Self-forgiveness, self-exoneration, and self-condemnation: Individual differences associated with three patterns of responding to interpersonal offenses☆

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A R T I C L E   I N F O

A B S T R A C T

Studies examining individual differences associated with self-forgiveness have tended to include measures that confound self-forgiveness with other hedonic traits, that is, the ability to release negative emotion following failure. In this paper we used cluster analysis to distinguish genuine self-forgiveness from simply letting oneself off the hook via self-exoneration. Cluster analysis revealed three patterns of responding to interpersonal offenses: self-forgiving (high responsibility and end-state self-forgiveness and low self-condemnation), self-condemning (high responsibility and self-condemnation and low end-state self-forgiveness), and self-exonerating (high end-state self-forgiveness and low responsibility and self-condemnation). Comparisons among the clustering solution groups allowed for examination of personality traits associated with individual differences in responses to transgressions. The self-forgiving and self-exonerating clusters largely did not differ on traits (e.g., self-compassion, neuroticism) associated with hedonic wellbeing. However, interpersonal functioning personality traits did distinguish the three response patterns. The self-forgiving cluster had lower vulnerable narcissism compared to the self-exonerating and self-condemning clusters. In addition, the self-exonerating cluster had lower empathic concern compared to the self-condemning cluster. Our findings provide evidence for three types of responses to transgressions and insight into the individual differences associated with each of these response patterns.

1. Introduction

Self-condemnation hurts. We all know the pangs of regret, guilt, and shame that can arise when we have acted wrongly. Self-condemnation, prolonged shame, and being stuck in regret have been associated with negative outcomes such as anger (Baumeister, Stillwell, & Heatherton, 1994), depression, maladjustment, and global negative self-evaluations (Cibich, Woodyatt, & Wenzel, 2016). Research suggests that chronic self-condemnation is also problematic in the context of marriages (Pelucchi, Paleari, Regalia, & Fincham, 2013). It is, therefore, important to understand the processes by which people can move away from self-condemnation following interpersonal transgressions and the individual differences associated with those processes. Although some people engage in self-condemnation after causing interpersonal harm, others find ways to move on. In the current paper, we examine two such responses—self-forgiveness and self-exoneration—that have largely been confounded in the empirical literature on interpersonal transgressions.

1.1. Difficulties in self-forgiveness measurement

Self-forgiveness has been proposed as one way that people might work through their perceived wrongs and release themselves from self-condemnation (Hall & Fincham, 2005). However, is "self-forgiveness" really *working through* one's wrongdoing or is it just letting oneself off the hook? One possibility is that people who report forgiving themselves are simply better at excusing themselves and moving on in the face of negative feedback. Rather than taking responsibility, are "self-forgivers" simply able to brush off what has occurred through self-exoneration?

From early on, self-forgiveness has been understood as involving both the acceptance of responsibility and the release from self-condemnation. For example, early definitions suggest self-forgiveness is "a willingness to *abandon self-resentment* in the face of one's own *acknowledged objective wrong*, while fostering *compassion, generosity, and love toward oneself*" (italics added; Enright & the Human Development

Study Group, 1996, p. 115). This and other definitions of self-forgiveness involve dual dimensions: the responsibility dimension and the esteem/self-regard dimension (Griffin, 2016). However, these dual dimensions have been an ongoing challenge for self-forgiveness research (Woodyatt, Wenzel, & Ferber, 2017). While a person may claim to have forgiven oneself, if the means by which this was achieved involved denial of responsibility, minimization of the harm done, or portrayal of one's actions as not wrong, then the process of deflecting the transgression is more akin to self-exoneration than self-forgiveness. Still, most available measures of self-forgiveness focus on the esteem/self-regard dimension without consideration of the responsibility dimension. This can be explained by two diverging ways of approaching self-forgiveness measurement.

1.1.1. Self-forgiveness as a hedonic end state versus eudaimonic process

Woodyatt, Wenzel, and Ferber (2017) have suggested that self-forgiveness can be understood in two ways, either focused on hedonic end-state or eudaimonic process. A hedonic conception of wellbeing has been equated with subjective feelings of happiness, presence of positive affect, and absence of negative affect (for a reveiw, see Deci & Ryan, 2008). Think of the phrase "I have forgiven myself." On one hand, this can be understood in a hedonic way, that is, as a state of released negative self-directed emotions (e.g., shame, guilt, self-condemnation) and acquired positive self-directed emotions (e.g., self-compassion, self-esteem). Indeed, Woodyatt, Wenzel, and Ferber (2017) have argued that most personality (trait) and offense-specific (state) measures of self-forgiveness tap primarily into this type of hedonic end-state concept of self-forgiveness.

We can also understand that same phrase, "I have forgiven myself," in a different way, as representing a eudaimonic process. That is, self-forgiveness may involve negative emotions but will also involve positively working through what has occurred. This process involves taking responsibility for one's actions, thinking through one's wrong and working through feelings of guilt that arise, rather than simply bypassing or avoiding those feelings (Woodyatt & Wenzel, 2013a, 2013b). Consistent with a eudaimonic process, self-forgiveness can thus be understood as involving negative emotions; being driven by psychological needs; and reflecting personal growth toward virtue, character development, and one's "true self" (Waterman, 1993, p. 678).

