FORGIVENESS, RELIGIOUS COMMITMENT AND WELL-BEING IN ADULTHOOD:

A LIFE STAGE AND COHORT ASSESSMENT*

H. Wesley Perkins, Ph.D.
Professor of Sociology
Department of Anthropology and Sociology
Hobart and William Smith Colleges
Geneva, New York 14456 USA

(315) 781-3437   FAX: (315) 781-3718   E-MAIL: perkins@hws.edu

Summary with Tables and Figures

Background and Purpose of Study

A large body of research has linked religious involvement with health and well-being through prescriptive and proscriptive behaviors promoting ascetic lifestyles and reducing health risks. Religious belief and practice has also been linked to health and well-being through its provision of meaning and purpose in life seen as critical psychological elements of individual happiness that buffer against the condition of anomie.

The concept and practice of forgiveness, which has been frequently linked with religious values and espoused by major faith traditions, has long been held up by theologians and therapists as a value and goal of human action that can have great psychological and physical benefits beyond the immediate possible benefits of conflict resolution that might come as a result of forgiveness. Over the last decade psychologists using scientific methodologies have produced a large and growing body of empirical research on the health benefits of forgiveness for individuals. Most of this research has been conducted in small group therapeutic contexts and clinical populations with individuals seeking help for personal problems, or in small experimental counseling settings or in contexts of extreme violence and political unrest. Relatively little research has been conducted, however, on the potential connection between forgiveness and well-being in general populations of adults in modern societies. Even less attention has been given to the simultaneous assessment of interrelationships among religiosity, forgiveness, and well-being in large samples of non-clinical populations. Thus, the current study explores the associations among religiosity, the practice/experience of forgiveness, and measures of well-being in a large sample of non-clinical, university educated, and relative affluent adults at three time points over a ten year span.

Methods

The data are drawn from three waves of an anonymous survey of adults who were graduates from an undergraduate institution of higher education which they attended when they were between the ages of 17 and 23. The entire graduating classes of 1979, 1982, 1985, 1989 and 1993 were contacted and surveyed in 1999-2000 providing data on adults ranging in age from 25-45 (N=1,282; 64% response). They were residing in 44 states across the United States. Men and women were equally represented in the sample and were employed in a wide range of mostly semi- professional and profession occupations. Two-thirds of respondents were married, one-quarter were single or divorced, and another 8% were single but living with a partner. Slightly more than half of the sample (54%) had children at the time of this initial survey. In 2003-04 all five cohorts were resurveyed anonymously along with the added graduating classes of 1997 and 2001 (N=1,483; 54% response). In 2007-08 all seven cohorts were resurveyed along with the added graduating classes of 2005 and 2006 (N=1,897; 53% response).

Three measures of forgiveness were examined. First, respondents were asked to choose what was most typical of their relations with people who had offended, hurt, or wronged them in a serious way from among following four categories: 1) "I am usually angry or resentful and so I keep as much distance from them as possible thereafter." 2) I am usually angry or resentful until I "even the score" by some sort of retribution. 3) "Though I often hold a grudge initially, I can usually forgive people and move on or reestablish a relationship if they acknowledge their

1

wrongdoing and seek reconciliation." 4) "Regardless of whether they acknowledge their wrongdoing, I usually forgive them and their flaws, and move on fairly quickly with the rest of my life." Categories 1 and 2 were combined as one category for the analysis presented here.

Second, respondents were asked to think of the person who had hurt or wronged them most in the last five years and report to what extent they had been able to forgive that person. Response categories of "not at all," "only a little," "for the most part," and "completely" were coded on a scale of 1 to 4, respectively.

Third, the extent to which the individual is forgiving of oneself was measured in four items: 1) for hurts inflicted on family, 2) for hurts inflicted on friends or co-workers, 3) for other acts they may have committed which they later (or at the time) thought were morally wrong, and 4) for failing to accomplish major goals or expectations. Responses to these items were "not at all," "a little," "mostly," and "fully" (coded 0 to 3, respectively) and scores were combined to create an index of one's ability to forgive self. If an individual item on this measure was left blank as not applicable by a respondent, then the mean value of the sample was assigned for that item for the purpose of creating an index score. Ability to forgive self index scores could range from 0 to 12.

A religiosity index was created by adding the scores from three survey items: 1) personal strength of commitment to a faith tradition (no religious faith, not important at all, not very strong, fairly strong, very strong, or most important aspect of life coded 0 to 5, respectively), 2) frequency of attendance at religious services (times per month with 8 or more coded as 8), and 3) the extent to which the respondent thinks of his or her life as a part of a larger spiritual force in trying to understand and deal with major problems in one's life ("not at all," "somewhat," "quite a bit" or "a great deal" coded 0 to 3, respectively). Thus, religiosity scores could range from 0 to 16.

