The association of forgiveness and 12-month prevalence of major depressive episode: Gender differences in a probability sample of U.S. adults

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Abstract
Research suggests that gender differences in interpersonal orientations may differentially predispose women and men to depression. While women tend to be more interdependent and show interpersonal depressive styles, men are more independent and show self-critical styles. Forgiveness is one religious/spiritual, interpersonal variable that has received very little attention in the literature on depression. Hence, the purpose of this study was to examine forgiveness as a multidimensional, inter-relational variable that may have differential associations with depression in women and men. We measured multiple forms of forgiveness and assessed 12-month prevalence of major depressive episode using a screening version of the Composite International Diagnostic Interview. We controlled for religiousness/spirituality and demographic in our analyses, and used data from a nationally representative, probability sample of 1,423 adults, ages 18 years and older. Women reported higher levels of religiousness/spirituality and forgiveness than men. Among women, forgiveness of others, forgiveness of self, and feeling forgiven by God were associated with decreased odds of depression ($p < 0.05$), whereas seeking forgiveness was associated with increased odds ($p < 0.05$). For men, only forgiveness of oneself was significantly associated with decreased odds of depression ($p < 0.05$).

Introduction
Forgiveness is a concept that is closely tied to religiousness and spirituality (McCullough & Worthington, 1999; Rye, 2005; Wuthnow, 2000) and is a central aspect of many world religions including: Judaism, Christianity, Islam,
At its core, forgiveness is an interpersonal variable that is often, though not always, an expression of religious and spiritual beliefs. Research has demonstrated salutogenic associations between religiousness/spirituality and health (for a review, see McCullough & Larson, 1999). Hence, it should come as no surprise that forgiveness also shows positive relationships with depression and mental health (for a review, see Toussaint & Webb, 2005b). Gender differences in the relationship between interpersonal variables and depression have been well documented (e.g., Blatt, Hart, Quinlan, Leadbeater, & Auerbach, 1993; Kessler & McLeod, 1984). However, little attention has been paid to the role of forgiveness as a potentially important correlate of depression and how this association may differ for women and men. The present study aims to examine the relationship between forgiveness and depression, and how it might vary by gender.

Gender and interpersonal relations

A good deal of theory and research has been devoted to understanding how construals of oneself influence psychological and social psychological processes such as perceptions, emotions, and interpersonal relations. The self can be construed in two distinct ways that vary by gender (Cross & Madson, 1997; Kashima et al., 1995; Markus & Kitayama, 1991; Niedenthal & Beike, 1997; Walker, 1991). Men’s self-construals are typically more independent, and women’s are more interdependent (Cross & Madson, 1997; Kashima et al., 1995; Markus & Kitayama, 1991). Independent self-construals involve the conception of the self as autonomous, distinct, and separated from others, while interdependent construals consist of feeling connected and less differentiated from others. Differences in self-construals between women and men may have an important impact on gender differences in levels of forgiveness and the association between forgiveness and depression.

Gender differences in self-construals and depression

Gender differences in self-construals have important implications for depression. Empirical research has shown that gender differences in self-construals may give rise to differing vulnerabilities to depression (Blatt et al., 1993; Kessler & McLeod, 1984; Leadbeater, Blatt, Quinlan, 1995; Leadbeater, Kuperminc, Hertzog, & Blatt, 1999). Other work has demonstrated that men have self-critical depressive styles, but women show interpersonal depressive styles (Riley & McCranie, 1990; Whiffen & Sasserville, 1991; Zuroff, Quinlan, & Blatt, 1990). Research with adolescents has shown that girls are more reactive to both interpersonal and self-related stress, whereas boys react only to stresses that affect themselves (Leadbeater et al., 1995). Further studies have shown that women’s depression is frequently associated with negative interpersonal events (Hammen, 1991; Robbins & Tanck, 1991). In sum, current research suggests that women’s interdependent self-construals orient them toward interpersonal events that, when negative, place them at risk for depression.
Conversely, men’s independent self-construals focus their attention inward, and this tendency may result in vulnerability to depression in the face of self-critical stresses.

