

# Chapter Ten

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## Forgiving the Self: Conceptual Issues and Empirical Findings

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**M**ost theory and research on forgiveness focuses on people's capacity or willingness to forgive others. Forgiveness, however, is a complex process that involves both interpersonal and intrapersonal dimensions. Based on extensive clinical experience, Enright and the Human Development Study Group (1996) proposed a "forgiveness triad" to capture the multiple layers of forgiveness in human experience. In addition to the capacity to forgive others, Enright et al. (1996) also called attention to the importance of receiving forgiveness and forgiving the self.

### CONCEPTUALIZING SELF-FORGIVENESS

Much of our previous research has focused on shame and guilt, so it is perhaps not surprising that we would take a special interest in the concept of self-forgiveness. Shame and guilt are two painful "self-conscious" emotions that people experience when they have failed or transgressed—that is, when they are in the perpetrator, not the victim role. The human capacity for these "moral emotions" is both a blessing and a curse. Feelings of shame and guilt serve as a moral barometer, alerting us when we have violated important personal, societal, and moral standards. These feelings and the *anticipation* of these feelings often inhibit us from yielding to temptation. They can also motivate us in constructive directions that are healthy for both the self and others.

However, there are costs. Clinicians and clergy see the worst of it—people wrestling with debilitating, chronic feelings of shame and guilt that interfere with the quality of life and important relationships. For example, in mental health settings, clinicians often encounter clients who appear debilitated by unresolved feelings of

shame, guilt, and remorse—distressing feelings that are very often out of proportion to the severity of transgression. It has been suggested that in such cases, successful treatment involves helping the client process his or her deep feelings of guilt and remorse, then to resolve those feelings constructively by, for example, reparation and self-forgiveness. Thus, there may be an intimate link between self-forgiveness and the resolution of feelings of shame and guilt.

To date, theory and research on moral emotions and self-forgiveness have proceeded largely independent from one another. Most psychologists have discussed the nature of self-forgiveness within the context of interpersonal forgiveness theory, drawing clear parallels between forgiveness of the self and forgiveness of others. Enright (1996) defined *self-forgiveness* 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” (p. 115). Hall and Fincham (in press) defined *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 towards the self” (p. 4). DeShea and Wahkinney (2003) defined *self-forgiveness* as “a process of releasing resentment toward oneself for a perceived transgression or wrongdoing.”

In a recent integrative review, Hall and Fincham (in press) further delineated the parallels between forgiveness of the self and forgiveness of others. Both are processes that unfold over time. Both involve an objective wrong. In both cases, forgiveness is freely given (i.e., self-forgiveness is not a requirement or entitlement). Both self-forgiveness and forgiveness of others are distinct from condoning, excusing, or forgetting a transgression.

Nonetheless, the two types of forgiveness differ in some important respects (Hall & Fincham, in press). First, Hall and Fincham observe that whereas forgiveness of others is by definition unconditional (true interpersonal forgiveness does not hinge on the perpetrator’s future behavior), self-forgiveness may be granted *on the condition that* one makes reparation or *on the condition that* one changes one’s behavior in the future. Second, interpersonal forgiveness does not require reconciliation with the perpetrator. Forgiveness is an intrapersonal process that may or may not be accompanied by reconciliation at the interpersonal level. In contrast, reconciliation with the self is a necessary component of self-forgiveness. Third, Hall and Fincham speculate that the consequences of not forgiving the self may be more severe than the consequences of not forgiving another. One can avoid an unforgiven perpetrator, but one cannot escape an unforgiven self.

Finally, in discussing the nature of self-forgiveness, psychologists emphasize the importance of distinguishing between “true” self-forgiveness and “pseudo,” or false self-forgiveness (Baumeister, Exline, & Sommer, 1998; Hall & Fincham, in press). A requirement for true self-forgiveness is that the offender acknowledge the wrongdoing and accept responsibility. In pseudo-self-forgiveness, the offender essentially lets himself or herself off the hook—the offense and its consequences are brushed off, minimized, excused, and/or blamed on others. Hall and Fincham (in press) further

add the explicit requirement that significant angst be experienced as a result of the acceptance of responsibility. “The realization of wrongdoing and acceptance of responsibility generally initiate feelings of guilt and regret, which must be fully experienced before one can move towards 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-forgiveness. . . . True self-forgiveness is often a long and arduous process that requires much self-examination and may be very uncomfortable” (p. 10). In short, nontrivial pangs of conscience (some combination of shame, guilt, regret, and perhaps embarrassment) are necessary for true self-forgiveness to occur. Pseudo self-forgiveness may appear to result in a similar end state (being at peace with oneself), but it is essentially gained by a moral, cognitive, and affective shortcut—bypassing acceptance of responsibility, acknowledgement of harmful consequences, and negative self-conscious emotions. What is not clear in this nascent literature is how much self-conscious anguish needs to be experienced in order to have adequately processed and achieved self-forgiveness, the real thing.