Three separate measures of health and well-being are examined in this study. First, an eight item index measuring psychological distress (used in previous studies of general populations) was administered in the survey. Respondents were asked how often in the past 12 months they had any of eight experiences that reflect symptoms of distress. These included: 1) "wondered if anything is worthwhile," 2) "been in low spirits," 3) "had trouble sleeping," 4) "had periods when you could not 'get going'," 5) "felt that things never turned out right," 6) "had trouble remembering things," 7) "felt irritable, fidgety, or tense," and 8) "felt restless." Response categories for each item were "never," "seldom," "sometimes," and "often" coded 0 to 3 respectively. Thus, scores on the psychological distress scale could potentially range from 0 to 24.

The survey also asked respondents to provide a subjective indication of their health in general as "poor," "fair," "good," or "excellent. For the analyses presented here these data were dichotomized between those indicating their health was not good (fair or poor) and others (good or excellent). Respondents were also asked to describe themselves "in terms of general happiness and a sense of well-being." They could respond as "very happy," "fairly happy," "fairly unhappy," or "very unhappy." The data were subsequently dichotomized between happy and unhappy for this study.

Results

  Table 1 presents the measures of respondents' religiosity and well-being by the categories of typical reactions to people who have offended them. Among those who respond with anger, distance, and revenge, religiosity is lowest. Religiosity is highest among those who forgive others quickly and do so without resentment or need for apology. These results are repeated at each survey time period. Psychological distress, being in fair or poor health, and general unhappiness demonstrate the opposite pattern across categories of forgiveness.

  Table 2 presents the same measures of religiosity and well-being by the measure of the degree to which respondents have been able to forgive the persons who have hurt or wronged them most. Religiosity is highest among those who have completely forgiven the other person and lowest among those indicating little or no forgiveness in each survey wave. Those completely forgiving others show the least psychological distress, poor/fair health, and unhappiness in each survey.

  Table 3 likewise shows religiosity and well-being associated with higher ability to forgive oneself in all three surveys and significantly so in eleven of the twelve comparisons.

  The significant relationships between religiosity, forgiveness, and lower stress levels are further evaluated in a multivariate regression analyses. OLS linear regression analysis was employed to construct a path analysis where gender was an exogenous dummy variable predicting religiosity, forgiving oneself, forgiving the other person, and psychological distress symptoms. Religiosity is simultaneously entered as an independent variable predicting each forgiveness measure and distress symptoms. Forgiving self is also included as a predictor of forgiving others (as well as distress) because it has been argued that self forgiveness can become the model or psychological mechanism for releasing and practicing the forgiveness of others. Finally, forgiving others is included as an independent variable simultaneously predicting distress symptoms along with forgiving oneself, religiosity and gender.

  Figure 1 presents the results of this path analysis model where all statistically significant predictions are represented with a path arrow and beta coefficients for each survey time period. Forgiving oneself and forgiving the other person both simultaneously and significantly reduce distress in each survey wave although forgiving oneself demonstrates a consistently stronger direct effect. Forgiving oneself also contributes additionally by having a significant positive effect on one's ability to forgive another person. Religiosity is not directly associated with distress, but rather, makes indirect contributions to the prediction of reduced distress through its positive predicted effects on forgiving oneself and more so on forgiving others.

  Table 4 presents the results of a comparable sequence of multivariate loglinear regression analyses providing odds-ratios predicting effects of dichotomous independent variables on each of the dichotomous dependent variables. The odds of a respondent forgiving oneself and another person are higher for those respondents with high religiosity and significantly so for forgiving others. Religiosity has no notable or significant predicted effect, however, on subjective health and happiness. Forgiving oneself has a large effect (1.89 in 2007-08) almost doubling the chance of being able to forgive someone else. Finally, both forgiving oneself and forgiving another person produce significant odds ratios indicating much lower predictions of both poor health and unhappiness. Indeed, the chance of being unhappy is more than cut in half by forgiving oneself or forgiving another person.

Conclusion

The data collected in these non-clinical samples of university graduates surveyed at three different times demonstrate that forgiving others and forgiving oneself simultaneously predict less psychological distress, better subjective health assessments, and lower prevalence of unhappiness. The ability to forgive oneself demonstrates an especially large effect on the reduction of distress symptoms, and an indirect effect on well-being through its potential contribution to the ability to forgive others. Religiosity's primary contribution to well-being as measured in this study occurs indirectly through its positive impact on forgiveness of self and forgiveness of another person. Religiosity is more strongly related to the ability to forgive others and less influential in the forgiveness of self. The results are not only consistent across survey time periods, but more detailed analyses (not reported in the tables here) demonstrate that the overall patterns described here remain when the data are analyzed separately by gender and age categories.