**Role of forgiveness**

One commonly used definition of forgiveness consists of giving up one’s right to retribution and releasing or letting go of negative affect directed toward an offender (Coyle & Enright, 1998; Enright & Zell, 1989; Hargrave & Sells, 1997; Hebl & Enright, 1993; Hope, 1987; Pingleton, 1989; Shontz & Rosenak, 1983). Several types have been identified in previous theory and research that should be examined (Gorsuch & Hao, 1993; Hargrave & Sells, 1997; Mauger et al., 1992; Shontz & Rosenak, 1983; Thompson et al., 2005). We focus on four dimensions of forgiveness. First, forgiveness of others involves forgiving another for some harm done. Second, forgiveness of oneself involves release of negative affect and self-blame associated with past wrongdoings, mistakes, or regrets. Third, feeling forgiven by God refers to the belief or perception that one’s transgressions are forgiven by the divine. Fourth, seeking forgiveness involves initiating the process of giving and receiving forgiveness. Generally speaking, forgiveness is a critical process involved in repairing broken relationships that may play a key role in mitigating against women’s depressive vulnerability to negative interpersonal events. For men, forgiveness of oneself may also prove effective in ameliorating the negative effects of self-critical stress that put them at risk for depression. Forgiveness may be an important correlate of depression, but it is likely that different types of forgiveness will be related to depression for men and for women.

**Forgiveness and depression**

A number of studies show that forgiveness is negatively associated with depression (for a review, see Toussaint & Webb, 2005b). Unfortunately, much of the initial research was limited by small and unrepresentative samples, some of which included only women. Subkoviak et al. (1995) found that high scores on the negative affect subscale of the Enright Forgiveness Inventory (indicating cessation of resentment and anger) were associated with less depression in a convenience sample of 34 middle age ($M = 50$ years) adults. Forgiveness was also negatively associated with depression in a convenience sample of 24 elderly ($M = 75$ years) women (Hebl & Enright, 1993), 12 young adult ($M = 36$ years) female incest survivors (Freedman & Enright, 1996), and 35 young adult ($M = 25$ years) women and men (Hargrave & Sells, 1997). Problems forgiving oneself and others have also been shown to be positively associated with depression in a sample of 237 outpatient-counseling clients of a Christian counseling center (Mauger et al., 1992).

Interest in the association between forgiveness and depression has continued in recent years, and several studies have continued to consistently document a relationship. Brown (2003) showed a negative relationship between forgiveness
of others and depression in college students. Krause and Ellison (2003) showed negative associations between forgiveness of others and feeling forgiven by God and depression. Maltby, Macaskill, and Day (2001) and Witvliet, Phipps, Feldman, and Beckham (2004) showed relationships between unforgiveness of self and others, and increased depression in college students and veterans with post-traumatic stress disorder, respectively. Finally, Kendler et al. (2003) have shown that low levels of vengeance are associated with lesser odds of depressive status in a large sample of adult twins from Virginia. Notably, Kendler et al.’s work is the only investigation to utilize a Structured Clinical Interview for DSM-III-R (SCID) instead of a symptom checklist. In sum, while several studies have show associations between forgiveness and depressive symptoms, it is not known if a consistent pattern of associations would exist in more representative samples and when examining depression using a diagnostic screening measure of major depressive episode.

