perceived conditionality of divine forgiveness. Specifically, does negativity in one’s perceived relationship with God moderate the relationship between positivity in one’s relationship with God and the perceived conditionality of divine forgiveness? To examine this issue, Hayes’s (2017) PROCESS macro (Model 1) was used. Analyses for unconditional divine forgiveness and unconditional divine forgiveness were run, centering the two variables in the interaction and controlling for religiosity. Regarding viewing divine forgiveness as unconditional, a significant moderating effect was found, $F(1, 472) = 7.76$, $p = .006$. The Johnson–Neyman test indicated a statistically significant transition point for the moderator, such that moderation occurred only for negativity scores above 8.22 (19.92% of the sample). The interaction effect (see Figure 1) showed that moderation of the association between positivity and unconditional divine forgiveness occurred when levels of negativity were high.

The analysis for conditional divine forgiveness also yielded a significant interaction involving positive and negative aspects of relations with the divine, $F(1, 472) = 4.23$, $p = .040$. The Johnson–Neyman test indicated no statistically significant transition point for the moderator. As shown in Figure 2, conditional divine forgiveness was greatest when the relationship with God reflected higher levels of positivity and negativity.

In sum, confirmatory factor analysis provided further data showing that unconditional and conditional dimensions concerning divine forgiveness can be documented. It also showed that positive and negative subjective evaluations of God interacted dynamically in relation to each of the two divine forgiveness dimensions.

Study 3

With the two dimensions of divine forgiveness documented, one can ask whether they are related to seeking divine forgiveness and thus provide information relevant to the Seeking and Experiencing Divine Forgiveness Model (Fincham & May, 2023). The likelihood of seeking divine forgiveness is another construct that has only recently received attention. In the only known article on this topic, Fincham and Maranges (2024) developed a measure of the construct.

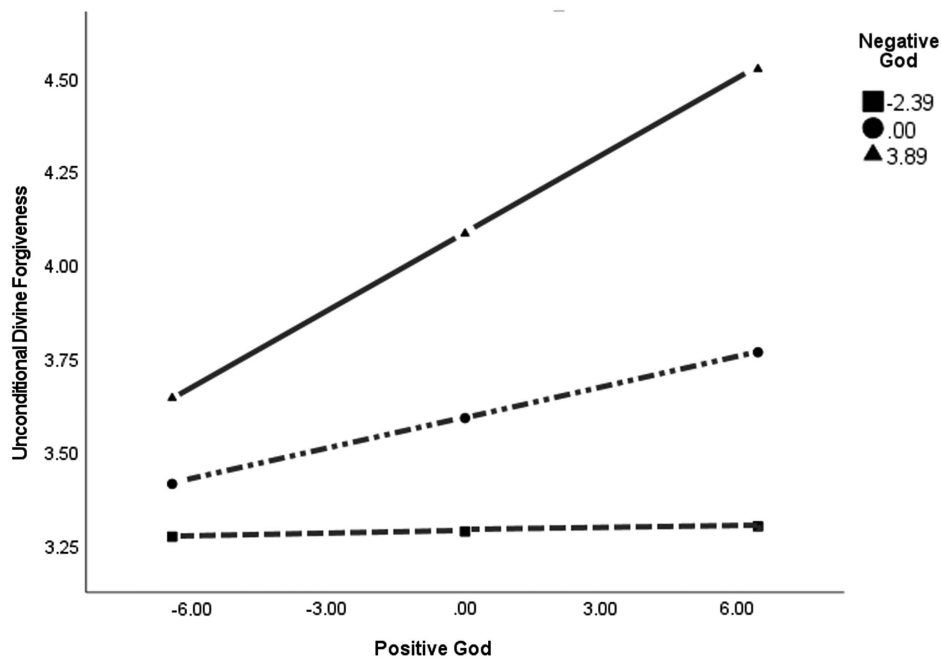
Table 2
Means, Standard Deviations, and Correlations Among Study 2 Variables

Variable	1	2	3	4	5
1. Relationship positivity	—	-.41**	.07	.28**	.74**
2. Relationship negativity		—	.11*	.02	-.29**
3. Unconditional divine forgiveness			—	.03	.08
4. Conditional divine forgiveness				—	.24**
5. Religiosity					—
<i>M</i>	16.37	6.39	3.48	4.09	7.75
<i>SD</i>	6.44	3.90	2.05	2.20	3.89

Note. $n = 477$.
* $p < .05$. ** $p < .01$.

