



# The psychological immune response in the face of transgressions: Pseudo self-forgiveness and threat to belonging<sup>☆</sup>



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## HIGHLIGHTS

- Ostracism led to lower acknowledged shame, regret, self-anger, and desire to reconcile.
- General perception of rejection was related to increased defensiveness.
- Hostile victim responses led to increased defensiveness over time.
- Respectful confrontation by a third party was related to decreased defensiveness.

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## ABSTRACT

Effective processing of a transgression must involve accepting responsibility for one's wrongdoing. However accepting responsibility may mean increasing the threat of social exclusion which offenders face as a result of their transgression, yet humans are fundamentally motivated to avoid this type of threat. Pseudo self-forgiveness is the use of minimization of harm, denial of wrongdoing, or victim derogation in order to release oneself from guilt and shame. This research examines the defensive psychological process of pseudo self-forgiveness and the impact of threat to belonging on a transgressor's engagement with this defensive response in both an experimental setting and real life. Study 1 used a lab based approach, manipulating the threat to belonging with an ostracism task. Ostracized participants minimized harm to the victim, reported less shame, regret and self-anger and less desire to reconcile with the victim. Study 2 followed participants over the 11 days after committing an interpersonal transgression. Results of analyses with linear mixed modeling suggest that the more rejected participants felt the more they engaged in pseudo self-forgiveness. Hostile responses from the victim were positively associated with pseudo self-forgiveness and others' respectful confrontation was negatively associated with pseudo self-forgiveness. Results suggest that need for belonging is a key variable for rehabilitation after committing a transgression.

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## Introduction

A well identified, and intuitive, key to rehabilitation of a transgressor is the acceptance of responsibility (Fisher, 2007; Holmgren, 1998; Hosser, Windzio, & Greve, 2008; Wenzel, Woodyatt, & Hedrick, 2012). When transgressors fail to accept responsibility they fail to meet the needs of the victim; they tend to be narcissistic, low in empathy, hostile, and unwilling to change (Ahmed, Harris, Braithwaite, & Braithwaite, 2001; Bandura, 1999; Exline, Root, Yadavalli, Martin, & Fisher, 2011; Fisher, 2007; Fisher & Exline, 2006; Squires, Sztainert, Gillen, Caouette, & Wohl, 2011; Wenzel et al., 2012). However, rather than denial of

wrongdoing being pathological or delinquent, there is much research to suggest that acknowledging responsibility is not our "natural tendency" (Fisher, 2007, p. 12). Rather, in the face of our own transgressions we humans have a series of complex, potentially non-conscious processes that work to protect ourselves against the reality of our own actions and reduce the emotional distress that results from the threats associated with committing transgressions (DeWall et al., 2011). These processes together have been termed the psychological immune system (DeWall et al., 2011; Gilbert, Pinel, Wilson, Blumberg, & Wheatley, 1998). While these responses can be considered adaptive, maintaining perseverance, optimism and positive self-regard, they have limitations in the context of transgressions, where responsibility is key to the restoration of transgressors and their victims. Understanding which factors exacerbate this defensive processing will offer insight into how to increase responsibility taking in transgressors (Rotella & Richeson, 2013). As transgressions threaten the offender's need to belong (Shnabel & Nadler, 2008) we suggest that exacerbation or reduction of

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this threat will be associated with increases or decreases in defensive processing, respectively. We report two studies, a laboratory experiment and a real-life longitudinal study, that tested our account.

#### *Pseudo self-forgiveness and psychological defense*

When faced with a threat to our self-regard or self-integrity our mind uses a combination of rationalization, justification, and minimization (to name a few) to reduce the threat of our failures and shortcomings (Haidt, 2001; Leary, 2007). Some of these defense mechanisms that relate to the threat created by inconsistent or immoral actions include moral disengagement (Bandura, 1999), defense motivation (Giner-Sorolila & Chaiken, 1997), cognitive dissonance (Festinger, 1957), and impression management (Tedeschi, Schlenker, & Bonoma, 1971). These processes function together like a psychological immune system (DeWall et al., 2011; Gilbert et al., 1998). They defend the self against negative life events, failures, and negative feedback in such a way as to maintain motivational aspects of the self-system such as optimism, self-efficacy, and positive self-regard. Despite often involving bias or self-deception, these processes can be adaptive in that they function to make people less attentive to negative information, enabling them to persevere and live relatively happy with themselves and their situations (Robinson, Moeller, & Goetz, 2009).

The process that allows offenders, through such defensive mechanisms, to arrive at a state of positive self-regard following a transgression has been referred to as pseudo self-forgiveness (Fisher & Exline, 2006; Hall & Fincham, 2005; Tangney, Boone, & Dearing, 2005; Wenzel et al., 2012; Woodyatt & Wenzel, 2013). Consistent with the terminology in the interpersonal forgiveness literature, true forgiveness does not mean downplaying the responsibility of the offender. Thus if the transgressor is using defense techniques in order to downplay their responsibility and claim self-forgiveness, they are not truly forgiving themselves. In this way pseudo self-forgiveness can be seen as a transgressor's cognitive restructuring of their offense in order to reduce the experience of stressful emotions that derive from their wrongdoing (Folkman, Lazarus, Dunkel-Schetter, DeLongis, & Gruen, 1986; Woodyatt & Wenzel, 2013).

