SELF–FORGIVENESS:
THE STEPCHILD OF FORGIVENESS RESEARCH

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Although research on interpersonal forgiveness is burgeoning, there is little conceptual or empirical scholarship on self–forgiveness. To stimulate research on this topic, a conceptual analysis of self–forgiveness is offered in which self–forgiveness is defined and distinguished from interpersonal forgiveness and pseudo self–forgiveness. The conditions under which self–forgiveness is appropriate also are identified. A theoretical model describing the processes involved in self–forgiveness following the perpetration of an interpersonal transgression is outlined and the proposed emotional, social–cognitive, and offense–related determinants of self–forgiveness are described. The limitations of the model and its implications for future research are explored.

In recent years there has been an upsurge of interest in interpersonal forgiveness. Prior to 1985 there were only five studies on forgiveness (Worthington, 1998), a number that since has increased by over 4,000% (PsycINFO, July 2003). However, intrapersonal or self–forgiveness has received remarkably little attention in this burgeoning literature. We therefore offer a conceptual analysis of this stepchild of the forgiveness literature, with the goal of stimulating research on the topic.

WHAT IS SELF–FORGIVENESS?

Few definitions of self–forgiveness can be found in the social sciences literature, but those that do exist emphasize self–love and respect in the face of one's own wrongdoing. In the philosophy literature, self–forgiveness has been conceptualized as a show of goodwill toward the self while one clears the mind of the self–hatred and self–contempt that re-

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sult from hurting another (Horsbrugh, 1974). Similarly, Holmgren (1998) argues that in self–forgiveness, the offender recognizes his/her intrinsic worth and its independence from his/her wrongdoing. Philosophers posit that self–forgiveness involves a restoration of self–respect (Dillon, 2001; Holmgren, 1998) and consists of three elements (Holmgren, 1998); first, self–forgiveness requires an objective fault or wrongdoing; second, negative feelings triggered by this offense must be overcome; and, third, an internal acceptance of oneself must be achieved.

In the psychology literature, self–forgiveness has been defined as "a willingness to abandon self–resentment in the face of one's own acknowledged objective wrong, while fostering compassion, generosity, and love toward oneself" (Enright, 1996, p. 115). Bauer et al. (1992) offer a more abstract definition, considering self–forgiveness as the shift from self–estrangement to a feeling of being at home with the self. Bauer et al. (1992) emphasize that self–forgiveness entails placing the transgression in a larger perspective and realizing that one is merely human. Self–forgiveness also can be conceptualized using a phase model, in which an individual moves through an uncovering phase (e.g., denial, guilt, shame), a decision phase (e.g., change of heart), a work phase (e.g. self–awareness, compassion), and finally an outcome phase (e.g., finding meaning, new purpose; Enright, 1996).

In the relative absence of a rapprochement between writings on interpersonal forgiveness and self–forgiveness, we build upon work on interpersonal forgiveness in offering a conceptual analysis of self–forgiveness that might both integrate writings on forgiveness and guide future research on self–forgiveness. Paralleling McCullough, Worthington, and Rachal's (1997) definition of interpersonal forgiveness as a process of replacing relationship–destructive responses with constructive behavior, we conceptualize self–forgiveness as a set of motivational changes whereby one becomes decreasingly motivated to avoid stimuli associated with the offense, decreasingly motivated to retaliate against the self (e.g., punish the self, engage in self–destructive behaviors, etc.), and increasingly motivated to act benevolently toward the self. Unlike interpersonal forgiveness, however, in self–forgiveness avoidance is directed toward the victim and/or toward thoughts, feelings, and situations associated with the transgression. This type of avoidance reduces the likelihood that painful thoughts and feelings about the offense will be activated. When self–forgiveness is achieved, such avoidance is unnecessary because the offender is at peace with his or her behavior and its consequences. Retaliation and benevolence in both self-forgiveness and interpersonal forgiveness are focused toward the offender.

The above conception of self–forgiveness is rooted in the tradition of cognitively oriented approaches to motivation initiated by expectancy–value theory, later exemplified in Weiner's attributional theory of motivation (e.g., Weiner, 1986) and currently found in goal theoretic approaches to motivation (e.g., Gollwitzer & Brandstatter, 1997).