Gender differences in forgiveness and depression

Research has shown that women have higher levels of religiousness/spirituality than men (Freese, 2004; Miller & Hoffmann, 1995; Miller & Stark, 2002). Forgiveness is considered a central aspect of many world religions (Rye et al., 2000) and, hence, should also show gender differences that favor women. This has indeed been shown to be the case. Miller, Worthington, and McDaniel (in press) have conducted a meta analysis of 53 articles reporting 70 studies that showed women were 1/4th of a standard deviation greater than men on forgiveness. This is slightly larger than Cohen’s (1988) criteria of 0.2 for demonstrating a small effect size. Nevertheless, Miller et al. argue that this difference is not only statistically but practically significant and discuss a variety of potential reasons why gender differences may exist, including: moral development, socialization, culture, and other factors. Of the 70 studies included in the meta-analysis, only four were population-based surveys, and interestingly, the standardized effect size for these four studies was notably larger (d = 0.48). It may be the case that gender differences in forgiveness are most accurately depicted when studies take care to sample broadly from well-defined populations and in a random and representative fashion. This conclusion should be reached with some caution, given the paucity of this type of work. In any case, gender differences in levels of forgiveness do exist.

While studies suggest that women have higher levels of forgiveness than men, the extent to which there are gender differences in how forgiveness is associated with depression, or for that matter any other antecedent or consequence, has not been given near as much attention. In fact, as Miller et al. (in press) have pointed out, few forgiveness studies have included gender as a central aspect. Some studies have shown that correlates of forgiveness vary in magnitude by gender. For example, both Fincham, Paleari, and Regalia (2002) and Toussaint and Webb (2005a) have shown that empathy is more strongly correlated with forgiveness for men than for women. Little attention has been
paid to this type of research question, but given the significance of gender in depression and its correlates, it is likely that the associations between forgiveness and depression will vary by gender.

Present investigation

The goal of the present investigation was to examine the relationship between forgiveness and depression. Foremost in our effort was understanding how forgiveness may be differentially related to depression across gender. Given the previously discussed gender differences in depressive vulnerability and prior literature on religiousness/spirituality, forgiveness, and depression, we expected that forgiveness would show higher levels in women than men. We also expected that forgiveness of others may prove to be more strongly related to depression in women than men. Conversely, forgiveness of oneself may likely be the stronger predictor in men than women. Since feeling forgiven by God and seeking forgiveness have been identified in prior theory and research as important variables, we included them as exploratory variables in our analyses of gender differences in forgiveness and depression.

This study went beyond prior work in multiple ways: First, while most of the prior work has been focused only on forgiveness of others, we measured additional forms of forgiveness. Second, we assessed the 12-month prevalence of major depressive episode. Prior work has mainly examined depressive symptoms but not depressive diagnoses. Third, in examining the relationship between forgiveness and depression, we adjusted for potentially confounding factors such as religiousness/spirituality and sociodemographics. Few studies, to date, have controlled for these potentially confounding factors. Fourth, while most prior work has drawn from small, unrepresentative samples, we used data collected from a nationally representative probability sample of the United States.

Method

Sample

Participants responded to the Survey of Consumers, a telephone survey of adults age 18 and older conducted by the University of Michigan’s Institute for Social Research. The sample was nationally representative and was randomly selected using the two-stage random-digit-dialing (RDD) procedure described by Waksberg (1978). The survey employs a rotating panel design to gather data from approximately 500 respondents on a monthly basis. Each monthly sample consists of about 300 new respondents and 200 respondents being re-interviewed 6 months after their initial interview. For five consecutive months in 1998, our study added questions to the monthly survey administered to the new national sample of about 300 respondents. The total sample for the 5-month period was 1,423 respondents, and the response rate for the survey ranged from 0.69 to 0.71 during the 5-month period.
Measures

Depression. The measurement of major depressive episode was based on the definitions and criteria specified in the revised edition of the American Psychiatric Association’s Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders. The 12-month prevalence of major depressive episode was assessed using a screening version of the Depression module of the World Health Organization’s (WHO) Composite International Diagnostic Interview, Version 1.0 (CIDI) (Kessler, Mickelson, & Williams, 1999; World Health Organization, 1990). The CIDI is a structured interview schedule designed to be used by trained interviewers who are nonclinicians to assess the prevalence of specific psychiatric disorders (Robins, Wing, Wittchen, & Helzer, 1988). WHO field trials and other methodological studies have shown good test–retest reliability and clinical validity of these CIDI diagnoses (Blazer, Kessler, McGonagle, & Swartz, 1994; Wittchen, 1994).