Figure 1

Simple Slopes of Perceived Positive Relation With God in Predicting Unconditional Divine Forgiveness at 16th Percentile (-2.39), the Mean, and 84th Percentile (3.89) of Perceived Negative Relation With God



Using a cross-legged stability model that controlled for both religiosity and impression management, they showed that the likelihood of seeking divine forgiveness was related to reported experiences of divine forgiveness 12 weeks later, but the inverse was not the case. The present study, therefore, investigated whether views on the conditionality of divine forgiveness were related to the likelihood of seeking such forgiveness. It was hypothesized that both views of divine forgiveness would positively correlate with seeking it. A subset of the sample completed the scale again 6 weeks later to obtain further test–retest reliability on the new Conditional-Unconditional Divine Forgiveness Scale.

Method

Participants and Procedure

Participants ($N = 321$; 26 males, 283 females, two nonbinary) were undergraduate students from a university in the southeastern United States recruited from a course that satisfied a university-wide liberal studies requirement. The racial/ethnic composition of the sample was as follows: 40 Latino/Hispanic (12.5%), 30 African American (9.3%), 223 White/Caucasian/European American (69.5%), one American Indian/Alaska Native (.3%), 13 Asian/Pacific Islander (4.0%), 11 mixed race (3.4%), and three other (.9%). The average age of the participants was 20.01 years ($SD = 1.96$).

Participants completed an online survey that was part of a larger study to examine students' mental, physical, spiritual, and relational well-being. A subsample of 184 participants completed the Conditional-Unconditional Forgiveness Scale 6 weeks later to obtain data on its test–retest reliability. The study was approved by the local institutional review board, and all participants gave

informed consent before any data were collected. Only respondents who indicated that they believed in “a supernatural agent(s) (e.g. God, Gods, a higher power)” were included in the present sample.

Measures

Beliefs About the Conditionality of Divine Forgiveness. Beliefs about the conditionality of divine forgiveness were assessed using the Conditional-Unconditional Divine Forgiveness Scale employed in Studies 1 and 2. Data from the subsample that completed the scale 6 weeks later showed that the conditional (.64) and unconditional (.67) dimensions demonstrated good test–retest reliability over this period.

Seeking Divine Forgiveness

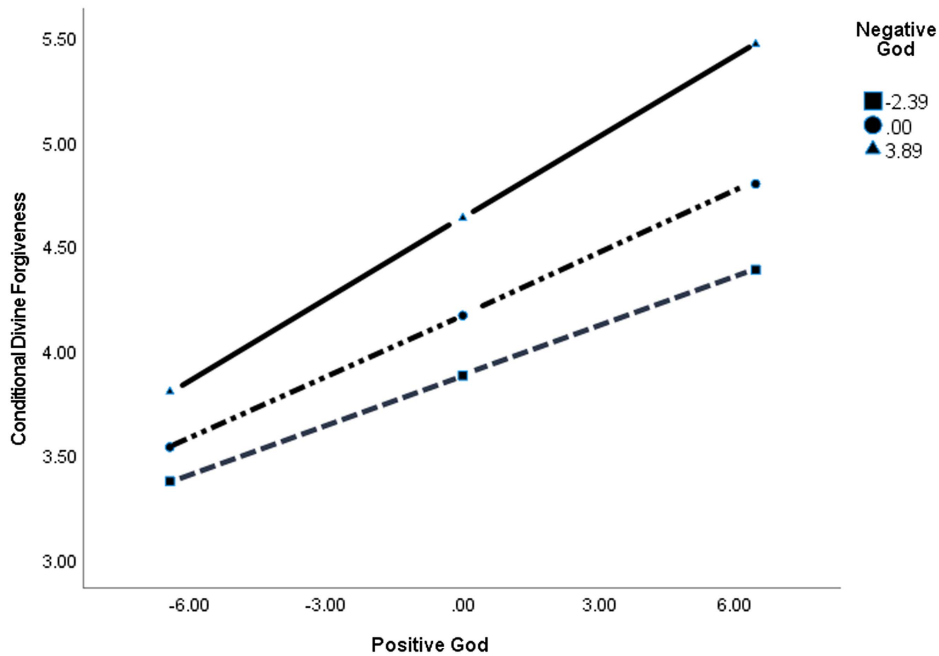
Fincham and Maranges (2024) adapted the Transgression Narrative Test of Forgiveness (Berry et al., 2001) to develop a five-item measure of seeking divine forgiveness. Respondents consider standardized scenarios describing transgressions and rate the likelihood of seeking forgiveness from a higher power for committing each transgression. They indicate their response using a slider with the endpoints labeled 0 and 100. A box beside the slider showed the exact numerical value as they positioned it. Scores were summed with higher scores indicating a greater likelihood of seeking divine forgiveness. In the present sample, coefficient α was .95.