COMPARING SELF-FORGIVENESS AND INTERPERSONAL FORGIVENESS

In addition to similarities at the definitional level, interpersonal and intrapersonal forgiveness share other features. These two forms of forgiveness are both processes that unfold over time and require an objective wrong for which the offender is not entitled to forgiveness but is granted forgiveness nonetheless. Self–forgiveness also parallels interpersonal forgiveness in that it is different from condoning or forgetting a transgression. To forgive oneself is not to say that one's behavior was acceptable or should be overlooked (Downie, 1965). In addition, as with interpersonal forgiveness, self–forgiveness is a conscious effort that does not occur unintentionally (Horsbrugh, 1974).

Despite these similarities, important distinctions can be drawn between interpersonal and intrapersonal forgiveness and these are summarized in Table 1. As mentioned previously, the two forms of forgiveness differ in the focus of forgiveness–related motivations. In addition, even though interpersonal forgiveness is unconditional, self–forgiveness need not be (Horsbrugh, 1974). One may set up conditions, such that the self is only forgiven if he or she continues to meet these conditions (e.g., "I will forgive myself as long as I continue to make reparations to the victim"). Self–forgiveness often entails a resolution to change (Enright, 1996) and to behave differently in the future. Thus, if this resolution is broken, self–destructive motivation may re–emerge and overpower self–constructive motivation.

Why is it that such conditions cannot also be applied to interpersonal forgiveness? According to Judaism, forgiveness is contingent upon the offender's *teshuvah,* or process of return, which entails specific actions on the part of the transgressor (Dorff, 1998; Rye et al., 2000). In contrast, the unconditional view of interpersonal forgiveness is consistent with Christian tradition. Philosophers argue that interpersonal forgiveness is necessarily unconditional, noting that because interpersonal forgiveness is permanent and cannot be "undone," the imposition of conditions is inappropriate (Horsbrugh, 1974). Exploration of this debate is beyond the scope of the current paper. Rather, we contend that while interpersonal forgiveness is most often viewed as unconditional, self–forgiveness can easily be conditional or impermanent.

Interpersonal forgiveness and self–forgiveness are also distinct in that interpersonal forgiveness does not imply reconciliation with the offender whereas reconciliation with the self is necessary in self–forgiveness (Enright, 1996). As Enright (1996) points out, "Certainly one may mistrust oneself in particular area, but one does not remain alienated from the self" (p. 116). Using this framework, self–forgiveness can be viewed as the vehicle through which self–reconciliation occurs. Thus, the consequences of not forgiving the self typically may be more severe than those associated with a lack of interpersonal forgiveness. In interpersonal transgressions, the negative thoughts, feelings, and behaviors toward a transgressor that can occur in the absence of forgiveness may not be activated unless the victim is in contact with the perpetrator. When one harms oneself or someone else, however, the offender must continue to face himself/herself and his/her actions. It is impossible to escape the situation by avoiding the transgressor as one might do in the case of interpersonal transgressions. This fact has led some to suggest that failure to forgive the self may result in self–estrangement or self–destruction (Horsbrugh, 1974).[1] However, to date, there has been no empirical work that compares the consequences of self–unforgiveness and interpersonal unforgiveness. As such, this remains a purely theoretical argument. Several other distinctions between intrapersonal and interpersonal forgiveness will be drawn throughout this paper.

Beyond the similarities and differences outlined between interpersonal and intrapersonal forgiveness, how are these processes related temporally? Is one a necessary precondition for the other? It has been suggested that self–forgiveness facilitates interpersonal forgiveness by allowing one to identify with one's offender (Snow, 1993). Similarly, Mills (1995) argues that interpersonal forgiveness is more authentic and meaningful when it follows self–forgiveness. If indeed we cannot forgive others unless we can forgive ourselves, then the role of self–forgiveness extends far beyond internal, self–focused processes and into the domain of interpersonal relationships. However, thus far, there is no evidence on the temporal relation between self–forgiveness and interpersonal forgiveness and there is limited evidence on the association between the two constructs, which suggests that they are unrelated or weakly related (e.g., Macaskill, Maltby, & Day, 2002; Mauger et al., 1992; Tangney, Boone, Dearing, & Reinsmith, 2002; Thompson et al., 2005).