Taken together, people experiencing self-forgiveness should rate high on hedonic/end-state measures of self-forgiveness. However, this alone is not enough to demonstrate genuine self-forgiveness. Self-forgiveness also relates to taking appropriate responsibility for wrong actions, experiencing the negative emotions that arise, and then the release that comes from working through the experience (Cornish & Wade, 2015a).

1.1.2. Self-forgiveness vs self-exoneration

When people score high on hedonic measures of self-forgiveness, but low on the responsibility/eudaimonic dimension, this may indicate self-exoneration rather than self-forgiveness. The self-defensive or self-exonerating response has been called pseudo (i.e. false) self-forgiveness, in contrast to *genuine* self-forgiveness where a person accepts responsibility and works through one's actions (Hall & Fincham, 2005). While the claim that self-forgiving and self-exonerating responses are confounded has been littered throughout the self-forgiveness literature, there is very limited empirical evidence thus far to show this pattern of results (Wenzel, Woodyatt, & Hedrick, 2012; Woodyatt & Wenzel, 2013a).

1.2. Three potential responses to transgressions

Considering the literature above, we can conceptualize individual differences in how people may respond to transgressions into three patterns, including 1) self-condemnation in the face of acknowledged wrong, 2) self-exoneration in which a person experiences self-forgiving

emotions without associated responsibility, and 3) self-forgiveness in which a person experiences renewed self-regard while accepting responsibility. Woodyatt and Wenzel (2013a) have argued for these three responses to transgressions, and have developed a process-based measure intended to assess each of these. Initial evidence from their studies suggests that these responses may be distinguishable in terms of outcomes for reconciliation over time. However are these three responses empirically distinguishable through most available measures of self-forgiveness? In order to examine this, we need to apply an approach that allows for the evaluation of multiple dimensions simultaneously.

One way to demonstrate these individual differences in response patterns to an offense could be use of cluster analysis. Cluster analysis is a data analytic technique that sorts or classifies cases (often people) into groups based on similarity on targeted variables (Byrne & Uprichard, 2012). This technique can therefore be used to demonstrate whether a subset of individuals responding about a specific offense score high on a measure of responsibility for that offense, high on a hedonic end-state measure of self-forgiveness, and low on a state self-condemnation measure, thus demonstrating genuine self-forgiveness. Similarly, individuals who score high on state self-condemnation and responsibility but low on state self-forgiveness would demonstrate a self-condemning response in which they have not yet moved on from the offense. Of particular interest to the current studies, cluster analysis could also reveal whether a subset of individuals score high on state self-forgiveness and low on self-condemnation (similar to individuals with genuine self-forgiveness), but also low on responsibility. If this group emerged through cluster analysis, it would demonstrate that some individuals can score high on a measure of hedonic end-state self-forgiveness yet appear to be engaged in self-exoneration (pseudo self-forgiveness) rather than genuine self-forgiveness due to the lack of accepted responsibility for one's offense.

1.3. Responses to transgressions and individual differences associated with wellbeing

As discussed, the cluster analysis approach allows for the extension of current literature by exploring how self-condemnation, self-exoneration and self-forgiveness relate to other individual differences. As noted already, self-condemnation is associated with a range of negative outcomes. Self-exoneration can also appear to be a maladaptive strategy, especially with regard to interpersonal outcomes (e.g., Tyler & Feldman, 2007). However there is a wide range of ways that people are defensive against threats to the self. Self-exoneration may just be an extension of typical psychological defenses, that is, the normal array of cognitive processes by which people brush off failure and negative feedback in order to maintain optimism, perseverance, and positive self-regard (Woodyatt & Wenzel, 2013a). If this is the case, then one could expect hedonic end-state measures of self-forgiveness—even if they capture both individuals who genuinely self-forgive and individuals who self-exonerate—to be correlated with individual differences associated with hedonic well-being.

Indeed, assessed using hedonic end-state trait measures, self-forgiveness has been found to relate to personality and individual difference variables through positive associations with agreeableness and self-esteem (Strelan, 2007) and negative associations with neuroticism, anxiety (Walker & Gorsuch, 2002), and proneness to shame and guilt (Strelan, 2007). These studies may suggest that self-forgiveness measures tap into a certain dispositional imperviousness to negative feedback, and a resulting presence of more positive affect than negative (Lyubomirsky & Ross, 1999). This bias to view life events in a more positive manner generally (Ryan & Deci, 2001) can flow into the interpretation of a committed interpersonal offense, the perception of their own emotions since the event, and the recall of the event (Zechmeister & Romero, 2002). Fisher and Exline (2006) suggested that measures of self-forgiveness may tap into a dispositional lack of self-condemnation. This is important, because if this is the case then many