TABLE 1

Religiosity and Well-Being among Respondents

by Most Typical Reaction to People Who Have Offended Them

	Anger & Distance/ Revenge	Reconciliation If Offender Apologizes	Forgives Quickly Regardless of Apology	p ≤
1999-00 (N)	206	612	389	
2003-04 (N)	210	722	475	
2007-08 (N)	287	947	617	
Religiosity (mean)[a]				
1999-00	4.2	4.6	5.2	.001
2003-04	3.9	4.5	5.3	.001
2007-08	3.7	4.0	4.8	.001
Distress (mean)[b]				
1999-00	10.3	8.9	7.6	.001
2003-04	10.3	9.1	7.9	.001
2007-08	9.6	8.6	7.7	.001
Health Not Good (%)				
1999-00	8.2	5.9	4.1	ns
2003-04	10.9	6.8	6.8	ns
2007-08	11.5	8.0	6.4	.05
Unhappy (%)				
1999-00	9.2	5.1	4.1	.05
2003-04	10.4	5.7	2.7	.001
2007-08	8.7	5.1	2.8	.001

[a]Religiosity ranged from 0 (no commitment to religious faith, no religious attendance, and no thought of one's life as part of a larger spiritual force) to 16 (religious commitment most important aspect of life, attends religious services 8+ times per month and thinks a great deal about one's life as part of a larger spiritual force). (In 1999-00 Mean=4.8, SD=3.4; in 2003-04 Mean= 4.7, SD=3.4; in 2007-08 Mean=4.2, SD=3.4.)

[b]Psychological distress scores ranged from 0 (no reported symptoms in last 12 months) to 24 (each of eight symptoms reported occurring often). (In 1999-00 Mean=8.6, SD=4.3; in 2003-04 Mean= 8.8, SD=4.7; in 2007-08 Mean=8.4, SD=4.7.)

TABLE 2

Religiosity and Well-Being

by How Much Respondents Were Able to Forgive the Person

Who Hurt or Wronged Them Most in Last Five Years

	Ability to Forgive Other Person			
	Completely	For the most part	Little or not at all	p ≤
N of cases				
1999-00	242	564	319	
2003-04	387	769	230	
2007-08	476	1,006	342	
Religiosity (mean)				
1999-00	5.6	4.8	4.3	.001
2003-04	5.4	4.6	3.7	.001
2007-08	4.8	4.1	3.7	.001
Distress (mean)				
1999-00	7.0	9.0	9.9	.001
2003-04	7.3	9.3	10.5	.001
2007-08	7.3	8.5	9.9	.001
Health Not Good (%)				
1999-00	4.1	6.6	6.6	ns
2003-04	4.7	7.0	13.5	.001
2007-08	7.0	7.2	12.0	.05
Unhappy (%)				
1999-00	1.2	5.3	9.4	.001
2003-04	2.1	5.2	12.2	.001
2007-08	2.9	3.2	12.7	.001

TABLE 3

Religiosity and Well-Being by Ability to Forgive Self

	Ability to Forgive Self[a]		
	High	**Low**	**p $\leq$**
N of cases			
1999-00	600	474	
2003-04	765	709	
2007-08	954	931	
Religiosity (mean)			
1999-00	5.0	4.7	ns
2003-04	4.9	4.5	.05
2007-08	4.4	4.0	.05
Distress (mean)			
1999-00	7.5	10.1	.001
2003-04	8.2	9.6	.001
2007-08	7.6	9.3	.001
Health Not Good (%)			
1999-00	3.0	8.0	.001
2003-04	6.2	9.4	.05
2007-08	6.5	9.7	.01
Unhappy (%)			
1999-00	2.3	8.5	.001
2003-04	2.0	9.2	.001
2007-08	2.7	7.1	.001

[a]Possible scores on the Self Forgiveness Index ranged from 0 (not having forgiven oneself for any of four types of personal failings to 12 (having forgiven oneself fully for all failings measured). Observed scores ranged from 1 to 12 (1999-00 Mean=8.2, SD=1.8; 2003-04 Mean=8.0, SD=1.9; 2007-08 Mean=7.9, SD=1.9). High/low ability was defined by dividing scores at the mean.