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1. This is not meant to imply that feelings of interpersonal unforgiveness cannot be chronically activated and therefore occur in the absence of relevant external stimuli. Similarly, we do not discount the possibility that failure to forgive another can sometimes have severe consequences. Rather, our description focuses on prototypic cases.

TABLE 1. Distinctions between Intrapersonal and Interpersonal Forgiveness

	Intrapersonal or Self–forgiveness	Interpersonal Forgiveness
Form of objective wrongdoing	Behaviors, thoughts, desires, feelings	Behaviors
Focus of forgiveness	Harm to self or to another	Harm to victim
Empathy	Inhibits forgiveness	Facilitates forgiveness
Limits	Conditional or unconditional	Unconditional
Reconciliation with victim	Required	Not required
Focus of avoidance	Transgression–related stimuli (e.g., victim, situations, thoughts, etc.)	Offender
Focus of revenge	Offender (i.e., self)	Offender (i.e., other)
Focus of benevolence	Offender (i.e., self)	Offender (i.e., other)
Consequences of unforgiveness	Extreme	Moderate

FORGIVING THE INJURY TO THE SELF OR THE INJURY TO THE OTHER?

Whereas interpersonal forgiveness focuses upon harm to the victim that results from the behavior of a transgressor, there are two possible foci of self–forgiveness (Horsbrugh, 1974). One may try to forgive the self for a self–imposed injury or, alternatively, for an injury to another person. Most commonly, these two factors are interrelated, as the reality of harming another person also inflicts hurt upon the self. Given these two forms of hurt, which is the target of self–forgiveness? Horsbrugh (1974) has argued that one can forgive the self only for the hurt one has brought to another person. The self–imposed hurt is real, but it is not the target of self–forgiveness. Rarely does one say, "I am sorry that I hurt myself"—it is more common to regret the actions that led to the self–imposed hurt (e.g., "I can't believe I did X"). This position rests on the view that actions are not the proper target of forgiveness. Instead, forgiveness focuses on the hurt resulting from actions, as, without the consequential hurt, it is argued that there would be little or nothing to forgive. For example, one may be unfaithful to one's romantic partner, but the partner's forgiveness is relevant only if the infidelity violated the norms of that relationship and hurt one's partner. Under different conditions, such as an open relationship, the same actions would not require forgiveness because they would not result in hurt. This position can be challenged because of

its failure to accommodate abrogation of the moral order (failure to behave in a way that one ought to behave), which is considered to be wrong even in the absence of hurt and therefore still might be the proper target of forgiveness.

An additional problem is that the above conceptualization of self–forgiveness neglects an entire domain in which self–forgiveness may be relevant. Although transgressions in which the offender and victim are the same do not meet its criteria, these offenses are nevertheless painful. Thus, we argue that self–forgiveness also can apply to situations in which the only victim of one's behavior is the self. There are innumerable situations in which we inflict harm on ourselves ("let ourselves down") and these range from academic failures (e.g., failing a test because of lack of preparation) to social failures (e.g., failing to be appropriately assertive). Although loved ones also may be affected by these behaviors, the primary victim is oneself. How do we forgive ourselves for such actions? This domain of self–forgiveness may be especially relevant to certain clinical populations, such as substance abusers or individuals with eating disorders. These individuals may suffer from guilt and/or shame because of their inability to stop engaging in self–destructive behavior. However, it is important to recognize that injuries to the self can occur without any overt, behavioral wrongdoing. The self also can be injured by wrongful thoughts, feelings, or desires (Dillon, 2001). Dillon (2001) provides examples of behaviors that might require self–forgiveness, such as racist thoughts or fears, wishes for the death of a sick parent, or sexual excitement over violence.

Finally, we can distinguish forgiving the self for the hurt that results from a particular act from forgiving the self for the hurt that results from recognizing any character flaw underlying the act (for "being the type of person who acts like this"). It is hypothesized that linking the act to a character flaw is more likely to the extent that there is a history of similar behavior and that self–forgiveness is correspondingly harder to achieve under these conditions.