Owing to the nature of their work, clinicians see the most extreme cases of problems with self-forgiveness. However, ordinary people in the course of daily life routinely stumble and fail. Almost everyone (with perhaps the exception of psychopathic individuals) at times faces the dilemma of an estranged, denounced self and the need to move toward self-forgiveness. In our research, we have been interested in the psychological and social implications of self-forgiveness in the normal range—that is, for people in general, not in a clinical population. A key question addressed by our research concerns the links between self-forgiveness and the capacity for moral emotions. A second, more general question is whether the capacity to forgive the self is a psychological strength, much as the capacity to forgive others is a psychological strength and virtue. Is self-forgiveness an element one might want to include in character education curricula? Is it a capacity parents might want to encourage in their children?

## ASSESSING SELF-FORGIVENESS

Very little research has examined the psychological and social correlates of self-forgiveness, in part because of the heavy emphasis in the literature on forgiveness of *others* and in part because there simply aren't many measures available to assess this construct. Mauger et al. (1992) blazed the trail with the development of their dispositional Forgiveness of Self scale. Mauger et al.'s measure, however, includes items that clearly fall outside the construct of self-forgiveness (e.g., “I often get into trouble for not being careful to follow the rules”). More recently, Wahkinney (2001; see also DeShea & Wahkinney, 2003) developed a situation-specific measure of self-forgiveness, much along the lines of Enright's Forgiveness Inventory. Here the focus of assessment is not on people's general capacity to forgive the self across time and situations but rather on a person's level of self-forgiveness with respect to a particular offense, whether or not they are more generally inclined or able to forgive the self.

Our interest is in trait self-forgiveness—people's general propensity to forgive (or not forgive) the self for failures and transgressions that cause harm to others, to the self (see Hall & Fincham, in press), or both. To assess individual differences in the propensity to forgive the self across situations, we developed the Multidimensional Forgiveness Inventory (MFI; Tangney, Boone, Fee, & Reinsmith, 1999), which assesses (a) a propensity to forgive others (FO), (b) a propensity to ask for forgiveness *from* others (AF), and (c) a propensity for self-forgiveness (FS). The structure of the MFI is similar to our scenario-based Test of Self Conscious Affect (TOSCA; Tangney, Wagner, & Gramzow, 1989) assessing proneness to shame and guilt, and our Anger Response Inventories (ARIs; Tangney, Wagner, Marschall, & Gramzow, 1991) assessing characteristic ways of responding to and managing anger. Respondents are presented with a series of common, everyday situations involving transgressions (some with the respondent as victim and others with the respondent as perpetrator). Each victim situation is followed by questions assessing likelihood of forgiving the perpetrator (FO) and an estimate of how long it would take to forgive. We also include items assessing how hurt and angry the respondent-victim would be. These are intended to engage respondents while providing an index of the likely impact of each event on the respondent. Each perpetrator situation is followed by questions assessing the respondent's likelihood of seeking or asking for forgiveness (AF), his or her propensity to forgive the self (FS), as well as the likelihood of externalizing blame and blaming the self.

Results from two studies, one with multiple respondents (index participants plus parents and friends of index participants), indicate that the MFI reliably assesses three distinct dimensions of forgiveness. Both internal consistency estimates and test-retest correlations over a 1- to 3-week period provide strong support for the MFI. For example, internal consistency of the MFI self-forgiveness scale across five samples ranged from .76 to .86. Test-retest reliability over a 1- to 3-week period was .70. Moreover, the scenario-based format of the MFI appears to have circumvented social desirability biases. The average correlation of measures of social desirability with Forgiveness of Others and Self-Forgiveness scales were .15 and  $-.17$ , respectively (Tangney & Boone, 2004).