FIGURE 1
Religiosity and Forgiveness Path Analysis Model
Predicting Distress Symptoms (1999-00/ 2003-04/ 2007-08)
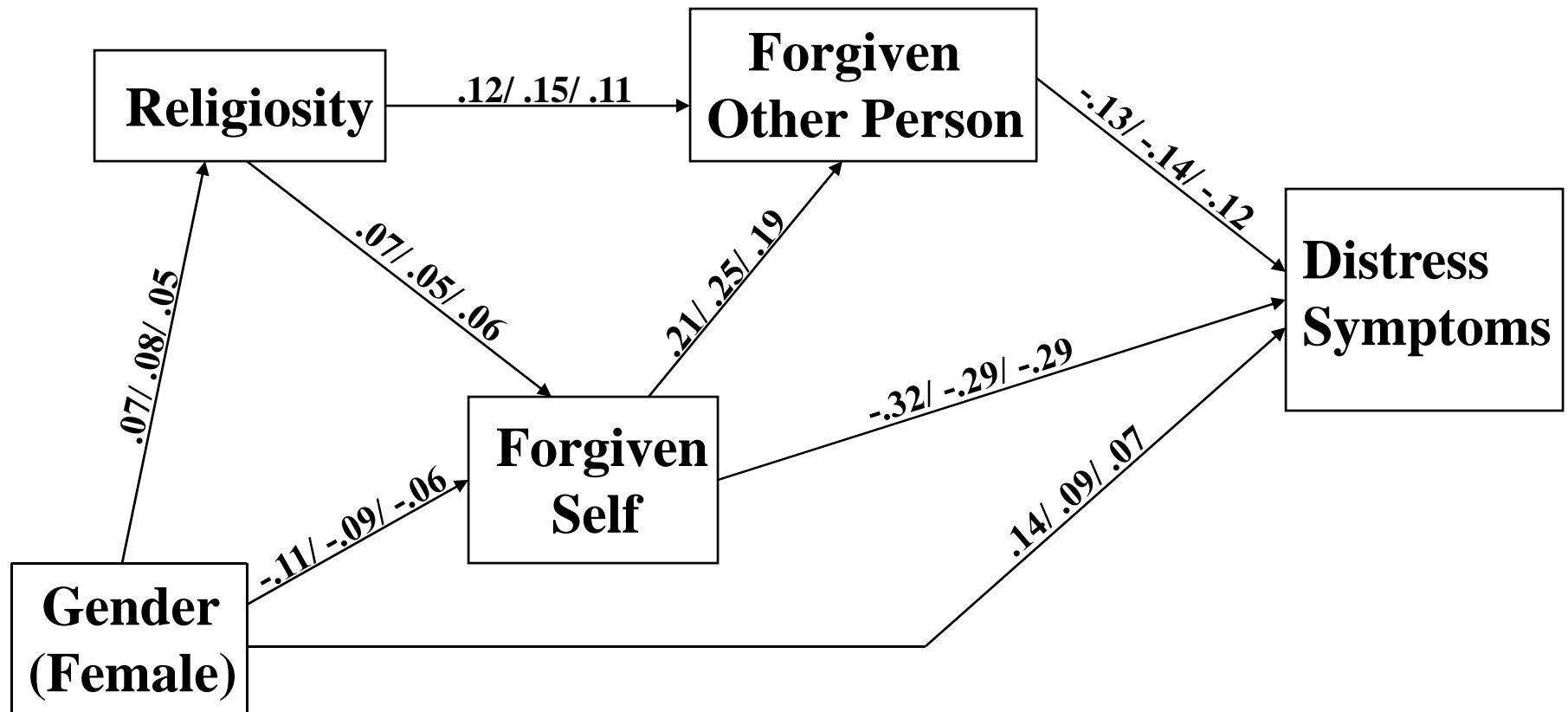
Note: All beta coefficients displayed are statistically significant at p < .05 for each time period.
(The omitted path indicates insignificant coefficients in all time period.)

TABLE 4

Odds Ratios from Binary Logistic Regression Analyses Predicting Ability to

Forgive Self, Ability to Forgive Other Person, Poor Health, and Unhappiness

Dichotomized Independent Variables	Dichotomized Dependent Variables			
	Forgive Self (high)	Forgive Other (most part)	Health Not Good	Unhappy
Gender (female)	.78**	1.16	.92	.96
Religiosity (high)[a]	1.17	1.31*	.97	1.09
Forgive Self (high)[a]		1.89***	.69*	.44***
Forgive Other (most part)[b]			.60*	.25***

Note: Results are based on 2007-08 survey data.
[a]Scale dichotomized into "high" and "low" at the mean.
[b]Compares combined response categories of "completely" and "for the most part" with combined categories of "a little" and "not at all."