



## Assessing the relationships among race, religion, humility, and self-forgiveness: A longitudinal investigation



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### ABSTRACT

Social and behavioral scientists have shown a growing interest in the study of virtues due, in part, to the influence of positive psychology. The underlying premise in this research is that adopting key virtues promotes a better quality of life. Consistent with this orientation, the purpose of this study is to assess the relationship between humility and self-forgiveness over time. The analyses are organized around three issues. First, it is proposed that older Blacks will be more humble than older Whites and older Blacks will be more likely to forgive themselves than older Whites. Second, it is hypothesized that, over time, more humble older people are more likely to forgive themselves than individuals who are less humble. Third, it is proposed that greater involvement in religion is associated with greater humility and greater self-forgiveness. Data from a nationwide longitudinal survey of older adults provides support for all these hypotheses.

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The rise of positive psychology has helped many social and behavioral scientists develop a deeper appreciation for the role that virtues play in improving the quality of life (Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2000). Although a wide range of virtues have been examined empirically (Peterson & Seligman, 2004), a growing number of studies focus on humility. Unfortunately, researchers have yet to agree on how to define humility. Since this longstanding issue cannot be resolved in the current study, the definition proposed of Fullam (2009) is adopted as a point of departure for the research that follows. She defines humility as a, "... virtue of self-knowledge acquired by the practice of other-centeredness" (Fullam, 2009, p. 175).

As research on virtues has progressed, a number of investigators have found that one of the primary purposes of character strengths is to bolster and maintain strong interpersonal relationships (e.g., Baumeister & Exline,

1999; Leffel, 2011). This is certainly true with respect to humility. A number of studies suggest that people who are more humble tend to enjoy higher quality social relationships (Peters, Rowatt, & Johnson, 2011), they are more generous (Exline & Hill, 2012), they have a greater ability to receive support from others (Exline, 2012), and they are more likely to help people who are in need (LaBouff, Rowatt, Johnson, Tsang, & Willerton, 2012). Research also consistently reveals that strong interpersonal relationships have a beneficial effect on health (e.g., Cohen, 2004). Perhaps the social skills that humble people possess help explain why Krause (2012a) found that individuals who are more humble tend to rate their health more favorably over time.

The purpose of the current study is to examine another potentially important correlate of humility: self-forgiveness. Since all human beings are flawed they are likely to have hurt someone at one time or another. And if an individual hurts someone, the need for self-forgiveness often arises. A growing number of studies indicate that people who are more humble are more likely to forgive

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others than individuals who are less humble (Davis, Hook, et al., 2010; Davis, Worthington, Hook, & Hill, 2013; Powers, Nam, Rowatt, & Hill, 2007), but there does not appear to be any research that focuses specifically on the relationship between humility and self-forgiveness. This is one reason why Hall and Fincham (2005) refer to self-forgiveness as the “stepchild of forgiveness research” (p. 621). In an effort to address this imbalance in the literature, the relationship between humility and self-forgiveness is evaluated in the research that follows.

In the process of studying humility and self-forgiveness, an effort is made to contribute to the literature in three other potentially important ways. First, research by Krause (2012b) suggests that Blacks are more likely than Whites to forgive themselves for the things they have done wrong. Moreover, another study by Krause (2012a) reveals that Blacks tend to be more humble than Whites. Yet there do not appear to be any studies that put the two together by assessing whether Blacks are more humble than Whites and whether greater humility is, in turn, associated with self-forgiveness. One goal of the current study is to examine this issue empirically.

Second, as Lundberg (2010) points out, every major faith tradition in the world places a significant emphasis on forgiveness. Consistent with this view, research suggests that religion is associated with self-forgiveness, as well (McConnell & Dixon, 2012). However, there do not appear to be any studies that assess the effects of religion on humility as well as self-forgiveness. An effort is made to do so in the analyses that follow.

Third, the wide majority of studies that have been done on self-forgiveness rely on cross-sectional data. Although causality cannot be proven conclusively with survey research data, researchers can nevertheless begin to

address vexing issues involving the temporal ordering among study constructs if they have data that have been gathered at more than one point in time (Menard, 1991). In the analyses that follow, the relationship between humility and self-forgiveness is assessed with two waves of data that are provided by a nationwide sample of older Whites and older Blacks.

The theoretical underpinnings of this study are developed below in two sections. A conceptual model is provided in the first section that is designed to evaluate the relationships among race, religion, humility, and self-forgiveness over time. As noted above, the data for the current study were provided by older adults. Consequently, it is important to discuss the benefits of assessing the relationship between humility and self-forgiveness among people who are in the later stages of the life course.

### 1. A conceptual model of race, humility, and self-forgiveness

The conceptual model that was developed for this study to examine the relationships between race, religion, humility, and self-forgiveness is provided in Fig. 1. Two steps were taken to simplify the presentation of this complex theoretical scheme. First, the elements of the measurement model (i.e., the factor loadings and measurement error terms) are not shown in this diagram even though a full measurement model was estimated when this conceptual scheme was evaluated empirically. Second, the model in Fig. 1 was estimated after controlling for the effects of age, sex, education, and marital status (i.e., these variables were treated as exogenous constructs).

It should be emphasized that all of the paths in Fig. 1 were estimated during the data analytic phase of this study

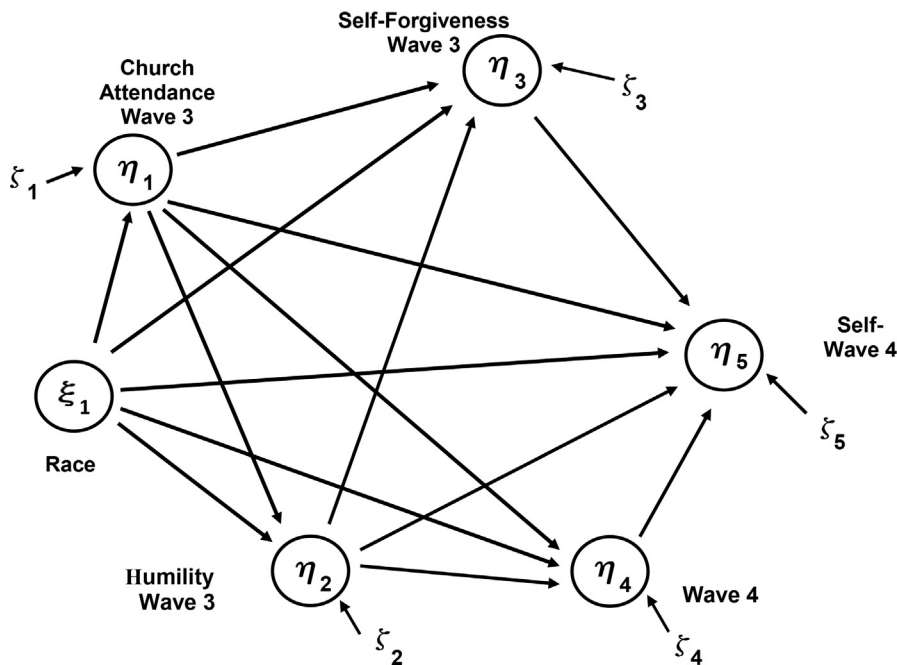


Fig. 1. A conceptual model of race, religion, humility, and self-forgiveness.

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