



FLORIDA STATE UNIVERSITY
COLLEGE OF HUMAN SCIENCES

“I Had Let Everyone, Including Myself, Down”: Illuminating the Self-Forgiveness Process Among College Students

Sarah Wolford, M.A., LMHC

Doctoral Candidate | MFT Program | Florida State University

Fiorella Carlos Chavez, Ph.D.

Postdoctoral Fellow | HDFS Program | University of Missouri

Jonathan G. Kimmes, LMFT, Ph.D. | Florida State University

Ross May, Ph.D. | Florida State University

Francis D. Fincham, Ph.D. | Florida State University

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Current Knowledge

Background

- **Prevalence of mental health disorders among college students** (AAUCCD, 2016)
- **Self-forgiveness research and health outcomes** (Maltby et al., 2001)
- **Unique mental health stressors for female college students** (Richards et al., 2014).

Self-Forgiveness

- **Self-forgiveness of *Interpersonal vs. Intrapersonal Transgressions*** (Hall & Fincham, 2005)
- **Emotional determinants of intrapersonal transgressions**
 - Self-disappointment
 - Regret
 - Guilt vs. Shame



The Present Study

The Utility of a Qualitative Analysis

- *In-depth* review and synthesis of thematic participant experiences (Creswell, 1998)
- Inform measurement strategy and design
- Salient for the development of theory
- None to date in the self-forgiveness literature



The Present Study

- Heavy emphasis on a qualitative, thematic analysis (Creswell, 1998)

Two Broad Aims

- (1) Identify *common intrapersonal transgressions* college student experience via salient contextual themes
- (2) Examine the *emotional determinants* of the self-forgiveness process among college students

Focal Research Question

What are common situational contexts (i.e., contextual themes) and emotional determinants of self-forgiveness for intrapersonal transgressions that college students face in which they are able/not able to forgive themselves?



Method

Participants

- Sample of ($n = 88$) female college students from a Southeastern University
 - 18-23 years old ($M = 19.61$; $SD = 1.14$)
 - 100% Female
 - 57% White
 - 74% Christian-Identified
 - $MGPA = 3.39$ [2.48 – 4.00]

Procedures and Plan of Analysis

- Narrative Data Collection: Written recall of experienced transgression— prompts for event A and B, respectively
- Data Analysis: 88 interviews, (Event A= 40; Event B =48) coded and *thematically integrated* using NVivo 11 Pro Software (Richards, 1999)
- Analysis & Verification of the Data:
 - Coding Procedures (Creswell, 1998)
 - Saturation (Strauss & Corbin, 1998)
 - Trustworthiness (Shenton, 2004)



Results

Event A Themes- Able to Forgive

- (1) Academic Performance
- (2) Sports Competition
- (3) Trouble with friendships/roommates
- (4) Alcohol involvement
- (5) Cheating on romantic partner/Hooking up
- (6) Self-harm

Emotional Determinants

Self-disappointment
Frustration/Anger
Guilt/Regret
Self-Hatred
Dehumanization

Event B Themes—Unable to Forgive

- (1) Academic Performance
- (2) Alcohol Involvement
- (3) Hooking Up
- (4) Lying
- (5) Toxic Personal Relations
- (6) Self-Harm

