



A needs-based perspective on self-forgiveness: Addressing threat to moral identity as a means of encouraging interpersonal and intrapersonal restoration[☆]

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HIGHLIGHTS

- Affirmed violated values led to increased shame, increasing self-forgiveness.
- This process led to increased reconciliation and self-trust.
- Belonging and unrelated value affirmation did not show these effects.
- This model was shown across two intervention studies with one week follow-up.
- The model shows lagged effects of self-forgiveness on restoration.

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ABSTRACT

Committing an offense creates psychological need within a victim and offender that can act as barriers to reconciliation. This paper examines the process of an offender addressing these needs independent of a victim's response in order to facilitate a process of self-forgiveness that promotes reconciliation and self-trust. We present two studies involving interventions following recent real-life interpersonal transgressions. Results suggest that meeting an offender's need for moral identity through the affirmation of the values violated by the offense, but not affirmation of belonging (Study 1), or affirmation of unrelated values (Study 2) increased genuine self-forgiveness, through shame acknowledgment. This process had downstream benefits for reconciliation and self-trust at one week follow-up.

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Introduction

Sometimes the solutions will require acknowledgment of past mistakes, and acceptance of insights for which none of our learning has prepared us. Reconciliation requires changes of heart and spirit ... It requires symbolic as well as practical action (Fraser, 2003).

All of us know what it is to be a transgressor. We hurt others, sometimes in minor, and other times in major ways. Words yelled in an argument, thoughtlessness, trust broken, respect violated. Moving past our transgressions in ways that benefit not only ourselves, but also those we have hurt, is at the heart of theories of reconciliation and restorative

justice (Braithwaite, 1989). Models of reconciliation suggest that after an offense both the offender and the victim have psychological needs that, if unaddressed, can form barriers to this restorative process occurring. In particular, research suggests that a victim experiences real and symbolic threat resulting in a heightened need for agency (SimanTov-Nachlieli, Shnabel, & Nadler, 2013), including an increased need for status and power, and a need for the offender to re-affirm the values violated by the offense as well as the shared identity these represent (Shnabel, Nadler, Canetti-Nisim, & Ullrich, 2008; Shnabel, Nadler, Ullrich, Dovidio, & Carmi, 2009; Wenzel, Okimoto, Feather, & Platow, 2008). On the other hand, research has shown that an offender has a heightened need for communion, acceptance, and belonging, expressing itself in a need to re-affirm the offender's moral/social identity (Abele, Cuddy, Judd, & Yzerbyt, 2008; Shnabel & Nadler, 2008; Shnabel et al., 2009). For both the victim and offender these deficits represent barriers to reconciliation. The needs-based approach to reconciliation suggests that the needs of victim and offender should be met in a reciprocal manner (Shnabel et al., 2008). However, this presents a

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chicken or the egg conundrum. If the offender is supposed to be meeting the victim's need for status acknowledgment and affirmation of values, but is not likely to do so without having their own need for acceptance and moral identity met by the victim, who goes first? Given the nature of victimization, it seems ethical to suggest that the responsibility of this should rest on an offender. Additionally, what of the restoration of offenders where the victim is not available or, indeed, non-existent (as in cases of 'victimless' offenses), but where an offender would still need to process their own needs following a transgression? How is it possible to encourage in an offender the acknowledgment of responsibility and the "change of heart" that Fraser (2003) refers to? Particularly, is it possible to achieve this in an independent way, rather than an interdependent way that places possibly unethical onus on a victim? Is it possible for an offender to address their own psychological needs following a transgression? In this paper we examine transgression-relevant value affirmation as a means of offenders addressing their own needs following an offense, encouraging self-forgiveness, and as a pathway for the restoration of both the offender and the victim.

Barriers to restoration from an offender's perspective

Research has demonstrated that for an offender a transgression results in the elevation of the psychological need for belonging (Ahmed & Braithwaite, 2006; Ahmed, Harris, Braithwaite, & Braithwaite, 2001; Shnabel & Nadler, 2008). Specifically, offenders experience a threat of exclusion; of being marginalized, stigmatized, and socially tainted because of their own wrongdoing. Social exclusion or marginalization of an offender is one way a community deals with a violation of group norms and values (Baumeister, 1994; Okimoto & Wenzel, 2009; Shnabel & Nadler, 2008). Whether exclusion is used because the offenders' behavior indicates to the group that they are an untrustworthy group member, or as a form of punishment, or as a way of communicating the group's condemnation of the behavior, the exclusion (or possibility of exclusion) threatens the offenders' fundamental need to belong (Baumeister & Leary, 1995). Thus, a transgression results in offenders having an elevated need for belonging and acceptance by others (Ahmed & Braithwaite, 2006; Ahmed et al., 2001; Shnabel & Nadler, 2008). However, this need for acceptance includes the need to re-establish that one is a good and appropriate group member, that one understands group moral values, and is able to conform to them (SimanTov-Nachlieli et al., 2013). This is expressed by the offenders needing others to understand their side of the story, empathize with their experience, and recognize that they are agreeable people (Shnabel & Nadler, 2008).