## SELF-FORGIVENESS: EMPIRICAL FINDINGS

We examined the psychological and social correlates of self-forgiveness in two independent studies using the MFI. Participants in Study 1 were 285 undergraduate students attending a large state university. Participants in Study 2 were 268 undergraduate students (index participants), 264 friends of the participants (also largely undergraduates), and 85 mothers and 68 fathers of the index participants.

## Self-Forgiveness and the Moral Emotions

Of particular interest is the relationship of self-forgiveness to individual differences in proneness to shame and proneness to guilt. The terms *shame* and *guilt* are often used interchangeably, but a large body of research now indicates that these are distinct emotions with very different implications for subsequent moral and interpersonal behavior (Lewis, 1971; Lindsay-Hartz, de Rivera, & Mascolo, 1995; Tangney, 1990b, 1992, Tangney & Dearing, 2002).

To summarize briefly, feelings of shame involve a painful focus on the self—the humiliating sense that “I am a bad person.” Such shameful humiliation is typically accompanied by a sense of shrinking, of being small, and feelings of worthlessness and powerlessness. Ironically, research has shown that such painful and debilitating feelings of shame do not motivate constructive changes in behavior. Instead, people in the midst of a shame experience often resort to defensive tactics, seeking to hide or escape the shameful feeling, denying responsibility, and even shifting the blame outside, holding others responsible for their dilemma. In contrast, guilt involves a focus on a specific behavior—the sense that “I did a bad thing” rather than “I am a bad person.” Feelings of guilt involve a sense of tension, remorse, and regret over the bad thing done, which typically motivates reparative action (confessing, apologizing, or somehow repairing the damage done).

Enright and colleagues (1996) suggested that “true self-forgiveness . . . originates from a position of guilt, remorse, and shame” (p. 117). Recent research, making a distinction between shame and guilt, however, suggests that these moral emotions should have very different implications for self-forgiveness. People who are prone to feelings of guilt (about a specific behavior) may indeed be well placed to seek and receive forgiveness from others and to forgive themselves—in part because a bad behavior is much easier to change than a bad self. However, people prone to feelings of shame (about the entire self) are very likely to have difficulties in these areas. In shame, the task of self-forgiveness is much more daunting. It is the self at issue. On the other hand, it has been observed that shamed individuals are no less likely to repeat their transgressions and often are more so, and they are no more likely to attempt reparation and often are less so (Tangney & Dearing, 2002). Rather, because shame is so intolerable, the shamed individual is inclined to respond defensively—even aggressively (Tangney, 1990a; Tangney & Dearing, 2002; Tangney, Wagner, Barlow, Marschall, & Gramzow, 1996; Tangney, Wagner & Gramzow, 1992). Shame has been associated with a tendency to deny responsibility and externalize blame, holding others responsible for failures and transgressions. Not infrequently, shamed individuals become irrationally angry with others. They sometimes resort to overtly aggressive and destructive actions. Thus, the propensity to experience shame may be associated with difficulties in forgiving the self. However one also can imagine an inclination toward something akin to pseudo-forgiveness, given shame-prone individuals’ propensity to defensively deny, rationalize, and externalize blame.

Results from two independent studies, one with multiple respondent groups, indicate that people who readily forgive themselves are somewhat less prone to both shame and guilt, relative to their peers. The findings did not consistently replicate across the various subsamples of respondents in Study 2. In some cases, the correlations were substantial, negative, and statistically significant; in other cases, the relationship was negligible. But in no case was there a significant positive correlation between self-forgiveness and the propensity to experience the moral emotions of shame or guilt.

Empathy is also relevant in situations where one harms others (as opposed to being the harmed victim). On one hand, empathic resonance with the distress of a harmed victim might intensify feelings of shame and guilt, making such feelings more difficult to resolve. On the other hand, it has been suggested that the capacity for other-oriented empathy might enhance the capacity for self-forgiveness because a shamed or guilty offender may be able to direct some of that empathy and understanding to the self, thereby facilitating self-forgiveness.

As it turns out, in both studies, other-oriented perspective taking was negligibly related to the propensity to forgive the self. Self-forgiveness, however, was inversely correlated with both empathic concern *and* personal distress scales from Davis's (1983) Interpersonal Reactivity Index. Individuals who are inclined to forgive themselves seem relatively immune to the distress of others.