Emotional Determinants

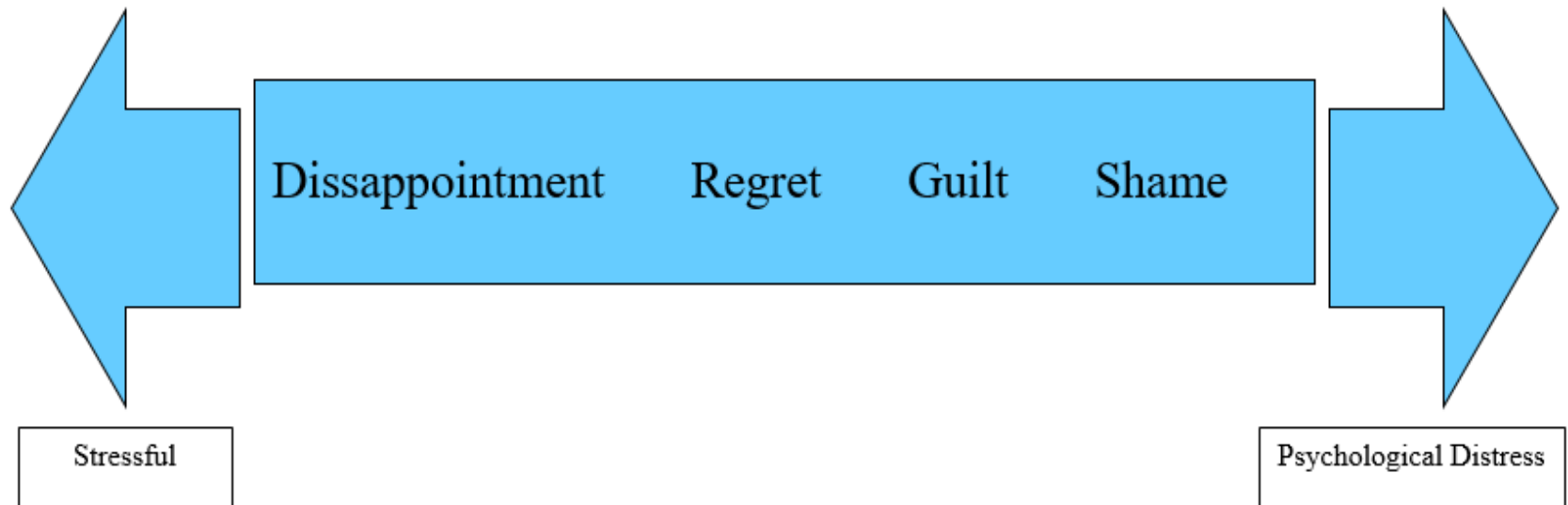
Self-disappointment
Self-directed anger
Regret
Sadness
Guilt and Shame



Results

Figure 1.

Spectrum of severity of emotional distress of an intrapersonal transgression among college students



Data Narratives

- **Stressful Contexts**

- **Academic Performance & Self-Disappointment:**

- #47 [Event B, Age = 18,W,c]: *“I was embarrassed to admit to myself that I needed to do better...I felt as though I had let everyone, including myself, down.”*
 - # 29 [Event A, Age = 20,W,c]: *“I didn’t put in as much effort as I could into studying for it...I was really disappointed in myself for not trying harder, but I was able to forgive myself and I said I wouldn’t do it again...”*

- **Alcohol Involvement:**

- #8 [Event A, Age = 19,W,c]: : *“...We were drinking a lot and we got up on stage and danced...how embarrassing...I also made out with a random guy, which I never do. I just felt guilty that night because that’s not who I am.”*



Data Narratives

- **Psychological Distress**

- Hooking Up/Toxic Relations & Depressive Symptoms:

- #44 [Event B, Age = 19,W,c]: : *“I let myself get completely lost in a toxic relationship. He had a lot of emotional problems, I thought I could help him despite how much I was suffering. I dropped my whole life for him when things ended, I went into a mild depression for a few months. Looking back, I let myself lose who I am and that’s why it’s still hard to forgive myself.”*

- Self-Harm & Worthlessness

- #26 [Event A, Age = 20,W,c]: : *“I used to cut myself. Nobody was involved, but me. I felt worthless and had a lot going on with an ex and feeling unwanted that I felt like the physical pain would take away all of the other negative feelings I had.”*

- Cheating on Romantic Partner & Hopelessness

- #26 [Event A, Age = 19,L,c]: : *“I cheated on my first love and he found out about it. This happened 3 years ago and it was the biggest heartbreak I have experienced thus far... I became very depressed and my self-worth and self-value plummeted... I cried a lot and mentally punished myself, thinking of myself as a disgusting careless human being. My actions went against everything I stood for. It took me a very very long time to forgive myself.*



Discussion

Strengths & Limitations

- In-depth analysis illuminated emotional constructs in quantitative studies (e.g., regret vs. guilt and shame; Hall & Fincham, 2005)
- The first to examine self-forgiveness among college students for *both* intrapersonal and interpersonal transgression contexts
- **Limitations:**
- Incorporate variation in qualitative methodology: phenomenology
- Expanded studies to include minorities and underserved populations, students with various religious/spiritual backgrounds

Clinical Implications

- Self-forgiveness = tool for assessment of risk at University counseling centers
- Assess *Type* as well as *Severity* of the Transgression; *Timing* of Event
- Assess *emotional spectrum* of experienced transgression with *symptomatology*
- Integrate the theory of self-forgiveness into the therapy process
- Provide psychoeducation to college students regarding the difference between intra vs. interpersonal transgressions



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