Results and Discussion

Table 3 presents the product-moment correlations among the study variables and descriptive statistics. As hypothesized, views

Figure 2

Simple Slopes of Perceived Positive Relation With God in Predicting Conditional Divine Forgiveness at 16th Percentile (-2.39), the Mean, and 84th Percentile (3.89) of Perceived Negative Relation With God



Note. See the online article for the color version of this figure.

of divine forgiveness as conditional and unconditional correlated positively with seeking divine forgiveness. However, it can be seen that the correlation for viewing divine forgiveness as conditional was almost twice the size of that for viewing such forgiveness as unconditional. Testing the difference between dependent correlations showed that this difference was statistically significant, $t(321) = 2.75, p < .001$.

To examine the above relationships in a multivariate context, Mplus was used to conduct a regression analysis in which the likelihood of seeking divine forgiveness served as the dependent variable, with the two views of divine forgiveness as independent variables. Both conditional, $\beta = .42, p < .001$, and unconditional, $\beta = .25, p < .001$, views of divine forgiveness predicted the likelihood of seeking divine forgiveness. To test whether these coefficients differed significantly, they were constrained to be equal, and the

analysis was rerun. The model did not fit the data, $\chi^2(1) = 7.59, p = .006, CFI = .92, TLI = .83, RMSEA = .14$. These findings show that both in univariate and multivariate contexts, viewing divine forgiveness as conditional is more strongly related to seeking divine forgiveness than viewing such forgiveness as unconditional.

General Discussion

Three studies examined a distinction that has received little attention in the voluminous forgiveness literature: conditional and unconditional forgiveness. Informed by the limited research on interpersonal forgiveness about this distinction, the present research sought to empirically document humans' views on the conditionality of divine forgiveness.

In an initial exploratory study, two dimensions emerged: views of divine forgiveness as unconditional and conditional on fulfilling preconditions. Both views were related to self-reports of divine forgiveness but were, as hypothesized, unrelated to well-being correlates of divine forgiveness, namely, depressive symptoms and human flourishing. This is unsurprising as one's views on the conditionality of divine forgiveness do not ipso facto yield any benefits that may result from perceiving that God or any other supernatural agent forgives one. Instead, they serve as a guidepost on how one proceeds to receive divine forgiveness.

Notwithstanding the preceding observation, understanding these views is important to comprehend fully how humans pursue divine forgiveness. A second study was therefore conducted to substantiate the existence of the two views on the conditionality of divine forgiveness in the context of a confirmatory analysis and to

Table 3
Means, Standard Deviations, and Correlations Among Study 3 Variables

Variable	1	2	3
1. Seeking divine forgiveness	—	.40**	.21**
2. Conditional divine forgiveness		—	.15*
3. Unconditional divine forgiveness			—
<i>M</i>	281.80	13.07	11.18
<i>SD</i>	146.48	3.42	3.58

Note. $n = 321$.
* $p < .05$. ** $p < .01$.

investigate potential determinants of views on the conditionality of divine forgiveness. Regarding the former, clear evidence again emerged for views of divine forgiveness as having conditional and unconditional dimensions. Regarding the latter, an individual's views of the extent to which he or she viewed his or her relationship with the divine as positive and negative were investigated as determinants of the perceived conditionality of divine forgiveness. A complex picture emerged. Contrary to expectation, with religiosity controlled, the more one perceived their relationship with God as positive, the greater the view that divine forgiveness was conditional. The relationship for unconditional divine forgiveness was not statistically significant. Moreover, contrary to expectation, the more one viewed their relationship with God as negative, the more they viewed divine forgiveness as unconditional. A statistically significant relationship did not emerge for conditional divine forgiveness. Confirming the potential confounding effect of religiosity when examining the correlates of divine forgiveness, a different pattern of results emerged when religiosity was statistically controlled. Specifically, the perceived positive component of the individual's relationship with the divine was related to both conditional and unconditional views of divine forgiveness. By contrast, the perceived negative component of the individual's relationship with the divine was unrelated to conditional and unconditional views of divine forgiveness.

The above univariate relations, however, need to be interpreted in the light of a significant interaction between positive and negative dimensions of one's relationship with God in predicting views on the unconditionality and conditionality of divine forgiveness. For unconditional divine forgiveness, the interaction effect showed that moderation of the association between perceived positivity of one's relationship with God and unconditional divine forgiveness occurred only when levels of perceived negativity were high (see Figure 1). In fact, there was no moderation at lower levels of perceived negativity and positivity. As one's relationship with God or a higher power becomes more ambivalent (high positive and high negative), viewing divine forgiveness as unconditional tends to increase. This might indicate that an ambivalent relation with the deity could promote seeing unconditional divine forgiveness as easier to get and possibly, as a result, less valuable. Alternatively, ambivalence may point to a greater anxious attachment to God, which motivates a desire for acceptance by God, something that is more easily achieved by viewing divine forgiveness as unconditional.