Forgiveness. Four dimensions of forgiveness were assessed, and all scales were coded so that higher scores represented more forgiveness. All reported alpha values are based on the present study’s data. Forgiveness measures used in the present investigation were originally used by Gorsuch and Hao (1993), Idler et al. (2003), Mauger et al. (1992), Watson, Hood, Morris, and Hall (1985), and Watson, Morris, and Hood (1987). The first two indices used a 4-point agree–disagree scale. First, the index for forgiveness of self was composed of two items (α = 0.67): (a) I often feel that no matter what I do now, I will never make up for the mistakes I have made in the past, and (b) I find it hard to forgive myself for some of the things I have done wrong. Second, a two-item index ascertained the degree to which respondents felt forgiven by God (α = 0.64): (a) Knowing that I am forgiven for my sins gives me the strength to face my faults and be a better person, and (b) I know that God forgives me. Third, the forgiveness of others index was composed of five items (α = 0.72). Respondents were asked when someone had hurt them, how often they: (a) hold resentment or keep it inside, (b) try to get even in some way, and (c) try to forgive the other person. Response categories included never, hardly ever, not too often, fairly often, and very often. Respondents were also asked whether they strongly agreed, agreed, disagreed, or strongly disagreed with the following statements: (d) I have grudges that I have held on to for months or years, and (e) I have forgiven those who have hurt me. Fourth, a three-item index tapped levels of seeking forgiveness—the extent to which one was proactive in giving and receiving forgiveness (α = 0.64). Respondents were asked how often they did the following: (a) ask God’s forgiveness when the respondent had hurt someone, (b) ask the other person’s forgiveness when the respondent had hurt someone, and (c) pray for someone who had hurt the respondent. Responses for each of the statements included very often, fairly often, not too often, hardly ever, and never.
Religiousness/Spirituality. Four religiousness/spirituality factors were assessed as follows: Service attendance was measured by asking respondents how often they went to religious services. Response categories ranged from (1) never to (6) more than once a week. Frequency of prayer was measured by asking how often they prayed in places other than church and synagogue. Responses ranged from (1) never to (6) more than once a day. Respondents were also asked to rate how religious and how spiritual they were on a 10-point scale.

Gender. Respondents were asked to report their gender.

Control variables. Covariates assessed included: age (in years), race (white = reference category), marital status (0 = not married; 1 = married),\(^2\) education (years completed), and income (13-point continuum ranged from under $10,000 to $100,000 or more).

Data analysis

Data were weighted for age, gender, and race to take into account differential probabilities of selection and to adjust the demographics of the sample to that of the United States population using the Current Population Survey. In Table I, we show gender differences in unadjusted levels of forgiveness and provide descriptive statistics, statistical significance, and Cohen's \(d\) effect size estimates. Associations between forgiveness and depression were assessed using logistic regression models. Models were run separately for women and men, but each gender by forgiveness interaction was tested by adding a multiplicative interaction