TRUE SELF–FORGIVENESS VERSUS PSEUDO SELF–FORGIVENESS

In order to truly forgive oneself, one must either explicitly or implicitly acknowledge that one's behavior was wrong and accept responsibility or blame for such behavior (Dillon, 2001; Holmgren, 1998). Without these elements, self–forgiveness is irrelevant and pseudo self–forgiveness becomes likely. Pseudo self–forgiveness occurs when an offender fails to acknowledge wrongdoing and accept responsibility. In such a situation, one may indicate that one has forgiven oneself when, in fact, one does not believe one did anything wrong. The realization of wrongdoing and ac-

ceptance of responsibility generally initiate feelings of guilt and regret, which must be fully experienced before one can move toward self–forgiveness. Attempts to forgive oneself without cognitively and emotionally processing the transgression and its consequences are likely to lead to denial, suppression, or pseudo self-forgiveness. Thus, our definition of self–forgiveness as motivational change rests on the assumption that the offender both acknowledges wrongdoing and accepts responsibility. Without this assumption, there can be no motivational change, as the offender already is motivated to act benevolently toward the self. However, this distinction rarely is made in the empirical literature. Self–forgiveness often is studied using a narrative method in which individuals recall situations whereby they forgave themselves or did not forgive themselves. However, it is unclear whether this method measures true forgiveness or pseudo–forgiveness. It is not made explicit that forgiving individuals also accept responsibility and wrongdoing and that they fully realize the consequences of their actions. This problem is exacerbated when self–forgiveness is assessed using rating scales as responses to items in such scales appear not to distinguish genuine forgiveness from pseudo–forgiveness (e.g., "I hold grudges against myself for negative things I've done," Thompson et al., 2005; "I find it hard to forgive myself for some things I have done," Mauger et al., 1992). Perhaps not surprisingly, there is some evidence that self–forgiveness is positively related to narcissism and self–centeredness and negatively related to moral emotions such as guilt and shame (e.g., Tangney et al., 2002).

Forgiveness requires a great deal of inner strength, and thus pseudo–forgiveness may be an appealing alternative that (on the surface) has the same benefits as true self–forgiveness. The offender is absolved of guilt and is able to feel and act benevolently toward the self. However, while pseudo–forgiveness and true forgiveness may appear to have the same results, they are drastically different. True self–forgiveness is often a long and arduous process that requires much self–examination and may be very uncomfortable. In contrast, pseudo self–forgiveness may be achieved by self–deception and/or rationalization, in which the offender fails to "own up" to his/her behavior and its consequences (Holmgren, 2002). Given these differences, are the end results of true forgiveness and pseudo–forgiveness really indistinguishable? There is little data to answer this question, but it is doubtful that pseudo–forgiveness yields the same emotional, psychological, and physical benefits as true self–forgiveness.

IS SELF–FORGIVENESS ALWAYS APPROPRIATE?

What of situations in which an individual perceives he/she is responsible and feels guilty about an event but is not actually at fault? This is of-

ten the case with traumatic events, such as the suicide of a loved one. Survivors may blame themselves and feel guilty when they are not responsible for the event. Is self–forgiveness pertinent in these situations? The answer arguably is yes, but only under certain conditions. If a person is adamant in the belief that he or she is responsible for an event, self–forgiveness would only be appropriate provided bona fide attempts first had been made to examine the evidence, to identify the person's wrongful behavior, and to determine accurately the degree of responsibility the individual should accept for the event. In some cases (e.g., being the victim of a rape), the person may mislabel a normal behavior as wrongful (e.g., "I should not have worn that dress") or accept responsibility even in the absence of any wrongful behavior (e.g., "I should not have walked home"). In the absence of wrongful behavior there is nothing to forgive.