Taken together, the profile of moral emotional dispositions associated with the MFI self-forgiveness scale raise the possibility that this measure taps pseudo-self-forgiveness, not necessarily the true self-forgiveness that involves a complex sequence of cognitive and affective events—acknowledgement of wrongdoing, acceptance of responsibility, recognition of negative consequences, attendant experiences of other-oriented empathic concern, consequent experiences of guilt and/or shame, and an ultimate reconciliation with and forgiveness of a truly regretful self.

## Other Characteristics of the Self-Forgiving Individual

**Characteristics of the Self.** Self-forgiveness necessarily involves forgiving misdeeds, failures, or transgressions—in a word, shortcomings in oneself or one's behavior. Thus, our readiness to forgive may hinge on the degree to which we hold ourselves to unrealistically high standards of perfection. One can imagine the difficulties with self-forgiveness faced by a relatively perfectionistic person. Similarly, "socially oriented" perfectionism (the perception that important others expect perfection, as described by Hewitt & Flett, 1993), fear of shame and/or negative evaluation, global self-esteem, and other self-evaluative personality dimensions should be relevant to one's propensity to forgive the self.

Our results indicate that people who are inclined to forgive themselves are less troubled by the self-evaluative concerns that color most people's lives. Self-forgiveness was negatively correlated with fear of negative evaluation, fear of shame, and

socially prescribed perfectionism. In addition, both level and stability of self-esteem were positively related to self-forgiveness in Study 1. Narcissism had even more substantial implications for forgiveness of self. Self-forgiveness was positively associated with narcissism across both studies. Narcissistic individuals may be slow to forgive others, but when they themselves transgress, they quickly forgive themselves and move on.

**When the Shoe Is on the Other Foot.** We also examined the feelings, attitudes, and behaviors of self-forgiving individuals when the shoe is on the other foot—when they are the victims of someone else’s transgression. In response to the MFI victim scenarios, the propensity to forgive others was positively correlated with self-forgiveness. However, a different pattern of results was observed when considering the ARI, which assesses people’s characteristic responses when angered by others. Results indicate that people who easily forgive the self tend to be harsher in response to others’ transgressions. For example, self-forgiveness was positively correlated (statistically significant in at least one study, with an analogous trend in the other) with direct physical and verbal aggression, indirect harm, and displaced physical aggression. Self-forgiveness was negatively correlated with self-aggression, the two adaptive anger management scales (rational discussion and corrective action), and most consistently with cognitive reappraisals of both the self and target roles. In short, people who forgive themselves easily when they harm others are the very same people who are least open-minded when they are the victims of others’ misdeeds. Self-forgiveness in perpetrator scenarios was negatively correlated with the propensity to rethink one’s own role or a partner’s role in anger scenarios (where the respondent is presumably the victim).

**Quality of Relationships.** The propensity to forgive the self was relatively independent of a variety of relationship-relevant dimensions, including attachment style and loneliness. There was some indication that people prone to jealousy are less inclined to self-forgive, compared with their less jealous peers. Considering respondents’ reports of their actual romantic relationships, no significant correlations were observed beyond what one would expect by chance. Thus, it remains to be seen whether our observed positive link between number of sex partners and self-forgiveness replicates in future studies.

**Big Five.** We also examined the relationship of self-forgiveness to the Big Five personality characteristics (openness, extraversion, conscientiousness, agreeableness, and neuroticism) and to a measure of self-control. The propensity to forgive the self was largely independent of personality factors, apart from a negative correlation with agreeableness (see chapter 11 by Mullet, Neto, and Rivière for a review of research on personality factors and forgiveness of self). In addition, self-forgiveness was negatively correlated with the Brief Self-Control Scale (Tangney, Baumeister, & Boone, 2004).

**Psychological Adjustment.** What are the implications of self-forgiveness for our psychological adjustment and well-being? Here, an intriguing pattern of results was

observed. Across two independent studies, self-forgiveness was positively related to an antisocial personality pattern. Further, in at least one of the two samples, self-forgiveness was associated with drug and alcohol dependence; manic bipolar symptoms; and histrionic, narcissistic, and aggressive personality patterns. It is worth noting that people who readily forgive themselves are not generally more vulnerable to psychological symptoms. In fact, self-forgiveness was associated with a general sense of psychological well-being and an absence of psychological symptoms in such key areas as depression and thought problems.<sup>1</sup>

**Religion and Gender.** To what degree does religion play a role in people's willingness to forgive the self? In our studies, we focused on Buddhist, Muslim, Protestant, and Catholic groups—groups that were sufficiently represented in the samples. We conducted analyses of variance across five subsamples—participants in Study 1 and the index participants, friends, mothers, and fathers in Study 2. In general, forgiveness dimensions varied surprisingly little as a function of religious affiliation. In Study 1, people's propensity to forgive the self varied significantly across religious groups. Post-hoc Newman-Keuls tests indicated that, on average, Protestants reported being more self-forgiving than Muslim and Buddhist respondents. However, no significant differences were observed among the multiple groups of informants in Study 2.

