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A Positive Relationship Between Religious Faith and Forgiveness: Faith in the Absence of Data?

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*Religious faith and beliefs appear to play an important role in the lives of many individuals and are the topic of much research. The present study investigated the relationship between religious faith and forgiveness in a sample (*n = *196) of college students. Students were asked to complete the Heartland Forgiveness Scale and the Santa Clara Strength of Religious Faith Questionnaire. Analyses of scores on both measures revealed a positive, significant correlation between these constructs, suggesting that there is a meaningful relationship between religious faith and the tendency to forgive. Implications and directions for further research are discussed.*

Religious faith and beliefs appear to play an important role in the lives of many individuals and are the topic of increasing amounts of research and study. According to a Gallup (1995) survey of a nationally representative sample, 60% of Americans indicate that religion is 'very important' in their lives and 96% believe in God or a universal spirit. Furthermore, 67% reported being members of a church or synagogue, and 42% attend religious worship services weekly, or almost weekly.

Positive correlations between religious faith and various psychological constructs have been identified in previous research, including work examining self-esteem, adaptive coping strategies, and hope (Graham-Pole, Wass, Eyeberg, & Chu, 1989; Hughes, McCollum, Sheftel, & Sanchez, 1994; Plante & Boccaccini, 1997a; Ross, 1990). Payne, Bergin, Bielema, and Jenkins (1991) reviewed the research and found that there was a positive relationship between intrinsic religiosity and self-esteem, personal adjustment, social conduct, and well-being, and a negative relationship with substance abuse, sexual promiscuity, and suicide. In addition, prosocial values and behavior also have been favorably linked with religiousness (Donahue & Benson, 1995; D'Onofrio et al., 1999; Plante & Boccaccini, 1997b) and greater personal happiness and life satisfaction have been reported by individuals with high levels of religious faith (Ellison, 1991). These robust relationships between religious faith and markers of health and wellbeing suggest that faith and health go hand-in-hand. The definition of religious faith, however, varies from study to study. For the purpose of our research, we conceptualize religious faith as the belief in a higher power that provides meaning and purpose in life, and which is demonstrated through behavior

such as prayer and attending services. The strength of an individual's religious faith is the extent to which he or she is influenced by this relationship with a higher power. Though religious faith often is associated with frequency of attendance at services and involvement in religious activities, many people have high levels of faith without engaging in traditional practices or rituals.

One positive psychological construct, forgiveness, also has been considered in relation to religious faith. Snyder and Yamhure Thompson (2000) define forgiveness as the adaptive framing of a transgression or mistreatment. A transgression occurs when the behavior of a person, another person or people, a situation, or a set of circumstances violates expected personal or positive norms. Transgressions create discomfort for all members involved and this discomfort motivates individuals to dissipate their attachment to the negative outcomes. When an individual experiences a transgression, he or she forms a negative bond to the source of the violation. When that individual does forgive, the bond valence changes to a range from neutral to positive. The bond is no longer negative because the forgiver views the transgression differently and focuses attention away from the solely negative aspects of the transgression, the transgressor, and the outcomes related to the transgression. This model of forgiveness is considered to be a social and coping skill, where individuals are motivated to forgive because it enables them to maintain their value in society. Forgiving behavior is reinforced by society and is perceived by others as a positive action that maintains order and enhances trust between interrelated groups of people.

Despite attention that forgiveness has received in recent literature (Enright, Gassin, & Wu, 1992; McCullough, Sandage, & Worthington, 1997; McCullough & Worthingon, 1994), this construct, like religious faith, has been poorly defined and operationalized in correlational and quasi-experimental research, thus limiting our understanding of its role in living a healthy life. It is clear, however, that forgiveness is associated with positive mental health, with research suggesting that forgiving individuals tend to maintain positive and productive relationships with themselves, others, and situations (McCullough, Sandage, & Worthington, 1997).

As the constructs of religious faith and forgiveness become better understood via refined theories and measurement, many important questions about the predictive value of the constructs can be answered. One question has been of particular interest and now can be strategically examined: Does a connection truly exist between religious faith and forgiveness, or have we been operating on faith in the absence of data? Based on the support of previous findings that religious faith is related to beneficial mental health and that forgiveness leads to productive relationships, our hypothesis is that strength of religious faith is positively correlated with forgiveness.

Method

Participants

A convenience sample of 196 people (139 females, 57 males; 90% Caucasian; 77% single) completed faith and forgiveness questionnaires. Participation was solicited in undergraduate and graduate psychology and education courses at a large Midwestern university. Religious affiliation of participants was 35% Catholic, 50% Protestant, and 15% other.

Materials

A cover letter describing the study, a brief demographic questionnaire (which included questions about gender, ethnicity, education, marital status, religious affiliations, and religious practices), The Heartland Forgiveness Scale (Snyder & Yamhure Thompson, 2000), and the Santa Clara Strength of Religious Faith Questionnaire (Plante & Boccaccini, 1997b) were completed by the participants.