There are two other common concerns that must be addressed when considering the appropriateness of self–forgiveness. The first is whether self–forgiveness is justified when an individual has committed a truly heinous offense, such as rape or murder. This is a controversial topic. Scholars have debated whether victims of such transgressions should forgive their attackers (e.g., Murphy, 2002), and this debate extends to self–forgiveness. The issue at the core of this controversy actually may be the distinction between pseudo self–forgiveness and true self–forgiveness. Few things are more offensive than observing a criminal who seemingly has no remorse for his/her actions. However, it is unlikely that this individual has achieved true self–forgiveness. It is far more likely that he/she is engaging in pseudo–forgiveness. It is probably rare that criminals are able to reach true self–forgiveness, as the processes involved may be too painful and difficult. But for an offender who admits to behaving in an unspeakable manner and who is genuinely pained by his/her behavior and its consequences, self–forgiveness is less controversial. Holmgren (2002) takes a similar stance, arguing that *genuine* self–forgiveness is always appropriate. This is admittedly a sensitive issue, and there is no easy answer.

A second frequent concern related to self–forgiveness is that it is a sign of disrespect toward the victim, and thus is only appropriate after the offender is granted forgiveness by the victim. However, self–forgiveness is only disrespectful to the victim when it takes the form of pseudo–forgiveness, in which case the offender does not appreciate the gravity of his or her actions and their consequences. When an offender acknowledges and accepts responsibility for wrongdoing and is willing to apologize or make restitution to the victim, self–forgiveness is not a sign of disrespect (Holmgren, 1998). Thus, receiving forgiveness from the victim is not required for self–forgiveness to be appropriate.

DISPOSITIONAL OR OFFENSE–SPECIFIC?

Self–forgiveness need not apply only to specific transgressions through which one has harmed oneself or another person, it also can be considered across time and a range of transgressions, as a personality trait. Trait self–forgiveness is positively associated with self–esteem and life satisfaction and negatively associated with neuroticism, depression, anxiety, and hostility (Coates, 1997; Maltby, Macaskill, & Day, 2001; Mauger et al., 1992). It is weakly related, and in some studies unrelated, to forgiveness of others (Macaskill et al., 2002; Tangney et al., 2002; Thompson et al., 2003). Although self–forgiveness across time and transgressions is an important dispositional construct, it is also critical to examine how self–forgiveness may vary from offense to offense and to consider the emotional, social–cognitive, and offense–related factors that may facilitate self–forgiveness following a specific transgression.

TOWARD A MODEL OF SELF–FORGIVENESS

Having drawn several relevant conceptual distinctions, we are now in a position to offer an initial model of self–forgiveness. In turning to this task, we immediately face a choice, as the processes involved in self–forgiveness are likely to differ according to whether the focus is upon interpersonal or intrapersonal transgressions. We doubt that self-forgiveness related to both types of transgressions can be captured adequately in a single model and therefore focus our efforts on only one, self–forgiveness of interpersonal transgressions. We posit that the motivational changes that define self–forgiveness are driven by cognitive, affective, and behavioral processes, which are laid out in our model. These processes are the means to an end; namely, motivational change that constitutes self–forgiveness. Figure 1 depicts our model of self–forgiveness. We first describe the components of the model before outlining its implications for future research.