For conditional divine forgiveness, the significant interaction between positive and negative dimensions of one's relationship with God showed that the moderation effect occurred regardless of the perceived negativity of one's relationship with God (see Figure 2). It, therefore, appears that ambivalence per se in one's relationship with the deity is not as important in considering conditional divine forgiveness. The difference documented in the moderating role of the valence (positive and negative) in one's relationship with God for unconditional and conditional views of God can be seen as further evidence of the value of distinguishing these two views of divine forgiveness. However, why bother with this distinction if they do not relate to important psychological outcomes such as psychological distress and well-being?

The answer to the above question is both theoretical and empirical. Theoretically, the perceived conditionality of divine forgiveness constitutes an important decision point in the only process model of divine forgiveness with implications for how such forgiveness is

perceived to unfold (Fincham & May, 2023). Indeed, it can be argued that the perceived conditionality of divine forgiveness likely impacts the likelihood of whether it is pursued. At the empirical level, this is important because seeking divine forgiveness not only predicts whether divine forgiveness is subsequently experienced (Fincham & Maranges, 2024) but is also related to psychological distress and psychological well-being (Maranges & Fincham, 2024). Thus, Study 3 examined whether unconditional and conditional divine forgiveness were related to seeking divine forgiveness. Not only were they related at the univariate level, but each was related to seeking divine forgiveness independently of the other. The findings also suggest that conditional divine forgiveness was more strongly related than unconditional divine forgiveness. It is possible that this finding reflects an assumption that to the extent that divine forgiveness is viewed as unconditional, the person need not seek it or only does so minimally.

However, the above findings could also reflect limits in assessing unconditional divine forgiveness in at least two ways. First, it is unclear whether the wording of the items led to the lower endorsement of unconditional versus conditional divine forgiveness. Future qualitative analysis of unconditional divine forgiveness is needed to determine how people think of this construct, which can then be used to craft items that capture their views. Second, the present findings may be limited by the nature of the samples studied.

The results support the argument that religiosity must be considered when investigating divine forgiveness. Consistent with prior research (e.g., Fincham & May, 2022, 2024), a substantial relationship (.64) between religiosity and divine forgiveness emerged in Study 1, and religiosity was also related to the perceived conditionality of divine forgiveness. It is, therefore, appropriate to control for religiosity in all analyses involving divine forgiveness to ensure that the latter does not simply serve as a proxy for religiosity in the study of divine forgiveness. Moreover, future research should present findings that control for religiosity as their primary results, as when this control is absent, findings are necessarily ambiguous.

Notwithstanding the novel findings of the studies, it is important to bear in mind several study limitations when interpreting their results. The most obvious is that the sample comprised mostly young, White, college-attending women. Thus, the current findings need to be replicated using a more diverse sample that varies in race, gender, and socioeconomic status and includes information on participants' religious backgrounds. Future research might also benefit from including multiple indicators of psychological distress and well-being. Third, all measures used in this research were self-reports. Such reports are subject to socially desirable responses, so the failure to control for this bias in Studies 2 and 3 is noteworthy. Finally, two lines of future research are needed. The first should examine how temporal dynamics of affective evaluations of one's relationship to the deity relate to conditional and unconditional views of divine forgiveness. For example, as one transitions from a positive evaluation of the deity to an ambivalent view, how does this impact views on the conditionality of divine forgiveness? The second needs to explore how religious behaviors, such as the desire to understand God's will better and behavior designed to increase one's openness to God's forgiveness, relate to the perceived conditionality of divine forgiveness.

Despite the limitations noted, this research makes valuable contributions to an emerging literature on divine forgiveness. It is

the first to document the distinction between conditional and unconditional views of divine forgiveness. Both convergent and discriminant validity for a measure to assess these views were provided, and the positive and negative qualities of one's relationship with God interacted dynamically in predicting conditional and unconditional dimensions of divine forgiveness. It also provides initial data on an important decision point in the Seeking and Experiencing Divine Forgiveness Model (Fincham & May, 2023). Finally, the research is the first to document the relation between the perceived conditionality of divine forgiveness and the likelihood of seeking such forgiveness, which is related to psychological distress and well-being.

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