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variable</th>
<th>Women ((n = 709))</th>
<th>Men ((n = 563))</th>
<th>(p)</th>
<th>(d)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Forgiven Self</td>
<td>3.95 (1.24)</td>
<td>3.86 (1.27)</td>
<td>ns</td>
<td>0.07</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Forgiven Others</td>
<td>4.09 (0.74)</td>
<td>3.89 (0.84)</td>
<td>***</td>
<td>0.26</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Forgiven by God</td>
<td>4.78 (0.55)</td>
<td>4.66 (0.68)</td>
<td>***</td>
<td>0.20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Seeking Forgiveness</td>
<td>4.13 (0.87)</td>
<td>3.62 (1.09)</td>
<td>***</td>
<td>0.54</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Service Attendance</td>
<td>3.61 (1.65)</td>
<td>3.18 (1.58)</td>
<td>***</td>
<td>0.28</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Prayer</td>
<td>4.63 (1.44)</td>
<td>3.79 (1.67)</td>
<td>***</td>
<td>0.54</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Self-Rated Religiosity</td>
<td>6.50 (2.52)</td>
<td>5.78 (2.61)</td>
<td>***</td>
<td>0.28</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Self-Rated Spirituality</td>
<td>7.07 (2.39)</td>
<td>6.37 (2.45)</td>
<td>***</td>
<td>0.29</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: Significance of \(t\) test for gender difference: ***\(p \leq .001.\)
term to a model run in the full sample. To facilitate the interpretation of the logistic models, each forgiveness index was dichotomized at approximately the 50th percentile. Low forgiveness was the reference category. Due to skewness in the forgiven by God variable, these data were dichotomized at the 25th percentile. Analyses of religiousness/spirituality variables were handled identically to the forgiveness analyses. In model one, forgiveness coefficients were adjusted for control variables. In model two, these coefficients were adjusted for religiousness/spirituality variables, as well as control variables. In Table II, logistic coefficients for religiousness/spirituality and forgiveness variables are presented as odds ratios with associated significance levels and 95% confidence intervals.

Results

Gender differences in levels of forgiveness and religiousness/spirituality

Table I shows the means and standard deviations for all religiousness/spirituality and forgiveness variables for both women and men. The significance of the t test and effect size estimates for gender differences on each measure are reported in the two far right-hand columns. In comparing levels of forgiveness across women and men, a distinct pattern emerges. With the exception of forgiveness of self, women scored significantly higher than men on all indices of forgiveness (p ≤ 0.001). Although not significant, the gender difference in levels of forgiveness of self was in the same direction as all other indices. Gender differences in

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Forgiveness variable</th>
<th>Women (n = 709)</th>
<th>Men (n = 563)</th>
<th>Interaction</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>OR</td>
<td>95% CI</td>
<td>OR</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Forgiven Self</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(a) Self—High</td>
<td>0.34***</td>
<td>(0.21, 0.55)</td>
<td>0.15***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(b) Self—Low (ref)</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>–</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Forgiven Others</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(a) Other—High</td>
<td>0.45***</td>
<td>(0.28, 0.73)</td>
<td>0.83</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(b) Other—Low (ref)</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>–</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Forgiven by God</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(a) by God—High</td>
<td>0.603+</td>
<td>(0.36, 1.01)</td>
<td>1.47</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(b) by God—Low (ref)</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>–</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Seeking Forgiveness</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(a) Seeking—High</td>
<td>1.71*</td>
<td>(1.06, 2.77)</td>
<td>1.38</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(b) Seeking—Low (ref)</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>–</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Net $R^2_N$</td>
<td>0.12***</td>
<td></td>
<td>0.10***</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Notes: All coefficients adjusted for sociodemographic control variables. Significance of odds ratios: + p ≤ .10; *p ≤ .05; ***p ≤ .001.
religiousness/spirituality variables showed a pattern of results similar to that for forgiveness. For all religiousness/spirituality variables, women showed higher levels than men. It should be noted that according to Cohen’s (1988) guidelines, gender differences were small to moderate in magnitude. The largest differences between women and men were in seeking forgiveness and prayer.