EMOTIONAL DETERMINANTS OF SELF–FORGIVENESS

Guilt. Given the long history of the concept of guilt in the psychological literature, it is surprising that the relation between guilt and self–forgiveness has received relatively little attention (for an exception, see Tangney et al., 2002). Guilt can be assessed as a trait or a state, and it involves tension, remorse, and regret resulting from one's actions (Tangney, 1995a). Guilt is "other–oriented" in that it focuses on one's effect on others. Guilt fosters other–oriented empathic concern and motivates the offender to exhibit conciliatory behavior toward the victim,
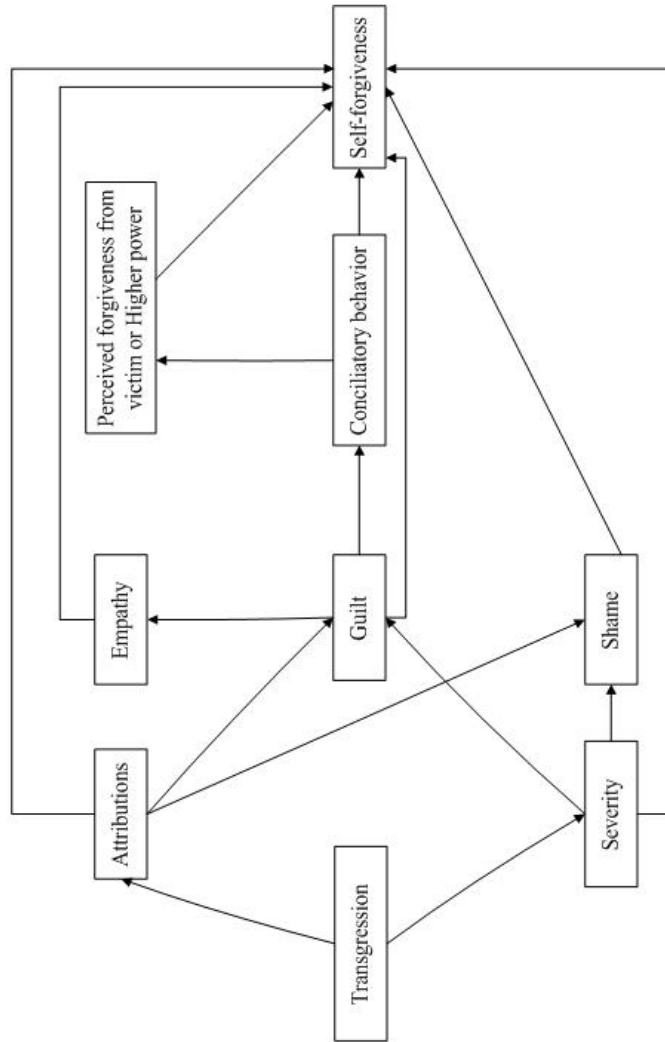
FIGURE 1. Proposed model of self-forgiveness.

such as apologizing, making restitution, or seeking forgiveness (Ausubel, 1955; Tangney, 1995b). However, while there likely is a positive association between conciliatory behaviors and self–forgiveness, the other–oriented empathy fostered by guilt actually may inhibit self–forgiveness. Zechmeister and Romero (2002) found that, compared to individuals who had not forgiven themselves for an offense, those who had reached self–forgiveness were less likely to report guilt and other–focused empathy. Thus, while there appears to be a negative association between guilt and self–forgiveness, this association likely is mediated by conciliatory behavior and empathic processes.

Shame. Unlike guilt, which involves a focus on one's behavior, shame is associated with a focus on the self (Lewis, 1971; Tangney, 1995a). Lewis's (1971) observations are useful for illustrating this distinction:

> "The experience of shame is directly about the *self*, which is the focus of evaluation. In guilt, the self is not the central object of negative evaluation, but rather the *thing* done or undone is the focus. In guilt, the self is negatively evaluated in connection with something but is not itself the focus of the experience." (p. 30)

As with guilt, there likely is a negative association between shame and self–forgiveness. However, whereas guilt may promote conciliatory behavior toward one's victim, shame is more likely to promote the self–destructive intentions associated with failure to forgive the self because the offender may view the offense as a reflection of his or her self–worth. Shame often motivates an avoidance response that is consistent with a lack of self–forgiveness (Tangney, 1995a). Thus, the negative association between shame and self–forgiveness is expected to be stronger than the relation between guilt and self–forgiveness.

SOCIAL–COGNITIVE DETERMINANTS OF SELF–FORGIVENESS

Attributions. Research on interpersonal forgiveness has shown that benign attributions for an offender's behavior are associated with more forgiveness, while maladaptive attributions are associated with less forgiveness (Boon & Sulsky, 1997; Bradfield & Aquino, 1999; Darby & Schlenker, 1982; Fincham, Paleari, & Regalia, 2002; Weiner, Graham, Peter, & Zmuidinas, 1991). This link between attributions and interpersonal forgiveness may generalize to self–forgiveness. Zechmeister and Romero (2002) found that offenders who had not forgiven themselves were more likely to maladaptively attribute their behavior to arbitrary or senseless motives than self–forgiving offenders. Also, self–forgiving individuals were more likely to adaptively attribute some of the blame

to the victim. Given the tendency to attribute one's own behavior to ex-ternal forces and attribute other's behavior to internal forces (i.e., the ac-tor–observer effect; Jones & Nisbett, 1972), this process actually may en-hance self–forgiveness. Thus, as with interpersonal forgiveness, external, unstable, and specific attributions for one's own behavior may facilitate self–forgiveness, while internal, stable, and global attributions may make self–forgiveness more difficult. Weiner (1986, 1995) argues that causal attributions give rise to emotional reactions (e.g., guilt), which then influence the offender's behavior. For example, an offender who maladaptively attributes his/her own behavior may feel excessive guilt and be more likely to then seek forgiveness.