While these defensive responses may be adaptive in many situations, when it comes to processing transgressions this normal psychological immune response may be problematic. If transgressors utilize these techniques too eagerly they can create several problems:

- 1) They lack the motivation to repair relationships and make amends, which is derived from negative emotions such as guilt (Fisher & Exline, 2006); they fail to realize the insights these moral emotions provide us about our own actions (Haidt, 2001). Responsibility and associated guilt, shame and regret are key variables associated with lasting change in offenders (Hosser et al., 2008).
- 2) Over time transgressors have an ongoing sense of unacknowledged shame (Ahmed & Braithwaite, 2006; Ahmed et al., 2001). Failure to experience and resolve negative emotions has been suggested to result in shame-rage spirals (Ahmed et al., 2001; Scheff, 1994) and can result in transgressors being less trusting of themselves and more avoidant of their victim (Woodyatt & Wenzel, 2013). Experiencing and acknowledging guilt, shame and responsibility are key to the resolution of our transgressions and the process of genuine self-forgiveness (Fisher, 2007; Woodyatt & Wenzel, 2013).
- 3) The victims' needs for their status and power to be re-established and for the violation of shared values to be acknowledged remain unaddressed, which will create further barriers to reconciliation (Shnabel & Nadler, 2008; Wenzel & Okimoto, 2010).

Thus defensive processing, while possibly having some short-term benefits, results in long-term deleterious effects for the offender and the victim (Leary, Tate, Adams, Allen, & Hancock, 2007; Woodyatt & Wenzel, 2013). Alternatively, researchers have identified that genuine self-forgiveness should be the process of releasing self-punitive motivation (and motivation for avoidance) while still acknowledging

responsibility (Wenzel et al., 2012). Genuine self-forgiveness involves an acknowledgment of responsibility and cognitive effort to understand and work through one's guilt, and its consequences. It is associated with inter and intrapersonal restorative outcomes for the offender, like increased self-trust, increased hope, increased empathy for the victim and increased desire for reconciliation (Woodyatt & Wenzel, 2013).

#### *Threat to belonging*

However acknowledging responsibility, while important for successful resolution of the transgression and transgression related emotions, is not easy. Researchers have noted that committing a transgression carries with it the threat of rejection by others (Ahmed et al., 2001; Baumeister, 1994; Leary, 2007; Shnabel & Nadler, 2008; Shnabel, Nadler, Canetti-Nisim, & Ullrich, 2008). Research suggests that the experience of emotions such as guilt and shame is closely related to status threat (Gilbert, 2004). These emotions are thought to have evolved within socially complex hierarchies to help with the negotiation of group life by signaling the threat of rejection (as a result of one's violation of group norms or values) to the individual. This then helps motivate the individual to make changes to their behavior and also to appease more dominant group members (Beer & Keltner, 2004; Gruenewald, Dickerson, & Kemeny, 2007). Thus shame and guilt are closely related to the threat of exclusion and serve to increase the chance of acceptance (Leary, 2004). If being responsible for wrongdoing fundamentally threatens our need to belong, and we are motivated to minimize threats to the self (Cohen & Garci, 2008; Sherman & Cohen, 2006), we would expect that the threat to belonging may exacerbate defensive reactions.

In short, we expected that increased threat to belonging would be positively related to pseudo self-forgiveness (defensive processing).

#### **Study 1**

In Study 1 we adopted an experimental design using a predicted future paradigm (Twenge, Baumeister, Tice, & Stucke, 2001), a well-established ostracism task, to create a threat to belonging before exposing participants to a vignette and instructing them to take the perspective of the transgressor. We expected that when participants were exposed to a threat to belonging they would show increased defensive processing, including minimization of harm and deflection of blame, compared to participants in other conditions, and as a consequence would report less shame, less regret, less anger at themselves, and less desire to reconcile with their partner.

#### **Method**

*Participants and design.* Seventy-five first-year students of an Australian university participated in the experiment (64 female) with an average age of 23.69 years ( $SD = 8.67$ ).<sup>1</sup> They were randomly allocated to one of three experimental conditions: future alone, future belonging, and future preoccupied (negative future non-relational control).

*Procedure.* Participants were invited to a study allegedly on attachment style and coping with guilt. Participants filled in a fabricated attachment style questionnaire and received fabricated feedback depending on the experimental condition (for more details of descriptions see Twenge et al., 2001). They were told that based on their attachment style (labeled avoidant, secure, or preoccupied) they were likely to have a future isolated and alone (future alone), a future of healthy and long term relationships (future belonging), or a future of difficulties and mishaps (future preoccupied). Participants were then asked to read and imagine

<sup>1</sup> First year samples in Australian universities with diverse entry points tend to have higher mean ages than other universities, with higher number of mature-age and part-time students. Additionally online research tends to attract higher numbers of these students due to accessibility. Age range is 17–49 years.

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