**Gender differences in forgiveness, religiousness/spirituality, and depression**

Table II presents odds ratios, significance levels, and 95% confidence intervals for the association of forgiveness and depression separately for women and men. Interactions conducted in the full sample are reported in the far right-hand column. The bottom row for each model shows the net $R^2_N$ value (Nagelkerke $R^2$), which is an analogue to the ordinary least-squares regression coefficient net $R^2$ (Nagelkerke, 1991). The net $R^2_N$ provides an estimate of the variance in depression diagnosis uniquely accounted for by forgiveness variables net of the association between depression and control variables. Looking at the odds ratios for the first model, a distinct pattern emerges. For women, each of the four types

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Predictor</th>
<th>Women ($n=709$)</th>
<th>Men ($n=563$)</th>
<th>Interaction</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Service Attendance</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(a) Attend—High</td>
<td>1.06 (0.64, 1.74)</td>
<td>0.73 (0.32, 1.65)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(b) Attend—Low (ref)</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>–</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Prayer</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(a) Prayer—High</td>
<td>1.96** (1.18, 3.24)</td>
<td>1.30 (0.53, 3.17)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(b) Prayer—Low (ref)</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>–</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Self-Rated Religiosity</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(a) Religious—High</td>
<td>0.59+ (0.34, 1.03)</td>
<td>0.59 (0.23, 1.52)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(b) Religious—Low (ref)</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>–</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Self-Rated Spirituality</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(a) Spiritual—High</td>
<td>0.99 (0.57, 1.71)</td>
<td>2.16+ (0.93, 5.04)</td>
<td>*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(b) Spiritual—Low (ref)</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>–</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Forgiven Self</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(a) Self—High</td>
<td>0.37*** (0.23, 0.60)</td>
<td>0.15*** (0.06, 0.37)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(b) Self—Low (ref)</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>–</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Forgiven Others</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(a) Other—High</td>
<td>0.44*** (0.27, 0.73)</td>
<td>0.83 (0.39, 1.79)</td>
<td>*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(b) Other—Low (ref)</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>–</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Forgiven by God</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(a) by God—High</td>
<td>0.57* (0.33, 0.97)</td>
<td>1.81 (0.73, 4.46)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(b) by God—Low (ref)</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>–</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Seeking Forgiveness</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(a) Seeking—High</td>
<td>1.69* (1.01, 2.80)</td>
<td>1.52 (0.65, 3.58)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(b) Seeking—Low (ref)</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>–</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Net $R^2_N$</td>
<td>0.21***</td>
<td>0.18***</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Notes: All coefficients adjusted for sociodemographic control variables. Significance of odds ratios: $+ p \leq .10;  * p \leq .05;  ** p \leq .01;  *** p \leq .001.$
of forgiveness is significantly associated with depression, but for men, only forgiveness of self is significantly associated. A significant gender by forgiveness of others interaction was observed. High levels of forgiveness of others reduced the odds of depression for women by over one half but showed no reduction for men. Forgiveness of self was a highly significant predictor of depression for both women and men. Although no gender by forgiven self interaction was present, the pattern observed was consistent with our expectations and showed that high levels of forgiveness of self provided a stronger reduction in the odds of depression for men than for women. With respect to the feeling forgiven by God variable, high levels showed a marginally significant reduction in the odds of depression for women but no significant association for men. High levels of seeking forgiveness were significantly associated with greater odds of depression in women, and again no significant association was found in men. Forgiveness variables predicted approximately 12 and 10 percent of the variance in depression in women and men, respectively.

The pattern of associations between forgiveness and depression changed very little when adding religiousness/spirituality variables to the equation, suggesting that the association between forgiveness and depression is not accounted for by these factors (Table III). Only one religiousness/spirituality variable was associated at a statistically significant level. High levels of prayer were associated with almost twice the odds of depression in women only. Religiousness/spirituality and forgiveness variables predicted approximately 21 and 17 percent of the variance in depression in women and men, respectively.