OFFENSE–RELATED DETERMINANTS OF SELF–FORGIVENESS

Conciliatory Behavior. The extent to which an offender apologizes and seeks forgiveness for a transgression is positively associated with the victim's level of interpersonal forgiveness (e.g., Darby & Schenkler, 1982; McCullough et al., 1997; McCullough et al., 1998; Weiner et al., 1991). Seeking forgiveness from the victim of a transgression or from a Higher power also may play an important role in the offender's self–for-giveness. Offenders may be indirectly motivated to seek forgiveness by their attributions for their own behavior or the severity of the offense (Sandage, Worthington, Hight, & Berry, 2000) or directly motivated by guilt (Ausubel, 1955; Tangney, 1995b). Apologies and other conciliatory behaviors toward the victim may serve the function of easing the of-fender's guilt about the transgression. Goffman (1971) posits:

> "An apology (and hence also a confession) is a gesture through which the individual splits himself into two parts, the part that is guilty of an offense and the part that dissociates itself from the deceit and affirms a belief in the offended rule" (as cited in Gold & Weiner, 2000, p. 292).

This idea is empirically supported by Zechmeister and Romero (2002), who found that self–forgiving offenders were more likely to report apol-ogizing and making amends to the victim than were offenders who did not forgive themselves. Similarly, Witvliet, Ludwig, and Bauer (2002) showed that when offenders imagined seeking forgiveness from some-one they had wronged, their perceptions of self–forgiveness increased and their basic and moral emotions improved. Thus, conciliatory behav-iors toward one's victim may promote self–forgiveness by absolving an offender of his or her guilt.

Perceived Forgiveness from Victim or Higher Power. A related factor that may influence self–forgiveness is the extent to which an offender be-

lieves he/she is forgiven by the victim or by a Higher power. Witvliet et al. (2002) found that imagining a victim's merciful response to one's for-giveness–seeking efforts resulted in physiological responses consistent with increases in positive emotion and decreases in negative emotion. Further, imagining seeking forgiveness and merciful responses from victims resulted in greater perceived interpersonal forgiveness among offenders. Thus, actual apologies and conciliatory behavior toward a victim also may increase a transgressor's sense of being forgiven by the victim, thereby reducing guilt. However, Zechmeister and Romero (2002) compared self–forgiving offenders with offenders who were not able to forgive themselves and found no difference in reports of being forgiven by the victims. In light of these contradictory findings, the rela-tion between forgiveness by the victim and the offender's self–forgive-ness requires further clarification. It is also important to consider the role of forgiveness from a Higher power. There is preliminary evidence to suggest that perceived forgiveness from God is positively associated with self–forgiveness. Cafaro and Exline (2003) asked individuals to fo-cus on an incident in which they had offended God and found that self–forgiveness was positively correlated with believing that God had forgiven the self for the transgression. Thus, we predict that perceived forgiveness from both the victim and a Higher power will be positively associated with self–forgiveness.

Severity of the Offense. The association between a transgression's se-verity and interpersonal forgiveness is among the most robust relations in the forgiveness literature. More severe (hurtful) transgressions are as-sociated with less forgiveness (Boon & Sulsky, 1997; Darby & Schenkler, 1982; Girard & Mullet, 1997). The severity of an offense, in terms of its consequences, also may predict an offender's degree of self–forgiveness. Although self–forgiveness requires an acknowledged wrongdoing that negatively affects another person, it is possible that an offender also may realize some positive consequences of the transgression. For example, the offender may feel that he or she has grown from the event or that his or her post–offense relationship with the victim is stronger. Offenders who have forgiven themselves report more positive consequences and fewer lasting negative consequences of the transgression than do of-fenders who have not forgiven themselves (Zechmeister & Romero, 2002). Thus, it is predicted that more severe transgressions will be associated with lower levels of self–forgiveness.