Heartland Forgiveness Scale (HFS)

The HFS is a 24-item self-report measure of forgiveness (as conceptualized by Snyder & Yamhure Thompson, 2000) that consists of four subscales (i.e., Forgiveness of Self, Forgiveness of Other, Forgiveness of Situation, and Pseudo-forgiveness), each containing six items. Participants report how they typically respond to transgressions by choosing the most appropriate rating on a 7-point scale (1 = Almost Always False of Me; 3 = Most Often False of Me; 5 = More Often True of Me; 7 = Almost Always True of Me). Mean scores on the HFS in one study ($N = 519$) were 88.81 ($sd = 15.08$), and in another study ($N = 815$) were 90.01 ($sd = 15.12$).

Psychometric examination reveals that scores on the HFS are positively correlated with other measures of forgiveness and measures of hope, cognitive flexibility, relationship satisfaction, and social desirability. Additional construct validation findings indicated negative correlations with vengeance, psychological symptom, and chronic hostility (Snyder & Yamhure Thompson, 2000).

Santa Clara Strength of Religious Faith Questionnaire (SCSORF)

The SCSORF is a 10-item questionnaire designed to measure strength of religious faith regardless of denomination. Participants respond to items on a 4-point rating scale (1 = Strongly Disagree to 4 = Strongly Agree). Examination of psychometric properties (including a coefficient alpha of .95, split-half reliability of .92, and predicted positive correlations with measures of personal control religious orientation, and religious behavior) provide evidence for the measure's reliability and validity (Plante & Boccaccini, 1997b).

Procedure

The survey was conducted in the Spring of 2000. Participants' return of completed packets indicated informed consent. Simple correlations were used to examine the relationship between participants' scores on the forgiveness scale and those on the faith questionnaire. A factor analysis was conducted on the SCSORF in order to ensure validity for the given population. Results of this factor analysis suggest that this instrument provided an accurate means of measuring strength of religious faith within the population studied.

Results

As a means of analyzing the data, Pearson Product Moment Correlation Coefficients were computed for the total Santa Clara Strength of Religious Faith (SCSORF) score and the total score on the Heartland Forgiveness Scale (see Table 1). A significant positive correlation of .229 ($p < .01$) was obtained. These results lend support to the hypothesis that individuals with higher scores on the strength of religious faith measure also see themselves as more forgiving as suggested by responses on the forgiveness scale.

A further analysis of this data was conducted by computing correlations of total scores after splitting the data into categories by religious affiliation. Using the Bonferroni approach to control for Type I error across the eight correlations, a *p*-value of less than .006 (.05/8 = .006) was required for significance. This correction showed a correlation between religious affiliation and total forgiveness score in the sample of Protestant individuals only.

Post hoc analysis of correlations between total score on the SCSORF scale and the three subscales on the HFS (see Table 1) yielded a significant correlation only with the Forgiveness of others subscale, $r = .22$ ($p < .01$). Forgiveness of self and Forgiveness of situation scores did not covary with overall strength of religious faith score. Correlations were not computed for the Pseudoforgiveness scale since this is considered a validity subscale and findings have not strongly supported the use of this check (Snyder & Yamhure Thompson, 2000).

Discussion

The purpose of this study was to determine whether there is a relationship between religious faith and forgiveness, as currently conceptualized by Plante and Boccacini (1997a, b), and Snyder and Yamhure Thompson (2000), respectively. Consistent with previous research suggesting that religious faith is related to beneficial mental health and that forgiveness leads to productive relationships, it was hypothesized that strength of religious faith would be positively correlated with forgiveness. This research empirically examined this idea by measuring

individuals' levels of faith and forgiveness. In our sample of college students, we found a significant, positive correlation between these constructs, suggesting a relationship congruent with commonly held assumptions. That is, individuals' religious faith and tendency to forgive do covary. Specifically, strength of religious faith and the tendency to forgive others are positively related, the relationships between scores on the Forgiveness of self and situation subscales and the score on the SCSORF, were positive, but not statistically significant. Because directionality of the significant relationship is unclear, the authors were left to wonder whether strong religious faith engenders only forgiveness of others, and not that of situation and self.

Limitations of this study should be acknowledged and taken into consideration when interpreting the findings and considering future research. Of course, use of self-report data from a convenience sample and correlational design both limit the generalizability of the findings. Also, the question of directionality of the relationship between faith and forgiveness exists. In other words, does faith encourage forgiving behavior, or do individuals who frequently forgive seek out and strengthen their faiths? Future studies should attempt to explore this issue.

Future research includes further investigating why those who report having strong religious faith are less likely to forgive themselves and forgive situations. Is this an artifact of our sample or are there other, currently unidentified, psychological variables moderating this relationship? The eventual answer to these and other questions will continue to shed light on this relationship. However, we no longer need to rely on faith alone. Instead, we can now operate in the presence of data supporting a relationship between faith and forgiveness.

Notes

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Appendix

Table 1
Intercorrelations Between Heartland Forgiveness Total and Subscales and Santa Clara Strength of Religious Faith Scale (*N*= 196)

	1	**2**	**3**	**4**	**5**
1. Total forgiveness	-	.803**	.772**	.858**	.229**
2. Forgiveness of self		-	.367**	.586**	.131
3. Forgiveness of others			-	.496**	.299**
4. Forgiveness of situation				-	.126
5. Strength of religious faith					-

**$p < .01$.