If self-forgiveness does not vary substantially as a function of religious doctrine, does the *quality* of one's religious involvement relate to forgiveness? Our results indicate that self-forgiveness is unrelated to respondents' degree of religious involvement and their religious orientation (i.e., intrinsic vs. extrinsic reasons for being religiously involved).

Similarly, there were few gender differences in self-forgiveness across the subsamples. In Study 2, male index participants reported a higher propensity to forgive the self than did female index participants, but this gender difference did not replicate in the other Study 2 subsamples or in Study 1.

## Psychological Portrait of the Self-Forgiving Individual

People with a dispositional tendency to forgive themselves appear to be rather self-centered, insensitive, narcissistic individuals, who come up short in the moral emotional domain, showing lower levels of shame, guilt, and empathic responsiveness. Relatively "shameless," they feel little remorse for their transgressions, little empathy for their victims, and little concern about what others think of them. Although quick to forgive themselves, when angered, they're harsh in response to others' transgressions. For example, when provoked to anger, they are inclined to become aggressive, have difficulty seeing things from the other person's point of view, and disinclined to take constructive action.

These characteristics of self-forgiving individuals may cause distress to those around them, but self-forgivers are themselves unfazed. Regarding individual adjustment, the



propensity to forgive the self was positively correlated with self-reports of psychological well-being and negatively correlated with internal psychological distress. The only clinical problems associated with self-forgiveness were those related to a lack of self-control (e.g., drug and alcohol abuse, chronic antisocial behavior). In short, self-forgivers may act bad, but they don't feel bad.

## RECONCEPTUALIZING SELF-FORGIVENESS AND ITS MEASUREMENT

Given these results, it is clear that the MFI self-forgiveness scale does not necessarily capture a person's propensity to experience genuine feelings of remorse *and then* to resolve those feelings constructively. Rather, it appears that the self-forgiveness scale reflects a propensity to let oneself easily off the hook. Self-forgivers may easily forgive the self precisely because they fail to feel a sense of responsibility, remorse, and regret for their transgressions at the outset. In examining the intercorrelations of the MFI subscales, we found a strong negative correlation between forgiving the self and blaming the self. Thus, self-forgivers were inclined not to take responsibility for harming others in the first place.

The available research on the few alternative measures of self-forgiveness suggests that the MFI is not alone in capturing a substantial proportion of variance attributable to pseudo-forgiveness (for a review, see chapter 11 by Mullet, Neto, and Rivière). For example, using Mauger's measure, researchers have found a negative relationship between self-forgiveness and measures of neuroticism, anxiety, and depression (Leach & Lark, 2003; Maltby, Macaskill, & Day, 2001; Mauger et al., 1992; Seybold, Hill, Neuman, & Chi, 2001). Correlations between self-forgiveness and emotional empathy were nonsignificant but in a negative direction (Macaskill, Maltby, & Day, 2002). Similarly, Walker and Gorsuch (2002) replicated the inverse relationship between self-forgiveness and both neuroticism and anxiety using an alternative measure of self-forgiveness.

Similar results have been found when examining self-forgiveness with respect to specific events. For example, Zechmeister and Romero (2002) found that people who reported having forgiven the self for a specific event expressed high levels of regret and self-blame, but they also tended to blame their victims. Relative to those who did not forgive the self, self-forgivers were inclined to justify their actions and were rated by coders as "self-focused and portrayed victims as deserving what they got" (p. 683). Paralleling our findings regarding trait self-forgiveness and self-esteem, DeShea and Wahkinney (2003) found that people who reported having forgiven the self for a specific event expressed substantially higher levels of unconditional self-regard, relative to those who had not forgiven a significant transgression. In addition, self-forgivers scored low on neuroticism and high on agreeableness, replicating other researchers' findings at the trait level.