LIMITATIONS OF THE MODEL

It is important to note that this model is not intended to be a comprehen-sive model of self–forgiveness. There are undoubtedly other factors that

may facilitate self–forgiveness, such as relationship-level factors (e.g., was the victim a loved one or a stranger?) and personality-level factors (e.g., neuroticism). However, in light of research on interpersonal forgiveness (McCullough et al., 1998), it is expected that these variables are more distally related to self–forgiveness than the determinants discussed here. The proposed model also is limited in that there is as yet no evidence that supports causal relationships among these variables.

IMPLICATIONS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

Notwithstanding the limitations noted, the model outlined has several implications for future research. Chief among these is that it has the potential to inform self–forgiveness interventions, which have proliferated in the popular literature (e.g., Rutledge, 1997). To date, however, there are no empirically validated interventions designed specifically to facilitate self–forgiveness, although several have been effective in promoting interpersonal forgiveness (see Worthington, Sandage, & Berry, 2000). This is a much needed area of development in the forgiveness literature, as being unable to forgive oneself is associated with lower self–esteem and life satisfaction and higher neuroticism, depression, anxiety, and hostility (Coates, 1997; Maltby et al., 2001; Mauger et al., 1992). Given the deleterious effects of self–unforgiveness, why have no interventions been developed to target these processes? This gap in the forgiveness literature is most likely due to the fact that very little is known about factors that may influence self–forgiveness. Thus, the proposed model has the potential to aid in the development of self–forgiveness interventions, as targeting factors such as attributions and guilt or increasing conciliatory behavior toward the victim may increase self–forgiveness.

However, in order to conduct such an intervention and evaluate its effects, one must have a reliable method of measuring self–forgiveness. Although there are a few instruments to assess dispositional self–forgiveness (Mauger et al., 1992; Thompson et al., 2003), there are no published measures for self–forgiveness for a specific transgression (see Wahkinney, 2002, for an unpublished measure). Thus, the definition and model of self–forgiveness proposed here provide a foundation for the development of a measure of offense–specific self–forgiveness. Such a measure would be not only important in assessing the effects of forgiveness interventions but also critical to the future of self–forgiveness research. As mentioned, much of the literature on self–forgiveness assesses the construct dichotomously (forgave versus didn't forgive), which is incompatible with the view of self–forgiveness as a process with many levels. A measure of self–forgiveness that assesses the extent

of constructive and destructive motivations will enable researchers to differentiate complete lack of self–forgiveness from partial self–forgiveness or total self–forgiveness. Such a measure also will aid in assessing self–forgiveness from many different perspectives, initially through cross–sectional and/or retrospective research and ultimately in experimental or longitudinal studies. The current paper is offered as a framework from which such a measure could be developed.

Although this paper is intended to stimulate interest and research on self–forgiveness, it is critical that this research be founded on a solid theoretical base and that this foundation be established before a literature on self–forgiveness begins to take shape. Thus, the most pressing issue for future self–forgiveness research is the empirical validation of a theoretical model such as the one proposed here. It will be essential to evaluate how well this model fits actual data regarding the self–forgiveness of interpersonal transgressions. It also will be important to determine whether specific determinants are associated with constructive (i.e. benevolence) and/or destructive (i.e., avoidance, retaliation) aspects of self–forgiveness. Once such a model is established, more specific hypotheses about the nature and course of self–forgiveness can be explored.

CONCLUSION

Self–forgiveness has been overshadowed by research on interpersonal forgiveness and, as a consequence, has received little attention in the forgiveness literature. We believe that this dearth of research is the result of oversight and limited understanding of self–forgiveness and that it does not reflect the unimportance of self–forgiveness or a lack of interest in the topic. The present paper is intended to stimulate research on the topic by offering a much needed theoretical model of self–forgiveness of interpersonal transgressions. The value of the model lies not only in the extent to which it receives empirical support but also in its ability to facilitate research on self–forgiveness.

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