Shame as a marker of threat to moral identity

Further evidence to the threat to belonging comes from the domain of shame research. Consistent with functionalist accounts of emotions, where emotions are considered evolutionarily adaptive in function and motivate goal relevant behaviors (Plutchik, 1962; Roseman, 1984), shame has been posited as a socially adaptive emotion to promote cooperation, interpersonal relationships, and social survival, by alerting the self to the evaluation of others and, thus, alerting the individual to threats to social acceptance (De Hooge, Bruegelmans, & Zeelenberg, 2008; De Hooge, Zeelenberg, & Bruegelmans, 2011; Gilbert, 2007; Goetz & Keltner, 2007; Zeelenberg & Pieters, 2006). For example, Leary (2004) has suggested that shame (and other self-conscious emotions) functions to "maximize the probability of interpersonal acceptance and minimize the probability of interpersonal rejection" (p. 130). Evolutionary approaches to shame research suggest that shame results from decreases in status and/or social regard (Gilbert, 2007; Goetz & Keltner, 2007). Physiological approaches have revealed a similar pattern of pro-inflammatory response and hypothalamic-pituitary-adrenal (HPA) activation observed in situations of social-evaluative threat in humans, low-status animals, and experiences of shame (Gruenewald,

Kemeny, & Aziz, 2006). Extending Leary's sociometer approach to the self-system (Leary, 2000), we can adopt the view that shame functions like a gauge, giving feedback to the self on any threat to the goal of maintaining a positive social self, alerting the individual to the risk of marginalization, rejection or exclusion from the group (or the possible risk if the behavior was to be discovered) (c.f. Baldwin & Baccus, 2004; Beer & Keltner, 2004; Gausel & Leach, 2011; Gruenewald, Dickerson, & Kemeny, 2007). Thus, the experience of shame following transgressions seems to support the notion of an underlying threat to an offender's sense of being acceptable to the group or community. By extension, following a transgression the experience of shame is likely a marker of the threatened sense of belonging.

The question then becomes: how can this barrier be minimized or resolved? Shnabel and Nadler (2008) argue that acts of empathy, understanding, acceptance, or forgiveness shown to offenders (by either victim or a third party) assure them that they are accepted and belong to the moral community. Research has demonstrated that both a general sense of being loved or accepted and acceptance by a third party can reduce defensiveness and increase responsibility-taking (Woodyatt & Wenzel, 2013a). However, in the absence of a third-party with a legitimate role to afford acceptance, it would be up to the victims to offer this acceptance, empathy, and reassurance in order to remove the offenders' psychological and emotional barriers to reconciliation, which the victims may not be prepared to do because of their own need barriers. Put differently, the parties might find themselves in a situation where the reconciliation of mutual need satisfaction is hindered by the same barriers that it is supposed to overcome.

Attempts by the offender to process their own needs following a transgression

Offenders may instead be tempted to reduce the negative consequences from having done wrong by responding defensively; minimizing blame by justifying their actions, denigrating the victim, or downplaying the harm caused (Bandura, 1999; Fisher & Exline, 2010; Sykes & Matza, 1957; Tangney, 1990). This sort of defensive processing of a transgression may have a short-term benefit for an offender in terms of reducing negative affect, but does so at costs to the victim. These defensive responses are associated with negative outcomes for interpersonal restoration, including increased egotism and reduced empathy for the victim, denial of harm, and minimization of the severity of offenses (Tangney, Boone, & Dearing, 2005; Woodyatt & Wenzel, 2013a,b). Additionally, failing to address the wrongdoing does not resolve the threat to the offender's moral identity but merely bypasses it, leaving it simmering in the back of the offender's mind.

On the other hand, rather than denying or minimizing their actions, offenders can try and punish themselves for their wrongdoing. Self-condemnation or self-punishment may alleviate the threat of belonging as the offender re-affirms their moral identity by acknowledging responsibility. Responsibility for one's action is generally agreed on as key to processing one's transgression (Enright, 1996; Holmgren, 1998; Wenzel, Woodyatt, & Hedrick, 2012). However, for some offenders this may lead to the ongoing experience of self-punitiveness or lingering shame, which may fuel a latent defensiveness and/or egocentric focus on the offenders' own suffering. It is possible that the experience of self-punitiveness leads to cycles of rumination and avoidance. That is, an offender may shift between self-punitive responses and defensive responses in an attempt to manage negative affect. Indeed, Woodyatt and Wenzel (2013b) found that in the ten days following an interpersonal transgression, highly self-punitive offenders became significantly less empathetic toward the victim and became less desirous of reconciliation. Furthermore, because the transgression was not resolved this had a negative impact on the offender's self-esteem (Woodyatt & Wenzel, 2013b). In a study of relationship dyads, partners who expressed self-condemning attitudes not only experienced less satisfaction in their relationship themselves, but their partners also expressed

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