In short, each of these studies employed measurement strategies that appear to tap a heavy component of pseudo-self-forgiveness. Part of the problem is that all existing

measures of self-forgiveness essentially measure an outcome—an endpoint—without assessing crucial elements of the process that lead up to that outcome. To distinguish between true self-forgiveness and pseudo-self-forgiveness, it is necessary to capture critical aspects of the *process* that leads to the outcome of a self at peace with the self. Most likely, in solely assessing that endpoint, the MFI (and its sister measures) captures *both* individuals prone to pseudo-self-forgiveness and those who have the propensity to experience the sequence of events that theorists have in mind when they describe true self-forgiveness—a sequence that requires an acceptance of responsibility and the experience of some level of moral discomfort that must be resolved.

### NEW RESEARCH DIRECTIONS

One advantage of scenario-based measures such as the MFI (see also the Transgression Narrative Test of Forgiveness [Berry, Worthington, Parrott, O'Connor, & Wade, 2001]; the TOSCA measures of shame and guilt [Tangney & Dearing, 2002]; and the ARIs [Tangney et al., 1996]) is that they can be readily modified to test hypotheses about *processes*, not just outcomes (e.g., by incorporating the assessment of theoretically defined criteria and of hypothesized moderators and mediators *at the situational level*). Future research could modify the MFI to include scales assessing sense of responsibility and level of moral discomfort. In this way, guided by recent impressive theoretical advances (e.g., DeShea & Wahkinney, 2003; Hall & Fincham, in press), future studies could capitalize on the power of scenario-based methods by incorporating qualifying criteria and other process variables of interest.

A scientific understanding of the correlates and consequences of the propensity for true self-forgiveness (that complex process) awaits future empirical work. Ideally, such work would employ a combination of appropriately modified scenario-based measures, studies of the process of self-forgiveness in the context of specific offenses (with or without a consideration of individual differences), and the systematic observations by clinicians in the field.

### MORE GENERAL THOUGHTS ON THE MFI

The pace of research on forgiveness since 1999 has been astounding. Owing to Sir John Templeton's generous philanthropic contribution to this field, there has been an unprecedented development in our knowledge and understanding of forgiveness and the "virtues" more generally. So, too, has there been a tremendous growth in the assessment of these scientifically measurable constructs. Researchers interested in forgiveness of *others* are fortunate to have a range of measures from which to choose. Thus, the question is always, Which one?

Based on our findings from two large validation studies (Tangney & Boone, 2004) in conjunction with a review of the recent literature, we would recommend one of the shorter, global self-report measures over the MFI if one is interested in simply assessing the propensity to forgive others (trait forgiveness). We are especially impressed with Brown's recent (2003) Tendency to Forgive scale (TTF) and the Trait Unforgiveness-Forgiveness scale (TUF; Berry & Worthington, 2001; see Berry, Worthington, O'Connor, Parrott, & Wade, 2005). A key aim in electing to use a scenario-based approach for the MFI was to circumvent the problem of social desirability bias often seen in measures that rely on ratings of global attributes, especially when considering self-reports of moral emotions, strengths, and virtues (e.g., Harder & Lewis, 1987; Kugler & Jones, 1992; Mosher, 1966; for a discussion, see Tangney, 1996; Tangney & Dearing, 2002). Results from the current studies indicate that the MFI largely succeeded in circumventing possible confounds with social desirability (average correlation of forgiveness of others with social desirability was .15). However, the TUF performed reasonably well in this domain as well (average correlation with measures of social desirability in our Study 2 was  $-.29$ ). Moreover, Brown's recent (2003) TTF scale was only modestly correlated with social desirability ( $r = .25$ ). Notably, the TTF is composed of a mere four items that can be completed in a fraction of the time required by the MFI, and multiple studies attest to its reliability and validity.

When might the MFI be useful? Scenario-based measures such as the MFI may be especially useful when conducting research with subpopulations in which concerns about social desirability come to the fore (e.g., parents engaged in custody disputes). Respondents are often more willing to endorse a specific socially undesirable action in the context of a specific situation, compared with reporting on more generalized traits or tendencies. In addition, scenario-based assessments can be useful when working with young children who may not have the abstract thinking skills required to evaluate self-traits. Young children are cognitively equipped to report that they would forgive in situations a, b, and c, but they may not yet be able to view themselves as "a person who easily forgives." Denham and colleagues (see chapter 9) have developed a modified version of the MFI for use with parents and children, with promising results.

In the future, scenario-based assessments such as the MFI may be most useful when the focus of research is on theoretically relevant processes. With the addition of relevant response items, researchers can incorporate an empirical assessment of hypothesized mediators and moderators, as well as key construct criteria, for example, to distinguish between true and pseudo-self-forgiveness.