Discussion

One goal of the present investigation was to examine gender differences in levels of forgiveness and religiousness/spirituality. We found expected gender differences on three indices of forgiveness, such that women consistently scored higher than men. Women scored higher than men on forgiveness of oneself, though the difference did not reach statistical significance. Women scored higher than men on all measures of religiousness/spirituality. These findings are consistent with previous research that shows women are more forgiving and more religious/spiritual than men (Freese, 2004; Miller & Hoffmann, 1995; Miller & Stark, 2002; Miller et al. in press). Specifically, our findings replicate previous work showing a higher forgiveness of others in women, but our results also show that women scored higher on measures of feeling forgiven by God and seeking forgiveness. The latter two forms have been largely unexplored in prior empirical work, since forgiveness is often conceptualized as a global construct (Mullet, Houdbine, Laumonier, & Girard, 1998) or as having only two dimensions oriented toward the self or others (Mauger et al., 1992). Hence, our findings show expected gender differences in levels of forgiveness and point to new facets of the construct that also show higher levels in women.

Our work confirms previous studies demonstrating that women are more forgiving than men, but the question of why women are more forgiving remains.
Miller et al. (in press) offer several potential explanations that, to our knowledge, have not been empirically examined. First, gender differences in forgiveness parallel gender differences in moral development. In the face of a moral wrongdoing, women are more focused on relationship preservation and the needs of others, where men are more focused on law and order and a need for justice. Second, gender politics and societal forces shape interpretation and definition of injustice. Third, gender differences in forgiveness reflect gender differences in religiousness/spirituality. Fourth, forgiveness can be conceptualized as individualistic or collectivistic (Hook, Worthington, & Utsey, 2007). Individualistic forgiveness is aimed at achieving personal peace. Collectivistic forgiveness is motivated by the goal of group harmony. Being more interpersonally oriented, women may be more likely to engage in collectivistic forgiveness than males. When examined in a primarily individualistic culture like the United States, cultural differences in forgiveness may appear as gender differences. Future empirical work is necessary to determine if these hypotheses regarding the explanation of gender differences in forgiveness are accurate.

Our second primary goal in this study was to examine the association between religiousness/spirituality, forgiveness, and depression, and how it might vary by gender. As is commonly the case (e.g., Mattlin, Wethington, & Kessler, 1990; Pargament & Brant, 1998), there was only one significant association between religiousness/spiritual variables and depression. This was an association between higher levels of prayer and increased odds of depression in women only. Results of this type have been documented by others (e.g., Ellison & Taylor, 1996; Pargament, Smith, Koenig, & Perez, 1998) and suggest that, in cross-sectional data, the frequency of prayer can be a marker for the severity of the life stressors that individuals face (Spilka, Hood, Hunsberger, & Gorsuch, 2003). Pargament et al. refer to this as “religious coping mobilization”.

We showed that the pattern of relationships for forgiveness and depression varied for women and men. For women, the results showed that high levels of forgiveness of others and forgiveness of self were associated with decreased odds of depression. For men, only forgiveness of self was associated, and although there was no significant gender by forgiven self interaction, the strength of the association was greater than that for women. These findings may suggest that women who struggle to forgive others are more likely to suffer from depression, and while forgiveness of oneself is also important for women, it may potentially be more so for men. This type of variation is consistent with literature suggesting that gender differences in how women and men relate interpersonally influence mental-health outcomes such as depression (Blatt et al., 1993; Kessler & McLeod, 1984; Leadbeater et al., 1995, 1999).

Feeling forgiven by God and seeking forgiveness were included as exploratory variables in our analyses and showed interesting results. We found that feeling forgiven by God and seeking forgiveness were both associated with depression in women but not men. Broadly speaking, these indices may tap the interpersonal nature of forgiveness (i.e., relationships with God and others) in a manner that overlaps to some degree with the
forgiveness of others scale. In other words, the interpersonal nature of the forgiveness construct may be captured in three unique yet interrelated facets of measurement: forgiveness of others, feeling forgiven by God, and seeking forgiveness. Hence, it is not surprising that they were all identified as important correlates of depression in women but not men.