Scenario-based measures are lengthy. The payoff can be substantial, depending on the context, construct, and research question. If a researcher is interested in simply a quick dispositional assessment of interpersonal forgiveness, the MFI is probably not the measure of choice.

## RELEVANCE FOR CLINICAL AND APPLIED INTERVENTIONS

### Clinical Implications: Forget the Self

Clearly, based on the range of undesirable traits shown to be associated with the propensity to experience pseudo-self-forgiveness, it is not a characteristic we want to foster and encourage. True self-forgiveness—the process and the capacity to engage in the process—is what clinicians aim to facilitate when faced with clients who struggle with self-forgiveness. Yet we do wonder whether the focus on the endpoint—*self-forgiveness*—can be just as misleading for the practicing clinician or member of the clergy as it is for the researcher. Self-forgiveness is an awfully self-focused construct that seriously misses the point. One can waste away precious hours, months, or even years delving into what is essentially a self-focused analysis of selfish concerns when the real issue is a harmed other—be it a specific person, a group, the community, or (as Hall & Fincham [in press] argue) the self.

As Holmgren (2002) so aptly stated, “To dwell on one’s own past record of moral performance, either with a sense of self-hatred and self-contempt or with a sense of superiority, is an activity that is overly self-involved and devoid of any real moral value. The client will exercise his moral agency much more responsibly if he removes his focus from the fact that he did wrong and concentrate instead on the contribution he can make to others and on the growth he can experience in the moral and nonmoral realms” (p. 133).

### Application to Restorative Justice

This is at the heart of the restorative justice movement—an innovative, promising approach to work with criminal offenders (see chapters 29 and 30). Restorative justice is a philosophical framework that requires active participation by the victim, the offender, and the community with the aim of repairing the fabric of the community (Braithwaite, 1989, 2000; Cragg, 1992; Morrell, 1993). For example, the “Impact of Crime” workshop implemented in Fairfax County, VA’s Adult Detention Center emphasizes principles of community, personal responsibility, and reparation. Utilizing cognitive restructuring techniques, case workers and group facilitators challenge common distorted ways of thinking about crime, victims, and locus of responsibility. As clients grapple with issues of responsibility, the question of blame inevitably arises, as do emotions of self-blame. In the process of reexamining the causes of their legal difficulties and revisiting the circumstances surrounding their offense and its consequences, many clients experience new feelings of shame, guilt, or both.

Although not explicitly stated, another important feature of the restorative justice philosophy is the “guilt-inducing, shame reducing” nature of this approach. In early stages of treatment, offenders may feel a predominance of shame, focusing on themselves rather than the plight of the victims. Although not optimal, feelings of shame

can serve as a therapist's "hook"—yielding intense feelings that can be processed, transformed, and harnessed as more adaptive feelings of guilt. In the long term, restorative justice approaches (e.g., Maruna, 2001) encourage offenders to take responsibility for their behavior, acknowledge negative consequences, feel guilt for having *done* the wrong thing, empathize with their victims, and act to make amends. But offenders are ultimately discouraged from feeling shame about *themselves*. In short, from a restorative justice perspective, the emphasis is not on moral angst but on moral change and moral action.

## CONCLUSION

Elsewhere (Tangney & Mashek, 2004), we have argued that one need not feel bad (really bad) to be a good person. In fact, we reviewed a range of psychological theories and empirical findings that, taken together, seriously challenge the notion that suffering is a useful barometer of moral worth.

Neither is self-focus a useful barometer of moral worth. Quite the reverse. For example, true humility—in the sense of recognition of one's place in the world, not self-abasement—goes hand-in-hand with a relative lack of self-focus or self-preoccupation (Halling, Kunz, & Rowe, 1994; Tangney, 2000, 2002; Templeton, 1997). Having become "unserved" (Templeton, 1997), the person who has gained a sense of humility is no longer phenomenologically at the center of his or her world. The focus is on the larger community of which he or she is one part.

In addressing clients' difficulties with self-forgiveness, it may be that clinicians will be better served by focusing on the process rather than its endpoint.

## NOTES

1. In this nonclinical sample of traditional and nontraditional college students, as is typical in community samples, there was sufficient variability in clinical symptoms, with distressed individuals scoring in the mild-to-moderate rather than severe range.

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