We find it interesting, however, that the association for seeking forgiveness was in the opposite direction of other indices—higher levels of seeking forgiveness were associated with greater odds of depression in women. We offer three possible explanations for this finding. First, it could be the case that women are more keenly aware of when they have been hurt or have hurt someone and were experiencing heightened stress associated with the task of initiating the forgiveness process. For women, whether transgressors or victims, “taking the first step” in the process of forgiveness may actually engender psychological distress and bring about the occurrence of a depressive episode. Second, it may be the case that women high on seeking forgiveness are not actually sincere or genuine in their efforts. These women may actually be engaging in “pseudo-forgiveness”. Researchers (Baumeister, Exline, & Sommer, 1998; Enright, Freedman, & Rique, 1998; Enright & Zell, 1989) have discussed pseudoforgiveness as something that is not genuine but meant to achieve a goal or objective. For example, “I have forgiven you, now you owe me one”. This is an attempt to gain power over someone, not an actual act of forgiveness. Pseudoforgiveness involves an outward offering of forgiveness on the interpersonal level, but the inner resolution of conflict and anger is not achieved. Thus, women high in seeking forgiveness may actually be experiencing depression as a result of the effects of unresolved anger and conflict associated with pseudoforgiveness. Third, seeking forgiveness may be closely related to neuroticism, low self-esteem, or some other personality characteristic that is predictive of depression in women. Regardless of mechanism, it appears clear that not all forms of forgiveness related similarly to depression in women. In examining forgiveness in future studies, attention should be paid to more fully understanding the meaning of different facets of the construct and devising and implementing necessary controls.

Having documented gender differences in the association of forgiveness and depression, we should note some limitations of this work. First, although our forgiveness measures had face validity, they may have engendered socially desirable responses. Hence, measurement strategies (e.g., the Enright Forgiveness Inventory; Subkoviak et al., 1995) that employ a more indirect approach may be preferable. Second, we measured forgiveness without regard to context. Examining forgiveness as it relates to a particular event (i.e., wrongdoing, injury, loss) and attending to the frequency and severity of such an event may be informative. Third, our analyses of cross-sectional data provide no information about the causal ordering of variables and the reciprocal effects of predictors and outcomes. Longitudinal data are essential in examining the overall process that lies between forgiveness and health.
Fourth, due to survey constraints, we were unable to measure some key mechanisms (e.g., neuroticism, guilt, self-blame). It may be useful to know the extent to which such variables as forgiveness can be considered character traits or to what degree they are related to major personality variables. Future studies would do well to evaluate the stability of forgiveness variables and include additional measures of personality. In spite of these limitations, the present study has shown the importance of investigating gender differences in the association of forgiveness and depression.

In conclusion, our findings suggest that forgiveness is a multifaceted construct that is differentially related to depression in women and men. We found gender differences on three out of four forgiveness indices. In all cases, women scored higher on forgiveness than men, and these findings replicate those of other researchers showing women to be generally more forgiving. Our analyses also provide interesting and unique information on the association of forgiveness and depression for both women and men. While our findings fit well within the conceptual framework of theory and research on gender differences in interpersonal relations, we extend the literature by providing insight into how these differences are manifest in that association between forgiveness and depression. Previous research has shown that forgiveness is related to depression, but we note that the profile of forgiveness in women and men is quite dissimilar. Hence, there may be some promise in devoting more attention to the possibility that forgiveness may be a viable strategy for reducing one’s likelihood of experiencing a major depressive episode. For maximum benefit, it would seem that gender should determine the direction in which forgiveness efforts are aimed.

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Notes

[1] Forgiveness of others and seeking forgiveness scales, originally developed by Watson et al. (1985, 1987), were changed from dichotomous to Likert-type response scales.

[2] Exploratory analyses revealed that there were no noticeable differences between this coding scheme and other schemes that included dummy variables for separated and divorced, never married, and widowed respondents.

[3] Exploratory analyses revealed that the pattern of coefficients remained very similar when using other categorizations of the forgiveness variables such as tertiles, quartiles, and quintiles.
References


Forgiveness, major depression, and gender


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